

THE NATIVES ARE FRIENDLY

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O.C.A.S.

One year ago I was introduced to a fish that rivaled the coloration of the most exotic inhabitant of a saltwater reef. Its body was a bright red color somewhat more subdued than a red swordtail. The face and body were covered with electric blue lines and spots. The eye was ringed in bright orange while the black gill flap was bordered in white. Was this a new "lake fish" from darkest Africa or the latest South American "Biggy?"

No, and we didn't meet in a pet shop on opposite sides of a piece of glass. Our introduction took place at Spring Creek in Eastern Oklahoma on an OCAS outing. We were on opposite ends of the same fishing pole. I had just caught a superb 5 inch specimen of the long-eared Sunfish, *Lepomis Megalotis*. Here was a fish worthy of any aquarist's tanks and since I had already successfully kept some native minnows, I decided to give my newfound friend a new home.

The water in Spring Creek had tested neutral with a 2.5 degree of hardness and a temperature of 70 F. At home I set up a 20 long aquarium with many plastic plants arranged to form a dense refuge. In addition a piece of slate was leaned against one side to form a cave. The tank was placed in the draft of the air conditioner near the floor. This kept the water temperature near 70 even during the hot summer months. Two one inch convict cichlids were added as dither fishes and to serve as scavengers. I had discovered earlier that the presence of some boisterous eager eaters does wonders in overcoming a new fish's shyness, and this was no exception. In two days the Sunfish was eating brine shrimp and an occasional worm. He maintained his initial bright colors and got along very well with his South American Cousins.

On Labor Day of last year some OCAS members returned to Spring Creek. This time I obtained a 4 inch specimen. Its colors were not as bright as the original fish and its ear flap was not as large. Was this the female of the species?

The new fish was carefully inspected for any external parasites and then introduced to the original fish. Chaos erupted. If that little Sunfish had had wings, it would've flown from the tank. I quickly divided the tank with a piece of glass. A small piece was cut from one corner of the divider thus leaving a small doorway from one side of the tank to the other. The two Sunfish could see each other, and the convicts could get from one side to the other to perform the cleaning chores, while the little female(?) could visit the male at her convenience.

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Acriflavine was added to the water to inhibit any infectious diseases caused during the earlier battle. "Copper cures", Malachite green and Methylene Blue are extremely poisonous to Centrarchids and should never be used. Acriflavine combined with frequent water changes is a safe cure. On several occasions the smaller Sunfish would slip through the small doorway to make a special call on her large neighbor. These visits were swift and unromantic. Even on cold winter nights, when the tank temperature fell to 60 degrees, the two fish maintained their separate lodgings.

In spring, two things happened. The convicts spawned. It had taken them a year to reach maturity at the cold temperatures in this tank. Secondly, after removing the no longer docile convicts, the male Sunfish began to fan a large depression in the gravel with his tail. On April 28th, I noticed the pair circling over the depression. The female was on the inside and the male was pressed close to her side as they circled side by side as if on a merry-go-round, over the pit the male had dug. Every now and then the male would dart off to one corner or the other while the female waited patiently over the pit until his return. My presence seemed to disturb the fish and after about a half hour the activity was broken off with the female quickly returning to the safety of her side. I could detect no eggs in the spawning pit.

After the three day Memorial Day holiday I returned home to find that the male Sunfish had rearranged the plastic plants on his side so as to block the view from the front of the aquarium. He was proudly guarding a new pit which seemed to be filled with four day old brine shrimp. On June 6th, nine days later, I noticed little silvery spots in the pit. Closer examination revealed that these spots were eyes. Without a peeping tom to disturb them, the fish had finished what I had earlier so rudely interrupted.

The fry are still in the pit although they do hop about now and then. They are shaped quite similarly to cichlid fry but their development appears to be much slower. The male constantly guards the fry pausing only for his daily brine shrimp or occasional earthworm. The female is relaxing in her quarters paying no attention to the new family next door. The water temperature is 70 F. with a pH of 6.7, and a hardness of 5DM. The tank receives Gro-lux light for 14 hours a day.

If rarity is determined by the cost and difficulty of obtaining a fish, America's *Lepomis megalotis* is a rare fish indeed. No amount of money will buy this beautiful friendly fish at your local pet store. Your wallet is of no use. You've got to get out in the sun, sit in the grass, wade in the water and breathe the fresh-air. You've got to outwit your fish in his natural environment. That's not so bad, is it?

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