

NEW FRIENDS - DARTERS AND SCULPINS



By Mary Hill

Like everyone who went on the collecting trip to Bennett Springs, I had a fantastic time and hope that we will be able to do it again sometime soon.

Let me tell you a little about the fish I caught - the darters and sculpins.

The first fish caught was a darter, and what a darter it was! It is just as colorful as any imported tropical fish you could think of. This particular darter (I'll leave the technical naming up to someone more qualified to identify the species) has much dark blue, green, and electric orange-red on various parts of its fins and body. I found out later that this particular darter was to be much more colorful than all the others that I caught. It is a large male, about three inches long. I found four others, mostly males.

There are about one-hundred species of darters, most of which are fast moving stream dwellers. Some are nest builders, others lay their eggs under a small rock ledge, with the male guarding the eggs until they hatch.

These particular darters have small and slender cylindrical bodies that come to a point at the mouth. They have seemingly small mouths, but are able to swallow rather large baby guppies whole. They have large pectoral and double dorsal fins. The caudal fin is blunt and almost square. Hopefully, many of you will get to see these beauties for yourselves.

The darters stay close to the bottom of gravel-filled streams darting a few inches at a time in search of small aquatic animals. They peek around the corners of rocks with their pointed little "noses" hoping to find some choice morsel to pounce upon.

At my home, they have accepted Tetra Min's egg layers "E" food (mostly whale meal), Planktonite, made by Marine Research Associates (made for saltwater fish - 75% protein) and live baby guppies.

They are very colorful and interesting fish. They had no trouble adapting to the slowly rising temperature of our aquariums. They get along extremely well with each other and the Sculpins they share their tank with.

The sculpins are approximately the same body shape as the darters, except their heads are broader and flatter, their double pectorals are slightly larger and they have large gaping mouths. On first sight is even difficult to tell them apart. The sculpins have the remarkable ability to change their colors according to their surroundings, though. I have seen the same fish change from yellow with red speckles to dark orange with black

blotches, to almost completely black, except for a creamy white head, according to which rock it was resting on.

The sculpins are not nearly so active as the darters, except when chow time comes. They really come alive. They lie quite still, watching carefully until a guppy swims overhead, then they move like lightening and the guppy disappears. Sometimes they stalk a wary guppy. I have seen one sculpin follow a specific guppy clear across the tank. The guppy ended in the corner at the top of the water. The sculpin then proceeded to jump halfway up the corner of the tank, then he perched there in a completely vertical position, clinging to the silastic with the tiny hook-like protrusions on his pectoral fins. He then darted up, one inch at a time until he was about two inches from the surface of the water and the unsuspecting guppy. He rested there motionless for a few moments, then shot straight up and gulped the guppy down. I have also watched them search the rocks, moss, and gravel for bits of Planktonite, which they seem to relish- but only when there are no guppies around.

In the streams, and clear lakes, sculpins make their homes under small rock ledges, living peacefully along side darters. There they eat small aquatic animals and seem to thrive on trout eggs. They are jumpers, so the aquarium you keep them in should be covered. They have enjoyed small flying insects for "dessert".

The female sculpin deposits her eggs in a cavity under a stone, and the male watches and defends the eggs until the young have hatched.

The water stays around 75 degrees. The tank is an all glass, almost square home-made 20 gallon aquarium. It contains one undergravel filter, one air-stone (bubbling at full blast) and a Dyna-flow- they all contribute to creating rapidly circulating water, which the fish seem to love.

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