

OBSERVATIONS ON SPAWNING OF BANDED PYGMY SUNFISH

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Although the Banded Pygmy Sunfish (Elassoma zonatum) is the largest of its genus, it is still among the smallest sunfish. The maximum size attained by a mature male is less than 2.5" (total length). Females will usually remain smaller, 1.5-2".

Aside from clues of size and range, E. zonatum can be distinguished from the smaller members of its genus by a series of dark vertical bars along the sides. Also, E. zonatum bears a number of black spots on its sides. These little gems can be found in sluggish, slow water, usually along a river or pond bank in dense vegetation. The pH in these areas will range from 5.6 to 7.2. This species seems to relish a pH of about 6.2.

E. zonatum ranges from Florida to Texas up through southern Illinois and Indiana. The Atlantic Coastal Plain range extends up to North Carolina.

These fish are fairly peaceful until breeding time. In captivity, this occurs on an unscheduled basis. The breeding ritual will start off with the male turning a coal black to blue, and showing green flecks along the dorsal, anal, and caudal finnage. The female, on the other hand, stays her usual dull brown, but with a little greenish tint to the finnage. The bars along her side may also become more pronounced.

The courting process will start with one male and two or more females, if there is that much choice. The male will choose among females. Then, the pair will pick out a certain area of the tank and begin setting up their territory. After this happens, they will pick out a certain area of the tank and begin to set up territorial defense. Once the pair has established their domain, they will begin to clean and prepare the nesting site. The nest will consist of bits of leaves or peat and some bits of plants. The nest in itself is crude and usually has no definite shape.

I know that it is not common among sunfish for the female to "help" the male in such things as site selection and territorial defense, but it seems to happen every now and then with my pairs. The spawning process will take place within a few days after the nest is complete. The eggs are laid in no definite pattern either on a nearby plant or on the bits of vegetation in the nest.

The cluster of eggs usually numbers less than 30. Once spawning is complete, the parents should be removed to prevent them from eating the eggs. The fry will hatch within three days to a week. They are nearly invisible at first; they will regard even a newly hatched brine shrimp as threatening. There should be a layer of dead leaves along the bottom so that a culture of infusoria and such will be available when the fry have absorbed their yolk sacs (usually four days). They may also be fed any type of liquid fry food, and at four weeks they will start to accept newly hatched brine shrimp.

I would strongly recommend adding E. zonatum to your collection. They require very little tank space for breeding (2.5 gallons) and are very hardy fish.

Reference

Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Fishes, Whales and Dolphins, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York.