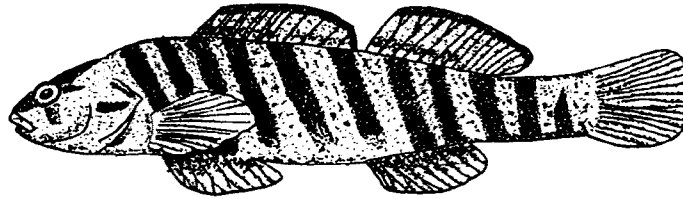


Overlooked Orangethroats



By Robert Rice

There aren't many fish better suited to aquarium life--and that have received less attention from aquarists--than the Orangethroat darter (*Etheostoma spectabile*). Colorful and tolerant to a wide range of water conditions, this active fish lacks the shy temperament common to many other darters.

The Orangethroat darter is moderately stout, with from 6 to 10 dark bars on its back. The sides of the fish may also be streaked with dark horizontal bars. Breeding males are brilliantly colored, with alternating blue green and brick red bars on their sides. The gill membranes are bright orange (hence, the fish's name), with the remaining under surface of the head being blue green. The fins are banded with blue green and red spots.

Unlike many darters, which require cold temperatures to thrive, the Orangethroats do well in warm water and can tolerate temperatures as high as 81 degrees Fahrenheit.

Orangethroat darters can be found in the Lake Erie and Mississippi River drainage, ranging from Wyoming east to Michigan and Ohio, and Southeast to Tennessee and in the gulf drainages of Texas.

Orangethroats are extremely varied genetically (five subspecies have been named so far), having evolved separate strains adapted to a wide variety of water conditions.

While many other types of darters will hide under rocks or driftwood, Orangethroats usually stake out territories in the open. On several occasions, I've even seen an Orangethroat rush to the surface and steal food from a fish 5 times his size!

To acclimate recently collected specimens, I place them in a tank with a few feeder guppies. After watching the guppies eat frozen food, the Orangethroats learn to accept the frozen offerings themselves. Soon, they will accept frozen food of all varieties. The Orangethroats I've kept seem to prefer bloodworms, but eventually will take almost anything--even flake food. After the fish are eating properly and appear to be thriving, I move them to more spacious quarters--in my case, one of my large community tanks. Next, I select those with the brightest colors, most outgoing temperament and general tolerance to domestic life to serve as brood stock.

Next, I'll cold treat these fish by keeping them at a temperature of 60 degrees during the winter. In my case, the laundry room of my walkout basement serves the purpose nicely. Other overwintering sites include a basement proper, a garage, or a backyard shed. Most darters need a current, so filtration is essential. Be careful, though, not to use a glass tank if the water temperature will drop below freezing, as these may crack.

In three to five weeks time, the males will color up brilliantly and establish territories. At about this time, I put 2 trios in a 20 gallon tank with some steady current and keep a watchful eye on them. Eventually, a male will coax a female into his cave (either in the rockwork or small flower pots I've supplied) and the two will spawn. As many as several hundred eggs may be deposited. These are highly adhesive and stick to virtually any surface. At this point, it's prudent to remove the adults from the tank, to prevent them from eating the eggs.

Fry will appear in about 7 to 10 days. The fry are very hardy and will grow rapidly with proper care. Those I've raised have been ready for newly hatched brine shrimp or infusoria soon after hatching. I've found that 6 feedings a day will get them off to a good start. Soon after, I'll introduce them to frozen baby brine shrimp, which I feed three to four times a day, and then, finally, blood worms twice a day.



Range map of the Orangethroat darter.