

THE SHEEPSHEAD MINNOW

[Adapted from "The Salt Marsh Killifish" by Scott Weber, Indianapolis Aquarium Society, via Delta Tales, publication of the Potomac Valley Aquarium Society, June 1986, vol. 17, #6.]

Cyprinodon variegatus, commonly known as the Sheepshead Minnow, is not a minnow at all. It is in fact a species of killifish. The genus Cyprinodon is generally known as the pupfish. Although some other pupfish species are becoming quite rare in their native habitat--a few have even been declared extinct--the Sheepshead Minnow (named after Sheepshead Bay, N.Y.) is often common where found. Its range extends from Maine to Mexico along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of North America. It is easily maintained in the home aquarium.

It is rather compact and stockily built, but what it lacks in grace it makes up in color. The male is the bigger and more colorful of the pair. His sides are an iridescent blue-green with a black-mottled overlay. His fins and belly line are a pastel orange sometimes changing to yellow. The female has none of the bright coloration, but she does have a very pale yellow belly and the black-mottled pattern. She also has a black dot on her dorsal fin. Individuals raised in my tanks have reached a total length of 2½" (females slightly smaller) and attained beautiful coloration.

Last year, when I was in Houston, Texas, I made a side trip to the Gulf tidal marshes around the Galveston area. There I was able to seine for local inhabitants. Among my catch of crabs, pipefish, mollies, etc., I netted several C. variegatus up to three inches long and in fantastic color. All had to be released; I had no way to keep them for the week I was there and couldn't transport them on the plane ride home.

As I stated earlier, they are easy to maintain as long as a few conditions are met. First, they need hard water with the addition of rock salt or sea mix. If rock salt is used, 1½-2 teaspoons per gallon will make them comfortable. If sea mix is used, bring the water to a specific gravity of 1.015 to 1.020. A ten-gallon tank will house a pair comfortably.

Bright light is a necessity if breeding colors are to be displayed. Set the tank near a window to receive direct sun or leave a light on over their tank for at least 14 hours a day, and watch them turn on the color.

C. variegatus is not a hard fish to feed. They will eat frozen or freeze-dried foods and go into a feeding frenzy when live foods are offered. They do require vegetable matter in their diet, and a growth of algae will supply this. If no algae is present, then feed spinach, peas, or green flake food.

They breed in typical killie fashion, spawning rapidly in breeding mops with corks removed so that mops sink to the bottom. A male will take over a mop and defend it against any other males that might swim too close. When a female is present, the male will hover just above the mop, displaying his fins and flared gills, and will make short dashes toward the female, trying to lure her into his area. When she is ready, she will join the male. They disappear into the strands of the mop, where they spawn. These fish are continuous spawners and lay a few eggs daily. If you want greater numbers of eggs, then separate the pair for a few days. When they've been placed back together, you should soon have more eggs than you need.

Eggs are picked from the mop and placed in separate containers with water from the parents' tank, and a small amount of acriflavine to prevent the spread of fungus from bad eggs.

Check the trays for three days, removing any eggs that turn white. On the third day, remove the eggs from the acriflavine and place them in fresh, clean water, also from the parents' tank. The eggs hatch in about a week at 72-75°F, and the fry will start eating newly hatched brine shrimp and microworms in a couple of days after the remainder of the yolk sac is absorbed. They have good appetites and should receive small amounts often. Be sure to change their water once or twice daily to prevent the water from fouling and killing the fry.

I kept them in plastic shoe or sweater boxes--depending on the number I was raising--for two or three weeks, with an airstone bubbling slowly. After this period, they should be moved to a ten-gallon tank filled to a 6" depth and add a sponge filter. With regular feeding and water changes, they grow rapidly and should be mature enough to sex out in about six months.