

The African Butterfly Peacock

Aulonocara jacobfreibergi “Eureka Red”

By John Moyles

Aulonocara jacobfreibergi (Johnson, 1974) is also called the African butterfly peacock and the fairy peacock. They are endemic to Malawi and are found throughout the lake of the same name. There are several geographical variants of the *Aulonocara* species in the hobby, including Eureka, Mamela, Otter Point, Hongi Island, Cape Kaiser, Lemon Jake, among others. These should never be housed together as they will readily cross-breed. Only one geographical race should be kept in the same aquarium.



Description

Males of this species differ from most other Peacocks in their broad, wide white dorsal and caudal fin margins. Females are easily confused with other peacock females, because they are grayish-brown in color with vertical banding on the body and have rounded anal and dorsal fins. Butterfly peacocks are further distinguished from other Peacocks by their large size. They can grow to lengths of up to 8 or 9 inches, but often can breed at half that size. Another distinguishing characteristic of the Butterfly Peacock is its moderate to deeply forked tail fin, which gives it the appearance of a swallow's tail.

The “Eureka” variant is an aquarium strain that was developed by line breeding specimens from Otter Point, Malawi. The males have blue throughout head, body and fins. Lower half of the head is blue and the upper part of the dorsal region is orange/red. Anal fin may show red. Dorsal fin has the trademark white/light blue blaze.

Diet

Butterfly peacocks are specialized feeders. In the wild they mostly consume zooplankton (insect larvae and crustaceans) in the wild. They require a high protein, high quality prepared diet in addition to frozen and live food items.

Breeding

Breeding Peacocks in the aquarium is not considered to be very difficult. Courting displays are very exciting to watch. They display with their fins erect and their thin, lateral stripes darken. Males make darting movements to get the female's attention. Once a male has attracted a female, he leads her to this nest. They make several passes across the nest in the classic T-position before the female finally

drops a few eggs. Just as the female reaches to pick them up, the male fertilizes the eggs. The two will repeat this process dozens of times. Once spawning is complete, the female will incubate the eggs in her mouth, using a special compartment called a buccal cavity, for a period of 21 to 28 days. When the fry are developed enough to swim and forage on their own, she will release them. Depending upon the size of the female, spawns of most adult peacock species number up to 50 eggs and newly released fry are around 10 mm in length.

Most aquarists prefer to keep their aquariums in the range of 78 - 82°F because spawning seems to occur more readily when these fish are kept in warmer water. Warmer temperatures will also speed the development of embryos within the mother's mouth and reduce "holding time".

In the aquarium, males will continue to chase females after spawning. It is essential that females have shelter from these advances. Female peacocks also do not eat during the incubation period. Because of this, they can become weak and easily stressed if chased and nipped at repeatedly. Caves and other shelter are necessary to provide cover. Often temporary placement in an isolation aquarium is the best option. It is important that she not be removed too soon after spawning as she might spit out the eggs. If the female is removed, consider allowing her a week after she spits the young to recover her strength before returning to the breeding aquarium.

Peacock species are known for their tendency to hybridize and many responsible aquarists refrain from keeping more than one breeding group in the same aquarium.

Habits

Peacocks can be housed with a variety of other Lake Malawi cichlids. Many of the more gentle "haps" make excellent tank mates. Various members of the genera *Protomelas*, *Copadichromis*, *Sciaenochromis*, *Cyrtocara*, *Placidochromis*, *Otopharynx*, and *Nyassachromis*, are some of the more popular fish which are often housed successfully with Peacocks. Peacocks should not be housed with "Mbuna" or other aggressive cichlids such as *Labeotropheus*, *Petrotilapia*, *Metriaclima*, or *Pseudotropheus* species.

Butterfly peacocks differ from other peacock species in its temperament. These fish tend to be feistier at times, fighting off any invaders in their territory. This is because, unlike other *Aulonocara* species that live in open schools over sand, *A. jacobfrebergi* live in caves that must be defended.

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