

Lamprologus ocellatus

By Tony Jochman



In my opinion, *Lamprologus ocellatus* is the most endearing of the cichlid species because of its small size, yet peculiar and often times spunky behavior. They are relatively unaggressive but highly active. Despite the fact that this little shell-dweller from Lake Tanganyika maxes out at 2-inches, the vigor with which it guards its territory is rarely matched.

In the wild, *L. ocellatus* inhabits the littoral zone - coastal regions where muddy or sandy shores are littered with empty shells of the snail *Neothauma tanganicensis*, at a depth of 15 to 100 feet.

In the tank, these cichlids should be supplied with at least one shell each. Exercise care in selecting shells; don't use shells that are likely to "trap" a fish in its spirals. Each shell-dweller needs at least one shell because they use them for shelter from predators and as a site for egg laying and brood tending by the female. Even though you may not have any other fish in the tank, they will still hang out near and even cling to their shells. In other words, they are necessary to give these tiny fish a sense of comfort and well-being at a minimum.

If you don't provide enough shells, one of your fishes will get beat up and you'll probably find him ostracized to the upper corners of the tank. It's important to have at least one extra shell (if not more) so that the *ocellatus* have some choice among the shells. Furthermore, their young will need a shell once they get evicted from their mother's.

Males need an area of floor space with a 6-inch radius, which they guard vigilantly. This is not a ferocious cichlid, but neither is it afraid to attack intruders many times larger than itself. About two months after my first colony was established in their tank, I decided I'd add a few more shells. One dropped right in the center of the male's territory. He'd already claimed four shells and so I thought a fifth one was out of order and proceeded to put my hand in to move it. No sooner had my hand gotten within 5 inches of the shell before the male had bitten my knuckle.

Needless to say, I ended up moving the shell with something other than my hand! *Ocellatus* have even been known to attack Python siphons.

For substrate, you can use either fine gravel or sand, but to truly experience the charm and intrigue of the *ocellatus*, you need to use sand. *L. ocellatus*, like all shellies, will excavate around its shell until it drops down level with the top of the sand, but where it differs from most is how it then buries the shell. It will face away from its shell, open its mouth and plow into a pile of sand with a rapid, propeller-like motion, blowing sand backwards and covering the shell. I'm not sure why they hold their mouth open while they do this, but I'll admit that at first, I thought they were blowing the sand out their gills as they plowed into piles of sand.

Once you see the *ocellatus*'s propeller stunt, you're sure to fall in love with this spunky little shellie. Konings in his 1998 video "Tanganyikan Cichlids" suggested that the motivation behind shell-dwellers' restructuring efforts are two-fold. Foremost, they arrange the sand around their shell so as to build a rampart around the perimeter of their territory, providing them protection. Another possible motivation might be to create a catchment area that diverts the natural flow of water and plankton to the vicinity of their shell. This is important for the young fry who don't venture beyond the shell for at least the first couple of weeks.

The primary difference among the sexes is that males are almost a half-inch larger than their counterparts. Males max out at 2 inches (5 cm) in total length and females at 1.5 inches (3.5 cm). Other differences are more subtle. Coloring is identical except females are supposed to have white-tipped dorsal and anal fins, whereas males' are gold. Males also tend to be more territorial than females, unless the latter are tending a brood. For example, females will usually let other females pass through their territory, although a visitor is often greeted with raised fins and only sometimes is chased off. Males also tend to be a bit more elongated and females will round up around the belly region when conditioned. Females will spawn every six weeks if kept in good condition.

L. ocellatus is a harem breeder, but can be successfully maintained as pairs. They can be kept and bred in tanks as small as 10 gallons if kept as pairs. For a trio, a tank size of at least 20 gallons is recommended.

Spawning begins when the female darkens along her back. She will court the male by curling her body and slapping her tail in the male's direction (see picture above). She then leads him to her shell, enters, and deposits the eggs. After she exits, the male will then either swim into the shell to deposit his milt, or will merely deposit his milt at the mouth of the shell if he's too big to enter. Once the spawning ritual is over, the female will take up her vigil over the eggs, occupying her time with fanning her pectoral fins across the entrance of the shell. This ensures the eggs have fresh, oxygenated water. The female will chase away anyone that approaches too closely to her shell, including the male.

Eggs are never seen, but I've read that they are white and 1.5 mm in diameter. Broods usually number between 20 and 50 fry. The eggs hatch after only 72 hours with the fry becoming free-

swimming 10 days post fertilization. They are extremely small, about the size of a pinhead. Once you spot them, it's time to start feeding them their own, specialized entrée. Baby brine shrimp, sifted Daphnia, and Cyclops make great fry foods. I have never used this technique, but one aquarist recommends gently shooting baby brine shrimp into the shell to ensure they get the food.

Initially, the fry will only poke their nearly microscopic heads out. With time, they will build up the courage to swim out of their mother's shell, and before you know it, they'll be venturing out further and further until they're finally evicted. At this point they'll take up residence in an empty shell or just hang out in the open, lying on the sand. Fry can be left in the tank with the adults, as these usually ignore the former; however, *ocellatus* juveniles tend to be sneaky and rather adept at preying on siblings from later broods. The fact that the evicted fry don't take as quickly to the shells simply compounds the problem. *L. ocellatus* will continue breeding until the tank is saturated with offspring and all the shells are claimed. At this point, it becomes necessary to remove some of the young to another tank where they can start their own colony. It's easiest to transplant the fry when they are still very young (by simply removing the shell) because once they're at that stage where they lay out on the open sand, they're hard to catch and don't head for the shells like the adults.