BREEDING THE HOCKEY-STICK OR PENGUIN TETRA

by Rene Jez

This very attractive tetra appears occasionally in the local aquarium shops; it is imported and forms part of the "classical" stock available to hobbyists all around the world. The name "Hockey-stick" or "Penguin" is derived from the black line running along the side of a silvery body and continuing to the lower extremity of the tailfin. It resembles very closely the form of a hockey stick. The latin name is *Thayeria boehlkei.*

This fish is found in the upper reaches of the Marañon, a tributary of the Amazon River. It grows to a length of 60-70mm and the body colours are the same in both sexes, but the female looks fuller in the pelvic region when in good prespawning condition. The adults are extremely capable jumpers and it is said that some imported specimens may leap as far as 2 metres when approached with a net.

The very soft water of the area where these fish occur naturally has a pH in the range 6.2-6.8, but I have noted normal development of fry, even after exposure to values as low as 5.5, for a limited time. However, it is better to aim for 6.5-7.0, when young fish are being reared.

I have wanted to include these fish in my aquaria for many years and to breed them but having always more species than tanks for breeding, I have had to forego the temptation. It is a real problem to introduce yet another school of fish into an already crowded tank. Moreover, my rule for successful breeding is to have at least 10 young fish, to bring them into spawning condition and to select a good pair, for the smaller the number, the lower the probability of success.

During a visit to Mr Paul Sykes' home I learned that he had already bred this species but that the survival rate was minimal. He ended up with only 2 - 3 fish and so was close to losing them, but he generously offered me his pair for experimentation. This was a chance not to be missed to obtain a pair of proven spawners, including a particularly fine male specimen. It is frequently a problem with tetras that the male is infertile or fails to fertilize the eggs.

I brought the pair home, prepared their tank and installed them. The water temperature was around 24°C and the pair spawned the following day. The basic requirement for this species is evidently to provide a longer-than-usual spawning tank (at least 450mm) to allow the fish to complete their spawning run. They behave quite wildly, spreading the tiny brown eggs all over the tank and producing quite a large number, when well conditioned.

In my case, the first spawning, following so closely upon Paul's earlier ones, produced barely more than 40 - 50 eggs and shortly afterwards, about half of them succumbed to fungus. The rest developed into extremely small fry.

I devised a strategy to bring food to all those fry by transferring them into a small tank (5-6 litres of water). To avoid handling problems, I reduced the volume of water in the spawning tank to the required volume and then transferred it, together with the fry, into the small tank. The gentle aeration allowed the nitrification process to begin soon after a little food was provided to the fry. The soft and near-sterile water used for spawning needs a little time to develop bacterial growth, before it can handle the transformation of ammonia into nitrate. Under no cicumstances should one allow the water to become foul, as can easily occur with incautious over-feeding. Examination through a magnifying glass, coupled with experience, will indicate just the right amount of food needed in the early stages, to leave the fry with nicely rounded tummies.

I started with egg yolk for a few days, followed by fine live food, and confidently expected good results, but the fry grew extremely slowly. It took 14 - 18 days for them to begin eating microworms. Then I realised why Paul had had problems in bringing them to the normal feeding stage. Hockey-stick infants are certainly hard to raise, even when given the best of preferential treatment.

After a month had passed the baby fish were still very small (barely 5 mm) and they showed no indication of their species. Neon tetras of the same age would be 8 to 10 mm long and would be shining with colours.

It seems that of this particular batch, I had probably not lost a single fry, for there were still 20 to 30 of them and they were very uniform in size, thanks to the provision of adequate fine live food. A second spawning, after a short rest period, produced several hundred fry but my absence for a few days during the critical period reduced the survival rate significantly. A third, more recent spawning looks promising. The only dark cloud on the horizon is the uncertain supply of live food in my local pond. All depends on the local weather.