BREEDING MELANOCHROMIS AURATUS

by Andrew Boyd

There are times when you really shouldn't go near aquarium shops! One sunny Friday afternoon Julie and I drove past Belconnen and sure enough, we ended up at Bob and Helen Kingwells' shop, Jem Aquatics.

As if by fate, they'd received a consignment of fish that afternoon and the cutest of the whole lot were some juvenile cichlids, about 4 cm long, pressing their little noses up against the glass, as friendly as anything. They looked African to me, which to my limited knowledge meant 'nasty', and Bob confirmed this from a quick glance at Axelrod *et al.*: maternal mouth-brooder, grows to about 15 cm.

At this stage they looked innocent enough, so we housed them temporarily in our larger Australian Natives tank, while I organised a hard, alkaline-water tank for their reception. Meanwhile, the young cichlids polished off 4 Desert Gobies, almost twice their own size.

So into their own tank they went and all was quiet until the 2 males discovered each other. All *M. auratus* start life yellow on the top half of their bodies, with black stripes beneath. Males of this fascinating species undergo a complete colour reversal as they mature, the yellow becoming muddy-grey and eventually black, as the underside gets lighter. Two of our fish started looking somewhat pale. "Ah hah" thought the bigger one "so you're the other male" and promptly killed him.

Time passed and the 3 little cichlids grew bigger, so we went and bought 3 more. Luckily, any males in the later lot were smart enough to keep their colour to themselves (like Desert Gobies) or maybe we picked 3 females. They were all quite happy, growing like mad on their diet of Jack Wattley's beefheart mixture (beefheart, prawns, liver and bran, minced together and then frozen), tubifex worms, bottom-feeder tablets and the odd *Daphnia* or two.

By this stage the dominant male had reached 7 cm in length and began displaying to the second-largest female. This involved his circling her and shaking from side to side. He would try to lead her back to 'his place', a section of hollow log, and eventually she did follow. We couldn't see what was happening but according to an article in T.F.H., the typical African cichlid mating is straightforward. The female snaps at the male's egg-spot, a small yellow patch on his anal fin. It is assumed that this is when he releases his sperm. She then releases her eggs, scooping them up in her mouth.

Immediately, the 'pregnant' female stopped feeding and after a week, had become noticeably skinny. After 10 days she started to be bothered by other fish, so we moved her - a risky business as fry could have been lost by being dropped or swallowed. It would have been better either a) to have used a divisible tank or b) to have planned the breeding with just a pair, followed by removal of the male. Anyway, she went into a 10-gallon, with a heap of Java moss, just in case she was a bit too hungry and likely to eat the fry the first time she saw them.

A couple of weeks after we separated her the first of the fry appeared. It was about 1 cm long and an exact copy of its mother. We immediately threw in some newly-hatched brine shrimp.

As this was our first mouth-brooder spawning, we wanted to see some of these renowned cichlid parental instincts in action. We left the mother with her fry and now, a month later, she still watches over them. The only change is that they are now too big to fit into her mouth. We have raised them on brine shrimp (both live and powdered), powdered flake and powdered bottom-feeder tablets. They lurk under rocks most of the time, dashing out only to feed or chase one another.

In conclusion, I can heartily recommend the keeping of this interesting little cichlid, if you have a tank big enough and can spare it for one species, plus a little patience. The dead sub-dominant males, the dead Desert Gobies, it all seemed worthwhile when the little ones took their first swim from their mum's mouth.