

BREEDING THE BLACK WIDOW TETRA

by Deborah Ralph

Rodney and I had thought many times about trying to breed tetras but either we did not have the right free tank space or there were no tetras available for breeding. Then a chance to obtain some good quality tetras occurred quite unexpectedly. We visited Rene Jez for a totally different reason and ended up bringing home some fine tetras. Among these were some long-finned Black Widow Tetras - *Gymnocorymbus ternetzi* var. - a turn of events that meant an afternoon busy in the fishroom.

An 18" x 9" tank was thoroughly cleaned with salty water and then three-quarters filled with water from our 5' community tank, followed by a topping up with fresh tap water. Some black water tonic was added and also some clean (as possible) Java moss, enough to cover the bottom of the tank. A sponge filter was also set to work. A nice pair of Black Widows was added to the tank that evening: why wait we thought. Next morning it was very evident that they had spawned, for there were eggs everywhere, amongst the Java moss. The fish were removed for fear that they would eat the eggs, even though they did not seem interested. Our concern that the Java moss would have introduced some unwanted bacteria soon proved valid, for even in a completely dark tank, all the eggs were soon white and fungused.

The pair of Black Widows were separated to be readied for the next try and were fed on live mosquito larvae, *Daphnia* and *Cyclops* for the next 5 days. During that time the spawning tank was cleaned again and made ready with only fresh tap water, that was then allowed to age. Also a diatom filter was run on the tank to remove any hidden 'nasties'. The pH was adjusted to about 6.8 and the temperature was 24°C. No Java moss was used this time but a spawning grid, made from glass and plastic fly-wire was placed on the bottom of the tank instead, covering about three-quarters of it. The following evening the pair were reunited and they seemed quite contented even though there was nowhere to hide: they do not seem to be jumpy fish. We were lucky again as by the next morning they had spawned once more. There were eggs all over the bottom but spawning was still continuing. The male was chasing the female, following her every move, although from time to time he would rush at her and collide with her. Eventually, after a spell of this male persuasion, they would go side by side and spawn again. It was something to see as the female was twice the size of her mate. The fish were removed at about 10 a.m., when they had begun to search the bottom for food. A number of eggs were laid outside the spawning grid but a lot had gone through or were lying on it. They were clear and small and there must have been over 200 of them.

The tank top, front, side and back were covered to keep the illumination low as tetra eggs are generally light sensitive. Black Widow eggs are probably not as sensitive as others but it does no harm to keep them in the dark. Early next morning caught us peeking in with a torch and we were pleased to see that about 80% of the eggs had not become fungused, although none had yet hatched. Later, at about 9 a.m., the eggs had hatched. The ones that did best were those that had been resting on top of the spawning grid. Little wriggling tails were seen dangling from the fine mesh. The fry stayed on the grid or on the floor for the remainder of that day and the tank was left covered. Next morning, the little Black Widows had

migrated to the tank walls, clinging mainly to the back one, where it was darkest. The spawning grid was carefully lifted out, a 10% water change was given and the fungused eggs on the bottom of the tank were removed. Fresh aged water at a similar temperature was run in gently, with an air-hose as a syphon, and about one cup of green-water infusoria was added to start some biological activity in the water. Almost to the hour at 4 days after hatching, the fry were free-swimming. The tank was then slowly uncovered and natural light allowed to enter, but the lamp above was not yet turned on. Some Java moss and small Mystery snails were added to the tank, together with some shell-grit to help maintain a stable pH. The first food, apart from the infusoria, was some micro-worms, as the fry were not as small as expected. However, although the fry were capable of taking these worms, on their first day of free-swimming, they appeared to spit them out again in disgust. A short time later some newly hatched brine shrimp were added - just a small number to see if the fry could handle them. And could they just: they were into them as though it was their very first meal. Obviously, they knew what was good for them! Needless to say, more had to be provided as the fry were certainly filling up their tiny bellies. It was a funny sight to see as the little bodies were clear, except for a tummy full of red brine shrimp nauplii.

The tank's light was turned on after the fry were a few days old. Each day they needed more brine shrimp and they still preferred them to micro-worms. They would fill up their tummies almost beyond capacity as if they were storing up for winter. The only problem was that next time, they did it all over again. The fry had exceptionally large mouths for their overall size. I actually saw a fry less than one week old open its mouth so wide as if to dislocate its jaw, when a small *Daphnia* or *Cyclops* wandered near, then snap it up. Appetite-satisfying foods seemed to be preferred. Brine shrimp nauplii were being provided morning and afternoon, along with some micro-worms and, when available, *Cyclops* and *Daphnia* of suitable size. Powdered flake was tried a few times but was ignored.

On the 12th day, there were about 350 fry, some 7mm in total length. Water changes were being given 3 times per week, 2 at 25% and the third at 10-15%, when the tank bottom was thoroughly cleaned.

Some fry grew quicker than others and the fast ones began to show some bottom-fin shape when they were only 18 days old and measured 10mm in length. They still preferred brine shrimp to most other foods but alternatives were being included to wean them off. At 4 weeks of age, the fry were developing the 'Widow' body shape, with black fins, silver sides and black body-lines. They were then 15-20mm long.

After our success in breeding Black Widow Tetras and learning that they were not as difficult as we expected, we are now encouraged to try some other tetras. We were surprised to find that Black Widow fry could deal with brine shrimp nauplii on their first day of free swimming and that their rate of growth was good. There were no problems with water changes, even with plain tap-water, after the fry were only 10 days old.
