

## Keeping the Archer Fish

Ben Gunn

The Archer Fish, known to the scientific world as *Toxotes jaculator*, can be found in the brackish and freshwater regions of the Indo-Australian archipelago, as well as south east Asia, Sri Lanka and India. This is an attractive fish; with low-domed back, curved belly, and an olive-brown dorsal surface but is not a commonly kept species. The body of this species has large silver-white scales contrasting with black wedge-shaped lateral stripes. The caudal fin is yellowish, while the broadish anal fin is silvery-white with a black edge. Overall this fish is very pleasing and an attractive addition to a well planted community tank.

I obtained my Archer fish, when I had just about had enough of a tank full of 'Johanni' (an African Cichlid), they had killed all of their tank mates, shredded all of the plants and were constantly rearranging the tank for the worst. Because of this I decided to get rid of the current occupants, and let the tank lie fallow for a couple weeks but rather than leaving the tank totally fish-free while away on holidays I decided to purchase a pair of something!

When at the Aquarium shop I told the owner of my predicament and that I wanted something with the personality of a cichlid but not the painful habit of digging, chomping, chewing, shredding and other disdainful cichlid acts. When the proprietor suggested an Australian Native, I conjured up an image of a tank full of rainbowfish, swimming around without much purpose or personality (sorry Doug). My mind was soon changed when I was shown a native of a different kind! Fifteen minutes later I was driving home with two 11cm Archer Fish in my possession.

Through experience, this species of fish does not appear to be fussy about water conditions, as long as the pH is kept above neutral. The fish seem to be most comfortable with a water temperature of about 27-28C. Before purchasing them I was a little worried about the fact that this fish is usually found in brackish water and because of this fact it is often difficult to keep. The shop owner however, assured me that these particular fish did not need brackish water because they had been collected from freshwater in northern Australia. At first I was a bit sceptical and added salt to the water, but as time went on I found no need to continue with this practice as the fish appeared healthy in straight tap water.

These fish proved to be quite hardy (in the sense that when conditions went bad they did not kick the proverbial 'bucket'), but they do seem to take a long time to recover from severe changes to their environment. On one such occasion the heater became unplugged, which as one might guess resulted in a dramatic temperature drop. The other inhabitants of the tank although a little sluggish seemed unaffected by the cold and quickly recovered, but the Archers took two weeks before they started to eat again. On another occasion when the pH became extremely acidic after the addition of some drift wood, the Archer Fish only started eating again after three weeks.

Archer Fish are perfect as far as compatibility goes with other fish and they do not dig and certainly do not eat or even touch the aquarium plants. They spend most of their time in the top third of the aquarium, their large eyes constantly moving about, taking in the surroundings, and scanning the water's surface for a potential meal.

As far as compatibility with its own kind, the books say that individuals are very amicable, but my pair obviously cannot read because one of the fish quickly became dominant and harassed the other until it lost condition and died. The surviving fish has been in a community tank for some time now with tank mates including Kribensis, Angel Fish and Bristle-nose Catfish. All of these occupants were placed in the tank when quite small and never once has the now 16cm Archer Fish looked like eating them. The fish does, however, look somewhat predatory and the fact that a closely related species to *T.jaculator* is frequently caught by fisherman on lures leads me to be hesitant about putting them in a tank with small tetras.

The Archer fish is best known for its ability to shoot terrestrial insects above the water by spitting a high powered stream of water at its prey. The fish will do this in a tank as well; on numerous occasions when being fed the Archer fish has shot pellets out of my hands, rarely missing. The longest shot hit the ceiling approximately 1.5 metres above the tank.

Archers will take almost any form of food as long as it is reasonably high in protein, making frozen peas and spinach out of the question. The main restriction on feeding is that the fish will normally take food only from the top half of the tank, and once the food sinks below this point it is often ignored. I have never seen the fish take food from the bottom of the tank.

An interesting observation on the feeding habits of this fish is that it swallows its food whole without chewing; so care must be taken not to give too many pellets as they may swell in the stomach and cause bloating. For this reason, it is best when feeding pellets, either floating or sinking, to keep the fish slightly underfed. One last note on feeding; Archers love winged insects, especially moths and flies. Many an annoying blow fly in the house has become a meal for my fish.

As far as breeding goes, this fish has not been bred in captivity making all tank species wild-caught. A successful method of sexing this fish has yet to be found.

To sum up, the Archer fish is ideally suited to a well planted aquarium with fairly small fish (but not too small) and a pH above 7. It is generally a hardy species but may take some time to recover from severe cases of shock. Its feeding habits are easily catered for using most prepared foods and the occasional moth. All in all I would thoroughly recommend this fish to anyone who may want a change from cichlids or would just like something a bit different in their aquarium.

