

I Love Loaches

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If you are looking for some interesting fish to add to your aquarium, I recommend members of the Loach family. The loaches come from South East Asia, generally from Pakistan and India to Indonesia, Sumatra and Borneo.

Over thirty years ago, I bought my first Kuhli loach (*Acanthophtalmus kuhlii*). I loved to watch them zipping around the aquarium at my local fish store, so I had to have one. I was very disappointed when the loach would always be hidden under rocks, in the gravel or behind the chrome frame of my 5 gallon aquarium. (Don't laugh, I still have the tank, and use it for growing up fry to this day) The local fish store owner suggested I save up some money and purchase at least two more of these loaches. This took a long time for a 12 year old, but after a few months of cutting grass, it was worthwhile! The trio of Kuhli loaches became the main attraction in my little tank. They were always darting up, down and all around. They really love each other's company.



Photo courtesy of Neil Lourie

My first set of Kuhlils lived about 10 years. Others have lived anywhere from 8 to 12 years. They grow to about 7 to 10 cm (3 to 4 inches). I have not spawned them, and if they do, it is rare in the home aquarium. The Kuhlils will scavenge any food falling to the substrate, but I make sure to drop in some pellets after the lights are turned off for the evening. They love to burrow into sand and smooth gravel. Although they sort of look like snakes or eels, after a few minutes, most people are charmed by their comic behaviour. Kids really warm up to them in no time. I recommend them for any community aquarium, usually with a pH around 7 and softer water, but I have kept them at a higher pH and harder water. If you have plants, either real or plastic, the kuhlils will hang from them like garland or a sock on a clothesline. I do not recommend these loaches for aquariums with large cichlids because the kuhlils look too much like worms and might be taken as a meal.

In the larger aquarium, I suggest the Pakistan or YoYo loach (*Botia almorhae* was known as *Botia lohachata*). They are fast swimmers and have a thicker girth than the kuhlils. The black line markings on their white bodies sometimes suggests the letters YOYO, hence their common name. Not all YoYos have that recognizable pattern, but the others are just as interesting. Their feeding habits are similar to the kuhlils. Their sleeping habits are different in that they will lie on their sides. First time YoYo keepers

can be tricked into thinking that they have died, but when netting them out, they take off at a furious pace. Resurrected? No, just taking a rest for the next dash around the tank. I am currently keeping three and that is probably the smallest group you should have. They like to have others around, so if you have space in your large aquarium, then add a few more for constant activity. They grow to about 10 cm (4 inches), sometimes larger.



Photo courtesy of University of Michigan

The major selling point of YoYos is their love of eating snails. If you have a bad infestation in your planted tank, these loaches will eliminate or reduce the population in a short period of time. When you purchase them, make sure they are double bagged. These loaches have a movable spine under each eye that is quite sharp. The spine can also get caught in a fine mesh, so use a coarser net. I have not seen a YoYo use this spine to injure another fish. I think it is a defence mechanism. Maybe they flash the spines at each other to establish a pecking order or part of a mating ritual. I have not found any account of breeding in captivity, so your guess is as good as mine.

Probably the most popular loach is the clown loach (*Botia macracanthus*). Almost every fish keeper I know either has them or wants them. I have seven in my 100 gallon aquarium. Some of the clowns usually join my shoal of Tiger barbs for swims around the tank. They have similar colouring with orange bodies and black vertical stripes. The clowns have a different shape, being longer and thinner than the Tiger barbs. Compared to the other two loach species I have already mentioned, the clown is somewhere in between in shape. In the home aquarium, clown loaches will easily exceed 10 cm (4 inches) in length and after many years can get up to 20 cm (8 inches). In nature, they can get up to 60 cm (24 inches). This is probably their breeding size, so that is why they usually do not breed in captivity.



Photo courtesy of Phil Maznyk

Like the YoYo loach, the clown loach loves to eat snails when they are available. Otherwise, flake and pellet foods will be eaten. On many occasions, I have heard them making a clicking sound, usually when they are eating. Some people report that their clowns also sleep on their sides, but I have not seen mine do so. Maybe they sleep under a log or rock or in a cave where I cannot see them?

A note of caution; loaches are similar to catfish in that they are sensitive to some medications. If you get ich (white spot parasite infestation) read the instructions for medications very carefully. Usually a half dose is the maximum safe level for loaches. Any higher, and the medication itself may cause the loach to die.

Loaches are excellent additions to most community tanks. Their fun loving nature just adds to the hobby. Get at least three of a kind and have a blast!

For more photos and information on these and other loach species, please surf to www.loaches.com