

Are you considering starting to keep African cichlids? Are you confused by the myriad of species of Rift Lake cichlids? Do you have no idea of which fish to start with? Let me make a suggestion. Try the Rusty Cichlid (*Iodotropheus sprengerae*) from Lake Malawi.

I started with this peaceful mbuna a couple of years ago and have been quite successful at keeping and breeding them. Their not so aggressive behaviour allows keeping them in a tank as small as 20 gallons, but bigger is better. Like all mbuna, the Rustys love to have rocks and caves in their environment. The adult males grow to just under 4 inches (10cm). The females are smaller at 3 inches (7.5cm). They generally have a brown body colour of iodine, with orange fins. Hence the Rusty cichlid nickname. They will nibble at algae and explore all parts of the tank. The water should be hard with a pH around 8.2. Temperature should be 77F (25C).

The Rusty cichlid is an excellent choice to see the spawning behaviour of a mouth brooder. The male will dance and shake and vibrate in front of the female, to show off his purple breeding sheen. The female will lay non-sticky eggs on a flat horizontal surface. The male follows right behind and fertilizes the eggs. The female then picks up the eggs in her mouth. She may grab at the anal fin of the male, because of the eggs spots there. This assures fertilization. She will then hold the eggs in her mouth for up to 3 weeks, not eating during that time. You will see the bottom of her throat begin to swell when the eggs hatch. After the babies consume their egg sack, they are ready to be born, fully formed, but only a quarter inch long. They usually have darker vertical bars, which fade, or the body gets darker brown after a few months.

Some keepers move the female to a separate small tank before babies are spit out. The female is then returned to the larger tank, leaving the fry to explore their new world in small groups. If the babies are to be born in a community tank, make sure there are lots of hiding places among the rocks.

The Rusty cichlids prefer a vegetable flake diet. The occasional live or frozen treat can be given, but no more than once a week. For babies, I give finely crushed spirulina flake placed in the water so it sinks right away.

When you are ready to add other Malawi cichlids like Electric yellows, Red or Blue Zebras, the Rusty cichlids make a nice contrast.

Enjoy!



Photo of male Rusty from <http://mbunaspassion.free.fr>