

## **Neetroplus nematopus - supotamen sulporteeN**

**By Al Ridley – yeldiR IA**

At Oktoberfish 1990, I purchased my first bag of "Neets". In the February 1991 issue of Fins n' Tales, I wrote about my experiences spawning these fish. It is funny how some fish just stay in the blood and when I saw some fry at a local shop I decided to give it a go once again. By the way... there is a spawning pair selling there for \$69.99!

The small *Neetroplus nematopus* is a New World cichlid that comes from the Great Lakes of Nicaragua, the Rio San Juan and in the Atlantic slope rivers of Costa Rica. River populations are typically found in areas of vigorous current and rocky bottoms. Lake Jiloa in Nicaragua is a small crater lake where *Neetroplus* is a common inhabitant of the rocky bottoms, occurring at all depths in considerable numbers. It is quite unique among Central American cichlids in its appearance, behavior and maintenance. They are aufwuchs grazers. As fry, they live in large, active colonies among the rocks. The coloration is rather drab save for a surprising transformation at breeding time. The body is a medium to light gray with a black vertical blotch in the centre of the body. During courtship, this colouration reverses to a velvety black body with light gray blotch. Because of this, "Neets" have been referred to as the "poor man's Tropheus". In older fish, the scales are delicately edged in black. Maximum size is about to 4" for the males, 2 ½" - 3" for the females.

Albert Gunther described this fish in 1869. Like many other nineteenth century cichlid genera, *Neetroplus* was defined on the basis of dental characteristics. The outer jaw teeth in *Neetroplus* are compressed and incisor-like in shape, quite different from the conical dentition characteristic of Heroines. The name of the Asian genus *Eetroplus* refers to the heavily spined anal fin of these cichlids. *Neetroplus* literally means "new *Eetroplus*". The specific name *nematopus* means "thread-foot," and refers to the filamentous extensions of the ventral fins of large males.

The lakes of Nicaragua have very hard, alkaline water. *Neetroplus* prefers such water conditions in captivity, but will do well in moderately soft, neutral to slightly acid water. This species is probably the least tolerant of nitrogen cycle mismanagement of any Central American cichlid. Stressed individuals become abnormally dark and manifest a greatly accelerated rate of respiration along with severely inflamed gill filaments. They will dash frantically about their tank at the slightest disturbance and often attempt to escape their polluted surroundings by jumping out. Regular partial water changes are a must to the successful maintenance of *N. nematopus*. So is an outside power filter which will also provide the water movement this species appears to enjoy. In larger tanks, I recommend setting up several territories of sandy or gravelly areas separated by rockwork and driftwood. It is suggested that *N. nematopus* actually serves as a cleaner fish in the wild, where other cichlid species will visit "Neets" to solicit a manicure.

*Neetroplus* is not overly picky at mealtimes. Flakes or pellets, any of the usual live or frozen foods and fresh greens are all devoured with gusto. *Neetroplus* much prefers feeding at the surface to scraping algae from solid surfaces. It usually requires several days without access to other sources of nourishment before individuals will revert to their typical feeding behavior in captivity.

As they near maturity, males will develop a slight hump high on the forehead. At times they will reverse colouration to the "dark with light blotch" mode, but not to the degree that is evident when courting. This marks the beginning of territorial behavior, with pairing and courtship to follow. Keep no more than one pair to a small (20-30 Gal.) tank. Three or four pairs may only be maintained in a very large aquarium, as subdominant males or unpaired females can be lost. Defense of territory is very aggressive, and even much larger fish soon learn to stay clear.

Preferred spawning sites combine a narrow entrance with a height not much larger than the maximum body depth of the male of the pair. Flowerpots or coconut shells cut in half lengthwise are eagerly accepted. In the absence of a shelter of this sort, a pair will excavate a cave. Though a small cichlid, *N. nematopus* is an accomplished and highly efficient digger. It is essential that any rockwork rest securely upon the bottom of the aquarium rather than on the surface of the

gravel. Otherwise, the pair's excavation may create a spectacular underwater avalanche as the rockwork's foundations are quickly undermined. While this poses some risk to the excavators, the real danger from such rockfalls is the unintentional breakage of a glass panel.

Neetroplus is a cave or hole spawning cichlid. If you keep track of the color changes of a courting pair, you may determine when spawning has actually occurred. The key is the colour of the female. Once she turns dark, and remains so for 2 or 3 days, you can assume that the spawning has occurred. The male's colour is not as intense as that of the female at this time, and he may occasionally revert to normal shading. Until it attains sexual maturity, *N. nematopus* is a peaceful resident in a cichlid community tank. With the onset of reproductive activity, which can happen suddenly, the situation undergoes a complete reversal.

The appearance of an obvious ovipositor is a certain sign that a spawning can be expected within a day's time. There is absolutely no problem in guessing whether spawning has actually occurred in this species. A parental female undergoes a dramatic color pattern change as soon as the eggs have been deposited, becoming, in effect, a photographic negative of herself! The male carries out the majority of territorial defense while the female tends the clutch of reddish-brown to burgundy colored eggs. Spawns tend to be small, rarely exceeding a hundred eggs, with the average closer to forty. However, the eggs are quite large, measuring 2.25 mm along the major axis.

The eggs hatch in just over 24 hours at 28°-30°, and the free-swimming fry emerge from the spawning shelter five days later. At this time, the male's color pattern also undergoes a "positive-negative" transformation. Neetroplus pairs are superb parents, capable of rearing young to sub-adulthood even under highly crowded conditions.

The fry are easily reared. They are large enough to take *Artemia nauplii* and finely powdered prepared foods immediately. Given ample food and frequent partial water changes, the fry grow rapidly. It is not uncommon for the larger individuals in a brood to have grown to 1.5 cm by their fourth week free-swimming.