

## **Apistogramma Cacatuoides the “Kitchen Table Cichlid”**

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My love affair with this little fish began back around the year 2002. This is far before this fish became popular in southern Ontario, and long before my family had coined the term “Kitchen Table Cichlid”. I became enamored with dwarf cichlids, a result of some German blue rams I picked up at Oktoberfish in 2001. I did some reading up on the other dwarf cichlids available, and fell in love with pictures and articles about the Apistogramma genus. Pictures of brightly coloured flowing finnage on the male cockatoos drew me instantly to this fish.



At Oktoberfish 2003 I was lucky enough to purchase a pair of triple red Apistogramma cacatuoides. There were 3 pairs in the auction, and I had a bit of a bidding war with another hobbyist on the first two pairs, which sold for over \$40 each. Apparently he gave up by the time the third pair came up, and let me have them for only \$25.

The term ‘triple red’ is used to indicate that the males of the species have red/orange markings in the dorsal, caudal and anal fins. The red/orange markings are interspersed with black dots. This is a tank bred variety, and is hotly becoming popular in our area. The double red variety was developed back in the 70’s and is the same, except that the anal fin hasn’t the red/orange/black markings. Sometimes the anal fin may have orange or red colour in it, but is still considered a double black spots aren’t present. Ideally, the best specimens have fully coloured dorsal, anal and caudal fins, with no spaces being absent of colour. The best males will have long flowing lyre shaped tails, and long dorsals, with the first 4 fin rays being solid black, extended and ‘spiky’.

Though my little fish were beautiful, they were a little more drab looking, being primarily brown, and the male was without much pronounced colour. About a week after I brought them home, they started to surprise me. The male began to colour up beautifully, and in this short period of time, I swear his fin extensions nearly doubled. I was feeding them a diet of frozen brine shrimp and bloodworms, they wanted nothing to do with any prepared foods whatsoever. I was keeping them in a quarantine tank, sand bottom, sponge filter, and just a few stones to swim around. They were sharing their quarantine with some killies I had purchased the same day.



Because I hadn't planned on breeding these fish, I hadn't looked into what a proper breeding tank would be for them. Low and behold, I had just set it up, complete with dithers and all. Back in those days, I didn't have the space to store any RO water long term. When I did water changes, I would let the RO system drip slowly directly into the tank, and then turn the heat back on later once the tank was full enough. Little did I know that this would stimulate the fish to think it was the rainy spring season in their native Amazon tributaries, and hence time to spawn. The ideal conditioning foods for these fishes is meaty foods, like bloodworms and earthworms....oh yes, I suppose that is what I was already feeding them!

So they spawned 2 weeks after I got them, in the quarantine tank. I was surprised to see just how brightly coloured the female became during breeding. She appeared as though someone had coloured her entire body with a yellow highlighter, and there were a few stark black lines to set it all off. Somebody ate the eggs by that night....perhaps the killies. I shrugged it off, and decided to get them set up into the community tank, where they would be the stars of the show. So in they went to the 35g fully planted setup, along with a few small tetras and a couple of cories. The male never did drop out of his breeding colours, and for his entire lifetime, remained gorgeous,

developing hues of purple along his sides, always flaring and displaying when someone approached the tank. A real showpiece he was.

Shortly after the introduction to the community they spawned again (after a water change of course). I tried to rear the resulting 50 or so young on frozen bbs, which I squirted at them with a syringe. The numbers dwindled rapidly, and I was soon without any young. I acquired a micro worm culture from another club member, with hopes of the parents spawning again. And they did, not two weeks later. This time, I had removed the cory's prior to spawning. And with much better results. After several weeks of squirting frozen bbs and microworm into that area of the community, 4 young apistos had survived. I was so proud of my four young fishes....little did I realize that had the tetras not been there, I surely would have had ten times that many!

Somehow two years later, I was down to just two of the offspring. The original pair had matured and passed on (apistos aren't reputed as being the longest lived fishes). Both of those two were females. I hadn't come across any more a. cacatuoides at auctions since I bought the original pair. Lucky for me, a. cacatuoides was rapidly gaining popularity around these parts, and rumour had it they could be found in several area LFS. I called around the shops in Kitchener, and despite rumours I heard on the internet, nobody had any. I really wanted to keep this line going, having loved the finnage and colours in my original male so much. In spring 2006 my husband went down to Toronto for me, and dropped by several shops. To his dismay, he wasn't able to find any, and came home with only a bag of vals for the community tank.

In September 2006 I went in to a pet shop before the KWAS meeting, and surprise surprise they had some double red cockatoos. There were two males in the tank, and I chose the subdominant one, as he looked a little younger and more willing to breed. Crossing the double reds with the triple reds is not a major faux pas, in fact, most triple reds throw both double and triple red offspring anyhow.

Back home, my two lone females had been coloured up in full lemon yellow breeding dress for several months. They were becoming restless and territorial with each other, pretending to guard non-existent broods. Not being prepared with a quarantine tank, I decided to risk it, and just popped him in. The next day, he had spawned with one of the females in the community. Of course, the other tank inhabitants quickly 'took care' of any eggs.

I decided I wanted to try my hand to breed these fishes, and time was running short, as the girls were growing old. I constructed a divider down the center of a fifteen gallon tank. I filled the tank with a blend of RO and tap water, giving me about 85.5 ppm tds. The ph was 7.4, quite high for most apistos, but fine for cacatuoides. Tank furnishings were bare; one sponge filter, one plastic plant and 3 small clay pots on each side of the tank. Placing a female on each side of the divider, I began feeding bbs to both females twice a day, on top of their usual ration of earthworms, bloodworms and algae wafers. Some days later, I introduced the male to one side, performed a wc with room temp RO water, and cranked the heater up to 80F. Nature took its course and I was blessed with a spawning in a few days. I was quite pleased to see the eggs were bright orange, a result of the heavy feedings of the carotene rich bbs, and a sign of good health in the female.

All was well and happy, until the male turned on the female and began to devour the eggs. I scooped him out and popped him over to the other side. Now, I wasn't about to start messing around with water parameters and temperatures when there are eggs, so if the other female was to spawn, I would have to wait for the fish to initiate it on their own. A. cacatuoides sometimes does that, they don't necessarily need the cool water changes, but it certainly helps.

A week after spawning, about 20 free swimming fry emerged from their cave. Now about this time, I was keeping a culture jar of bbs on top of the tank. Saturday mornings, I leave the house quite early to work. My dear husband was in charge of Saturday am bbs feedings. Unfortunately, his hands were a bit too large for the opening in the lid, and during the feeding, he proceeded to knock the precariously balanced glass lid, culture jar of brine and a fluorescent light fixture, into the tank. During this accident, the divider was badly damaged, and all the fish swam to and fro. He removed what he could from the tank, and came to pick me up and explain what had happened. I immediately left, it was a fish emergency. Knowing I had no RO water on hand, I stopped by the wine shop to grab some more. Minutes later, female #1 and her 6 remaining fry were in one margarine tub and female #2 and the male were in another. I was opening 15 gallons of RO water in my kitchen, not knowing where to set up an 'emergency' tank.

Feeling a little guilty, my husband suggested I just throw it up on the kitchen table. Surely within the next few days I could restore the now brackish 15 gallon breeding tank and return all the fish to their proper spots. I set up a spare 10 gallon tank as quickly as I could. By now, the temperatures in the Tupperware had dropped to 60 F. The mother and 6 fry went into a floating livebearer trap, and the other pair into the main tank. I hastily plugged in the heater, and took a nap.

Whilst I slept, the temperature climbed to 80F. The ideal temperature for raising apisto fry is 76F. Anything above that, and you get more males. Below that, you get more females. 80F is however, an excellent spawning temperature. The next morning of course, the second pair had spawned, right on the kitchen table. The RO system at the wine shop was much more efficient than mine, and had produced much softer water. I had also forgotten to mix in any tap, so the fish essentially got the feeling spring was here, and a huge monsoon had just flooded cool rain water all throughout the rain forests. The kitchen table tank was no longer temporary however; I didn't want to risk moving the fry, and the term "Kitchen Table Cichlid" was officially coined.

My male cactuoides, whom I had named Patience (as I waited so long for him) turned out to not be so patient after all. By that evening, he had driven his second wife into a corner and was set on devouring those eggs. 25 seconds later, he found himself swimming in the community tank. This is not normal a. cactuoides behaviour. Usually, the female tends to the eggs/fry while the male encircles about a square foot of territory around the spawning site, driving visitors away. He generally sticks to the edges, and doesn't participate in brood care, but doesn't antagonize the female either. With my original pair, the male actually did participate in brood care, something which is supposedly rare in this species. Patience however, had a bit of an attitude.

A week later, I had free swimming fry. We counted at least 30 of them. They fed upon newly hatched bbs immediately, and their little bellies turned fat and pink, something I hadn't witnessed when I was feeding microworms and frozen bbs. I knew right away this was the food for them. I continued to use microworms from time to time, but only when I had a poor bbs hatch, or forgot to start a new culture, and was in short supply. When the new batch of fry were about a week old, I introduced their 3 week cousins to them. All went well, their auntie didn't seem to mind at all, and female #1 was returned to the community.

Having a fry tank on the kitchen table turned out to be a rewarding experience for the whole family. Meal times instantly became more exciting, as we watched the mother lead the fry around the tank, and promptly remove them from 'dangerous' places (like right beside the ketchup. That ketchup bottle was up to no good, and she let it know) I became fascinated with

the fin movements the mother used to communicate with her young. What initially seemed like some kind of magic, started to reveal itself as a series of movements akin to pectoral fin sign language. A slight beating motion meant return to the cave. Moving pectorals back, meant stay here while I go hunting. No movement at all meant the fry were free to roam as they please.

At six weeks of age, I removed the mother from the young. I began increasing the amount of tap water with the now every-other-day water changes I was performing. Eventually they were all living in straight tap water. It is said that the minerals in the tap water help the young grow faster than they do in RO. Indeed *Apistogramma cacatuoides* can be kept in local tap water here, even though most other apistos need very soft and acidic water (the vast majority of them are black or clear water fishes). It has even been said that they may spawn in our liquefied rock tap water, though it would not be possible to raise fry through the wiggler stage without softer water.



My batch of youngsters in the kitchen have been growing rapidly, and now at nearly 3 mos of age are just beginning to show some sexually dimorphic characteristics. At last count there is about 60 of them. They are now primarily fed a mixture of sinking cichlid pellets and shrimp pellets all ground up, by way of an automatic feeder, 4X a day. Frozen bloodworms and bbs round out this non-stop diet for these ravenous teen-aged fish. By 4-5 months of age juvenile *a. cacatuoides* become sub-adults, are easily sexed and can be sold as pairs.

As well as my beloved triple and double red tank variety, there are two more varieties. Orange flash has gained huge popularity and is widely available. OF males have orange on the dorsal, caudal and anal fins, but have a complete absence of the black spotting. The females are indiscernible from the double/triple varieties, and most OFs throw at least a few young, which are double or triple red. A third variety exists but is very rare. It is the yellow-gold or YG. YG

cacatuoides males have a whitish yellow body with yellow fins. There is a little orange in the dorsal/caudal/anal fins, but the predominant colour here is still the yellowish white. The YG females have a complete lack of the black barring and central spot which is so prominent on the other females of the species. This variety is not an albino, as the eyes aren't red. It is a truly beautiful fish. The wild form of the species is relatively hard to come by as well. The body of the males is the same as the tank varieties, having black barring from time to time, interspersed with iridescent patches of blue, purple and black. The fins of the wild males are yellow to clear, with a honey-combed pattern being barely discernable. This clearish pattern corresponds with the patterns of black on the double/triple red varieties.

All in all I highly recommend this pugnacious little fish for most relatively peaceful community tanks. They are more than able to defend themselves from fin nippers like barbs and black tetras, hold their own against the fiercest of angels (they **may** pester angels if you get a male with an attitude), and generally ignore corydoras and any tetra too small to fit in their mouth. If you'd like to try your hand at breeding them, they are very rewarding as they respond well to breeding triggers, and have factors you can manipulate with temperature (sex ratio), ph (sex ratio) and feeds (finnage). Try a pair on your kitchen table, and see just how much fun they can be!