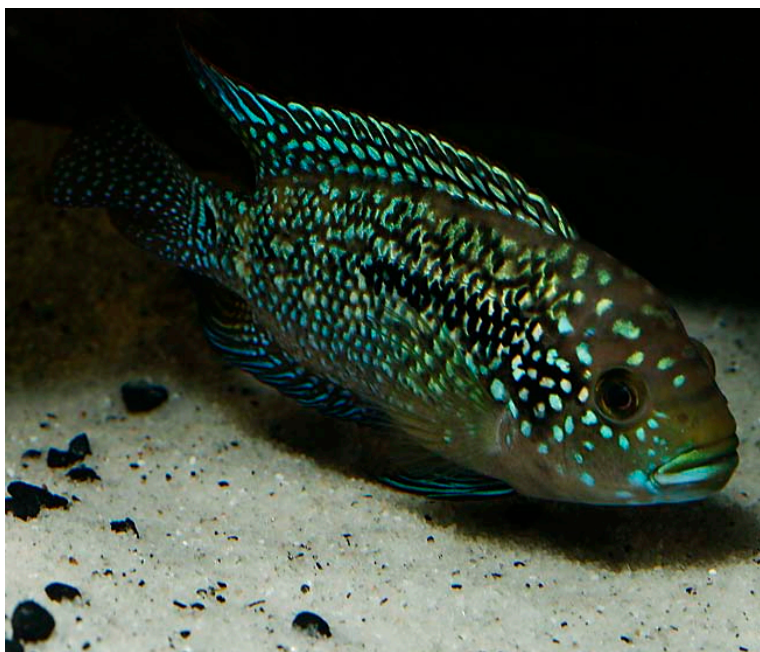


In Search Of EBJDs

Submitted by Phil Maznyk, (KWAS pmaznyk@rogers.com)

Before I describe my search for this fish, I would like to spend some time going over just what is an EBJD? EBJD is short for Electric Blue Jack Dempsey. Many hobbyists are probably familiar with the name Jack Dempsey. Those of you who are boxing fans may recall the late professional boxer who just happened to have the same name. In the context of this article, I am of course referring to the freshwater fish named Jack Dempsey. Originally known as *Cichlasoma octofasciatum*; however as of 2007 they have been re-classified into a new genera *Rocio octofasciata*. Let's back up a few lines. Why did I mention professional Boxer earlier? It appears these fish got their name after this famous boxer from the 1920's who's real name was Jack Dempsey. Jack was quite aggressive in the ring and had the facial features to go along with that. There you have it; now you know all there is to know about the history of these fish! I only wish it was that simple.



Young adult Jack Dempsey Photo by Phil Maznyk

Jack Dempseys are commonly found throughout Central America and the Honduras. The pH range of this species in these areas varies from the high 6's to about 8. They inhabit relatively slow moving waters and they can reach a size of just over 20 cm or 8 inches. They are known to be quite aggressive over territory once they have claimed it. Given the right conditions, Jack Dempseys will live for over 10 years. A typical tank size for an adult pair would be at least a 55 gallon aquarium. They enjoy sand for substrate but will do fine with gravel. They also like caves and/or empty terracotta pots for both sanctity and spawning.

Dempseys do quite well with live plants provided they are tied down, potted or planted in the substrate with rock around the stems to help keep them from being pulled out. They can be kept with almost any fish provided they are given enough space and that the tank mate(s) will not fit into the Dempsey's mouth or in the case of the Electric Blue Dempsey is not overly aggressive. All variants of this fish will eat almost all food that is offered to them. They enjoy chopped frozen shrimp, mysis shrimp, prepared beef heart, quality flake food and pellets. Adult fish have very healthy appetites, as a result, it is important to make sure you've set up adequate filtration to deal with the inevitable mess left after feeding. The EBJD is a relative newcomer to our hobby. Apparently it was first introduced by Hector Luzardo in 1985. The two biggest outward differences between the standard Jack Dempsey and the electric blue variant are of course the intense electric blue colouration and the fish's milder temperament.

EBJDs are not nearly as aggressive as your standard JD. There is also a significant amount of controversy when it comes to the actual origin of this species. Seasoned hobbyists and newcomers alike both regard this fish as one of the most visually stunning freshwater tropical fish available in the hobby today. If you were to do some research on the internet about this fish, you will quickly find out that since its first appearance in the hobby, the Electric Blue Dempsey has quickly become somewhat of a legend. Hobbyists from all over the world carry strong opinions about its true origin. I should also mention that there is also a gold coloured variant of this fish that is kept in aquariums although it does not enjoy the notoriety of the EBJD.



Adult Electric Blue Jack Dempsey Photo by Gary (MacFish)

There are some who say the electric blue variant is the direct result of a man made hybrid cross between 2 different New World cichlids and there are others who very strongly feel that the EBJD is a colour morph of the original Jack Dempsey. Complicating matters even further, there is actual data that supports both theories. After spending countless hours doing my own research I am of the belief that the EBJD falls into the latter category. I believe the debate is still out, and there is

ongoing scientific research into the true genetics of this beautiful fish. If you have some time and want to read about both theories, there are two excellent websites that pretty much have every aspect of Jack Dempseys covered. The original EBJD Website located at www.bluejax.co.uk and *All Things Dempsey* located here www.allthingsdempsey.com. Here you can review all sorts of information, join their forums and perhaps come to your own conclusion.

The electric blue variant seems to require somewhat special handling as a young fish. At least until they reach about 3 inches in size. The EBJD requires very good water quality and high quality foods. They do not fair well to what some of us may feel are simple stressors. They do not like competing for food and it would appear that the first few months of life in a new tank can cause them to suffer from internal parasite outbreaks. Metronidazole commonly kept by *Tropheus* keepers would appear to be the medicine of choice and should be kept at the ready. If you can get past this short hurdle, then they appear to lead a normal existence and are just as hardy as any other Jack Dempsey. Looking back on what I've found out to date, I had absolutely no idea just what I was getting into when I began my search for EBJDs.



Adult EBJD Photo by Gary (MacFish)

Those of you who know me, already know that I am not a member of the so called MTS club also known as Multiple Tank Syndrome. Rather than have many tanks with many different fish I've chosen to keep fish for a while, then completely change my tanks aquascaping and start over with a new species. Why? Well first I live in a modest sized townhouse and space is at a premium, second I just do not have the amount of time required to devote to a number of tanks and fish. My desire is for one nice show tank to look after and that is all. Needless to say many people have gotten some very nice quality fish from me over the years as a result of me turning my fish over. My most recent foray into Central and South American fish had me keeping a large colony of 10 Firemouth cichlids *Thorichthys meeki*. It was this unique species that actually got me curios

about Jack Dempseys, and in particular, the electric blue variant.

After completing my research on the internet, I decided that EBJDs were going to be my next project and my search began in earnest to find a small group of fish. Finding smaller fish in the 1 to 1.5 inch category wasn't very difficult as I was able to find a few retailers that either had some or could get them. I however wanted fish that were at least 3 inches or larger. Reading about the difficulty of growing this fish to the 3 inch size really had me wanting to bypass that possibility and just stock my tank with young adult specimens. I'm not at all against growing fish up from fry as a matter of fact I think it is probably the best way to study and understand a species. In the past I've kept some difficult species, specifically 3 different colonies of *Tropheus* and had very good success with them from fry through to adult. What really made me want to make the jump to young adults with these fish was the cost for the smaller fish. This species is not cheap. As a matter of fact they are the most expensive freshwater fish I have ever kept.



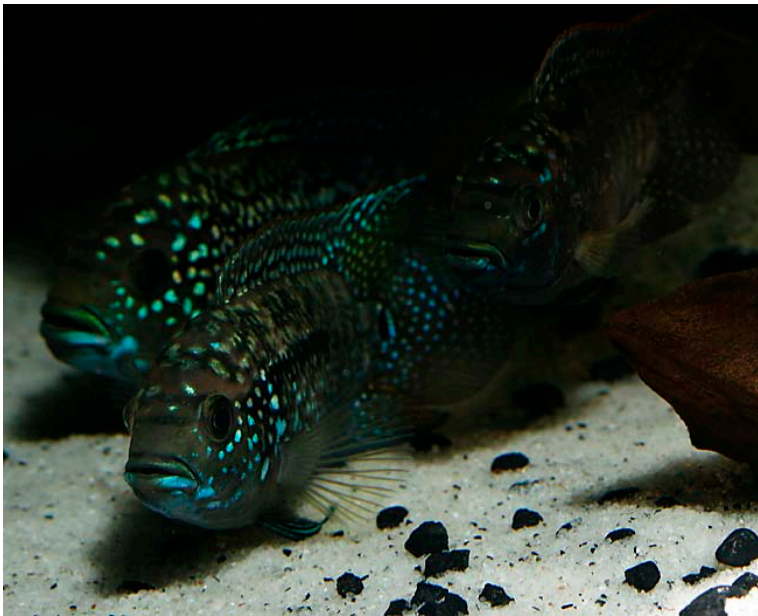
Juvenile EBJD Photo by Phil Maznyk

Quality juveniles in the 1 to 1.5 inch range typically command a price of \$45 to \$60 dollars per fish. Yes you read that right! Can you see now why I wanted to get stronger, larger fish, where my chance of not losing them and my investment was far less? I thought so. My search pretty much encompassed a 500 kilometer radius and nobody had a small group they would part with. A few hobbyists would sell a single fish but I didn't really want to get a fish here and a fish there. A small group that had been together for a while was much more desirable. Sure there are online sellers in the US but expedited air freight isn't cheap, plus there is always a chance of receiving DOA's when having fish shipped via air. Too many of my friends have been stung this way. I remember spending quite a bit of time calling numerous retailers and then I thought I would call Anthony McAslin -- one of our club members who just happened to also be a fish retailer. I asked if he might know of anyone who might have a small group of Electric Blue Jack Dempseys for sale.

Imagine my surprise when he said he had 3 pairs in his store. What! I was completely shocked to say the least. Apparently someone had him bring in these fish, but never did pick them

up. I thought to myself that my search was finally over. There is a fish god and he just happens to run a business in Cambridge, Ontario about 30 minutes from my house. What floored me even more was that these fish were between 3 and 4 inches and the price was significantly less at \$16 each. Off I go to Anthony's store Mc's Petworld to look at these 6 fish.

When I first saw these young adults I immediately saw that they didn't quite look like any EBJDs that I had seen online. They also didn't quite look like normal Jack Dempseys either. These 6 fish did however have a very nice spangling of blue. When I mentioned my concerns to Anthony it was explained to me that as he understood it, there were 2 different strains of these fish. Ones that were electric blue at birth but lost some of their blue colouration as they grew and a strain that were not so blue at birth but who's colour would deepen as they grew. It would appear as though these 6 fish fell into the latter category. Feeling somewhat more at ease, I bought that explanation and given the fishes already strong blue colouration I had them bagged and brought them home.



Group of Juvenile Jack Dempseys Photo by Phil Maznyk

Over the next few weeks something just didn't sit quite right with me and these fish. It's an odd feeling to have. I mentioned my concern to Anthony who said that he would scan and mail me a copy of an article entitled 'Out of the Blue' written by Harry Piken in the November 2008 issue of TFH magazine. Reading the article helped me understand that I had actually been sold normal Jack Dempseys (albeit darn expensive ones) that just happened to have a very prominent blue gene giving them there darker blue colouration. Apparently this isn't rare at all. Gary (MacFish is his forum name) who is one of the moderators from the forum on 'All Things Dempsey' recently posted the following information on our own KWAS forum. Here is what it takes to actually breed Jack Dempseys to obtain the electric blue morph.

"Both males and females are fertile but breeding EBJD x EBJD does not produce viable fry. Most die (or get killed by the parents) once they go free swimming. There is a breeder in Florida that I know that has successfully raised a spawn but he said the fish were not good quality so they were culled. The theory is that since every EBJD originated from the same pair, they are so inbred that the colour morph is weak. They were heavily inbred at the beginning but more and more people are bringing in new blood so eventually, I am guessing EBJD x EBJD will someday produce strong and healthy fish.

Right now, the only way to breed EBJDs is to breed an EBJD to a Regular JD. This produces 100% regular looking JD's but they all carry the Blue Gene. These are referred to as BGJD. You must then breed a pair of BGJDs or an EBJD to a BGJD. In the early stages, some people took the easy route and bred siblings or bred daughters back to their fathers. Not such an issue in most fish but in a fish that started extremely inbred, it does not produce good results. Add in the fact that people find it difficult to cull a very expensive 1" fish, and you get a bunch of inbred less than ideal stock.

When 2 BGJD are bred, you will get 25% EBJD, 50% BGJD and 25% JD. When you breed EBJD x BGJD you get 50% EBJD and 50% BGJD. This is standard genetics and what is expected using the punnett square to determine the probability of an offspring having a particular genotype. There is more evidence that supports the colour morph theory and not hybrid. I don't know any hybrid being bred that produces exactly what the punnett square says it should. Granted, I don't know anyone who has counted every single fry in a spawn to see if it is exact but from the breeders I've spoken to and the documented spawn pictures I've seen, it is very very close.

To add to this, as well, are Gold Dempseys. Another colour morph of a JD. There have been people that have bred an EBJD to a Gold JD and the fry all look 100% like regular Dempseys."

Truly fascinating reading. Thanks again to Gary for sharing that on our forum. It's now late November and I'm preparing for a business trip to the United States. I'm now bound and determined to find some true Electric Blue Jack Dempseys as there are numerous breeders in the US. It just so happens that I'm staying in Strongsville, Ohio a city just south of Cleveland. The state of Ohio is home to a strong Cichlid community and hosts an annual convention that ranks as one of the must see events of the year if you're into all things Cichlid. In past trips to Strongsville, I had hooked up with author and fishkeeper Dan Woodland and decided to contact Dan and let him know I was coming to town and could he help me find me a group of young adult EBJDs. To my disappointment he was unable to locate any. It seems there are an awful lot of purists in the Ohio Cichlid world and EBJDs aren't high on their lists. Dan did however mention that the owner of RMS Aquaculture might have some available.

I quickly called them and to my dismay had missed out by a mere 2 days on a group of 4 young adults! Okay I am getting real close now, I can feel it. Off to Strongsville I go. My cooler and 12 volt air pump are in the back seat of my truck, just in case. When I arrive at the Holiday Inn, I promptly check my e-mails and Dan has said there is a guy in Cincinnati just 3 hrs south from my hotel who is selling a group of 4 adults on Aquabid (the aquatic version of e-bay). I thought yes, this is finally it. I contact the seller but he had already received a minimum bid and would not in good faith part with his fish regardless of me telling him I would be there in 3 hrs with cash in hand. Join in the auction he says but the close date is beyond my stay in the US. Yes there is the buy now option but something in his voice just didn't sit well with me. When you're spending this kind of money you better feel comfortable with whomever you're dealing with.

Can this really be happening to me? To compound my search woes, I had left Kitchener in such a blaze on Sunday morning that I forgot to pack my Tim Horton's coffee and small filters. I can't stand motel room coffee and there's nothing quite like a good coffee when you're out of town for a week! Thank goodness a friend of mine from New York State who was at the same meeting came to the rescue. I won't go into all the details but suffice to say I owe him a can of Canada's finest coffee. Okay enough of that, it's now Tuesday morning and Jamie McDougall (fish room manager) of Aquarium Services here in Kitchener has been reading my thread on our clubs forum about trying to find EBJDs. Jamie sends me an e-mail and asks me to contact him about the young EBJDs he has in stock. I tell Jamie that I had already seen these fish and I know they are real EBJDs but they just aren't the size I want. Over the next few days, while I'm in the US I e-mail several prominent breeders of this fish and after some time dwelling on Jamie's request I go ahead and give him a call. Jamie makes me an offer on his EBJDs and after thinking about it for another day I decide to purchase 5 youngsters from him. If I want these fish anytime soon I better get them now. My business trip is over, and I'm on way back to Canada. Here we go again!



Electric Blue Jack Dempsey Photo by Phil Maznyk

Plans are made to get rid of my normal Jack Dempseys. A few members of our forum promptly scoop them up. The tank is cleaned and aquascaped for my new arrivals. During all of this I have joined Gary's (MacFish's) forum www.allthingsdempsey.com. I'm not contributing very much at this time but I can tell you, I am doing a lot of data mining gathering all sorts of information on these very special fish. Gary has been extremely helpful in replying to all of my questions and concerns. It doesn't hurt that he also lives not that far away either. Following his advice on EBJDs I have setup my tank to house my new group of Electric Blue Jack Dempseys. The fish are doing very well and I am enjoying them very much. Even though I said numerous times that I wanted to bypass the youngsters, in the end, that is just what I got. In reality I believe part of becoming a better fishkeeper is to learn from our own experiences and this one is certainly proving to be one I won't soon forget. In closing, for any club member thinking it won't be long before these little beauties will be up for sale as I move onto my next fish; think again my friends....think again!