

Chromidotilapia guntheri guntheri -- West African Devils

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By Kevin Plazak

Theodore Roosevelt frequently wrote with curiosity and respect for Chromidotilapia guntheri guntheri. And excerpt from his journal about the guntheri's "...are the most ferocious fish in the world. Even the most formidable fish, the sharks or the barracudas, usually attack things much smaller than themselves. But the guntheris habitually attack things much larger than themselves. They will snap a finger off a hand incautiously trailed in the water; they mutilate swimmers -- in every river town on the west coast of Africa there are men who have been mutilated; they will rend and devour alive any wounded man or beast; for blood in the water excites them to madness...".

When I had read about these blood-thirsty little devils I knew that I must acquire some for myself. They are illegal in 49 states except Nevada where they have been legalized in order to regulate the trade. The Senators from that state regularly face charges from the Senate floor that these fish could bring down our great nation if the fish ever make it into our great waterways. But since there is a lot of money involved in pitting these savage little fish against sharks, eels, tigers, badgers and mere-cats, the bloody battles will continue.

I found a shop near the Nevada border that specializes in most of the Chromidotilapias that are regularly fought in the larger casinos. I had my eye on the C. g. guntheri and would settle for nothing less. Upon purchasing a small group of six I noticed that the sales person who caught my fish was short one finger on his left hand. I inquired as to the nature of the accident thinking all the while that the legend of these fish was under rated. The finger was taken during beta-testing of a garden weasel -- frightening none the less.

The fish survived the drive nicely and were floated in a forty gallon tank. I left the room to get a soda and upon my return I had found that they had released themselves. All six of the two inch fish eyed me through the Plexiglas. This was the start of many strange occurrences in my fish room, none of which I can directly attribute to the fish but I certainly will not blame myself.

I started offering them flake food but they would have none of that. Frozen brine or bloodworms turned out to keep them from starving but they never put on any weight. I knew that living flesh is what they craved so I fed some extra fry I had from a large spawn of arrow cichlids. Had they the musculature to smile I would have sworn that they would have. I started feeding them feeder guppies and than goldfish and thought nothing more of them.

A few months later a group of friends came over to see my newly completed fishroom. I showed them what I considered some of the highlights when one of them (an avid astrologer) started screaming "They are evil! They are EVIL!!" and ran from the room. Not knowing the appropriate etiquette for that behavior (a frequent dilemma in the fish hobby) I finished the tour for the remainder of the group and went to find the reason for the earlier outburst.

"Kevin, I saw the fish. Your stars have aligned." She said while gathering her things and motioning to her sisters. "If you continue on your current path those fish will bring death upon your household."

"Well" I said, "I do feed them goldfish -- and they do seem to eat a lot -- but I eat chicken and that brings death too."

She rolled her eyes at my lack of comprehension. "Those fish and your stars show me painful death and horror!"

"Being eaten alive is quite nasty but goldfish are..."

"You will see" she whispered "and you will wear white socks this week and eat fast food. Heed my warnings." and she was gone.

The rest of my guests never really getting into the fun of the "Fishroom-warming party" left and wished me good fortune with the new room. I was non-plussed.

The following weeks were aquatically uneventful. I spent long hours in the fishroom staring at the guntheri hoping to see into their little fishy hearts and recognize something beyond their reputation. Darth Vader had a little good as it turned out and he was the blackest of black. But these little fish never let on that they had a temper or flash of violence beyond their appetite. And then it happened.

I have never felt the need to use tops on my tanks and this proved to be my undoing. A pair formed and chased the other fish out of the tank and into the adjacent tanks. In this mass exodus only the guntheri survived in their new tanks. I was unsure about what to do at this point and decided that patience would win the day when the pair that remained in the original tank started to spawn. The frenzy of death seemed to entice them to spawn. I was too slow with my camera that day. However, I have successfully spawned these fish and was able to capture them breeding on film.

Water chemistry is not overly important. A slightly alkaline pH and little hardness will get them comfortable. Any temperature over 75oF will suffice. The trick is the death. I have found that rending a live chicken is the crucial and efficient way to get them to spawn. Although this may seem messy and needless, I assure you after countless trials the weight ratio of animal being rendered to the pair of fish spawning needs to be on a scale of a six month old chicken. Rodents are too small and frustrating for the gravid pair and large fish that are alive are hard to come by. Household pets bring too many complaints from the neighbors and I should know.

This fish is not for the weak stomach. I have to keep a sign posted outside my fishroom when breeding is to take place as many a friend stopped calling after walking in at an inopportune moment. And needless to mention it is damn difficult to find a woman who will continue to date you when you are working with a challenging fish like the C. guntheri guntheri. I would never give up my pair.

If you are up to the challenge, I can give you the name of a good chicken supplier and a great prosthetic salesman. That and some intestinal fortitude and you are in for the ride of your life! I recommend no fish more readily.

