Keeping and Breeding *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"* - The Star Sapphire Cichlid

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All Photos by the Author

Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania" is a beautiful, interesting, and undemanding Malawi haplochromine. I've recently kept and bred this fish and would like to share some of my experiences concerning this fish's, maintenance, behavior, feeding, and breeding. This fish is the closest thing to an OB (orange blotched, but a term used for fish with blotching) Malawi Hap you're going to see. Males are a gorgeous dark blue with nice contrasting metallic white blotches, giving them their common name, The Star Sapphire Cichlid. The colors of the fish only intensify with age and it is an impressive sight to see a full grown ten inch male with stunning colors. At around three inches, the fish turn solid blue. When the fish reach four to five inches they begin to develop their white spotting. Every male looks different with some having more or less blotching than others. Females are generally smaller (six inches

Female *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"* are not as pretty as the males, but get a nice blue sheen.

maximum length) and far less colorful. The females are silver with a nice black throat, black barring, and a blue sheen. Females only look nicer with age and older females can develop a fair amount of blue.

Male Star Sapphire Cichlids are extremely variable when it comes to their spotting. No two males look the same.

This fish resembles *Placidochromis phenochilus,* hence the name. These two species are easily distinguishable. The true *Placidochromis phenochilus* gets its name from its unique lips, which are white (*phenol* = phenotype, *chilus*= lips (Trewavas, 1935)). This feature is lacking in *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"*. *Placidochromis phenochilus* also lacks the beautiful white blotching of *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"*. Although it is possible that these fish are just variants of the same species, I think they are different enough to be considered separate species.
These two fish are in the genus *Placidochromis* because they look quite similar to the Deepwater Hap, *Placidochromis electra (Konings, 2008).* Neither of these three species look similar to the type species *Placidochromis longimanus (Trewavas, 1935, Eccels & Trewavas, 1989).* When the next revision of the genus *Placidochromis* is done, it would not be surprising to see a new genus erected for these species.

Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania" is found in the northern part of Lake Malawi along the Tanzanian coast between Makonde and Lupingu (Konings, 2007). This fish is found over the open sand where it feeds. The Star Sapphire Cichlid has an ex-

Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania" is a very active species and is entertaining to watch.

tremely interesting way of feeding in the wild. They are a follower species, meaning they follow other fish who sift through the sand. In this case, these fish are *Taeniolethrinops spp.*., a large sand sifting haplochromine (Konings, 2008). *Taeniolethrinops* will sift through the sand looking for edibles. As they dig, various invertebrates are exposed from the sand sifting. In aquaria, *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"* readily accepts almost any type of prepared foods. A mixed diet of high quality flakes and pellets is best.

Keeping the Star Sapphire Cichlid poses few issues. It is a docile, yet active species; in my opinion, they require a four foot tank because of their activity. A 75 gallon aquarium comfortably housed my breeding group of seven 4-7 inch specimens. Ideally groups consisting of larger individuals should be housed in six foot tanks. The only time I ever witnessed aggression in this species was during spawning, and even then it was minimal. Like all Lake Malawi cichlids, hard, alkaline water is desired. I personally like to decorate the tank for this species with a sand substrate and rather few rocks in an attempt to mimic their natural habitat. Over a sand substrate these fish will actively search for food in the sand. The Star Sapphire Cichlid is easy to mix with other Lake Malawi cichlids. Mild-mannered mbuna species, Malawi peacocks, or a docile Malawi haplochromines all make good tankmates. I have also had success in the past mixing this species with mild Victorian cichlids and some Tanganyikan species. You can also keep larger non-cichlids with *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"*, one of my favorite combos being Rainbowfish.

Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania" is fairly easy to spawn. The fish is a maternal mouthbrooder and will start to breed at around four inches long. It usually takes about eight months to reach this size as this species doesn't grow super fast. The Star Sapphire Cichlid will excavate a small pit in which they spawn. Females are usually good holders and will typically hold to term, which is about three weeks. It's important to note that holding females are not always easy to notice compared to some other Malawi cichlids. The buccal cavity does not seem to distend very far

Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania" females hold for about three weeks. Above is a female Star Sapphire Cichlid incubating eggs.

when these fish are holding. The best way to realize that the fish have spawned is to monitor their behavior. Not only will females stop feeding when holding, but their mouths will have distinct "chewing" movements. Around the three week mark, I like to strip the female as the fry are free swimming or at least really close to free swimming. A spawn is usually around 20-50 fry depending on the size and age of the female. The fry are rather large and easy to raise. They grow quickly on baby brine shrimp or crushed flake. Around two months of age the fry are around one inch long.

Overall *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"* is a delightful species to keep. A truly breathtaking species, it would be a welcome addition to almost any Malawi show tank. Its undemanding and peaceful nature makes it a wonderful aquarium resident. This species seems to be popular in the aquarium trade at the moment and is usually available from aquarists as well as some fish stores. I thoroughly enjoyed keeping the Star Sapphire Cichlid while I kept it, but unfortunately had to get rid of my group as I needed tank space. Luckily, I was volunteering at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago over the summer and they were interested in my fish. I have since donated the breeding group which is going through the standard 30 day quarantine process. I look forward to returning to

the Shedd Aquarium and seeing my fish in the Lake Malawi display. Hopefully the Aquarium visitors will find them as interesting and beautiful as I did.

References:

Eccles, D.H. & Trewavas, E. (1989) *Malawian cichlid fishes. The classification of some Haplochromine genera*. Lake Fish Movies, Herten, Germany, 335 pp.

Konings, A. (2007) *Malaŵi cichlids in their natural habitat*. 4th ed., Cichlid Press, El Paso, Texas, 424 pp.

Trewavas, E. (1935) A synopsis of the cichlid fishes of Lake Nyasa. *Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, 10(16), 65–118.

A displaying male *Placidochromis sp. "phenochilus Tanzania"*.

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