



This male *Melanotaenia boesemani* exhibits courtship colors.

Boeseman's Rainbowfish – The Pearl of Irian Jaya

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Photos by the Author

In 1980 I described several new species of New Guinea rainbowfishes in a technical museum publication. Three of these were from the little-explored western half of the island now known as Irian Jaya. The specimens had been collected in 1954-55 by Dr. Marianus Boeseman of the Leiden Museum in Holland, who generously allowed me to work on them. In gratitude I named one of these fishes *Melanotaenia boesemani*. Working only on preserved museum specimens, I had no idea of the live coloration of the species. My *Rainbowfishes of Australia and Papua New Guinea*, coauthored with Norbert Cross, included a set of paintings featuring a dozen species for which no accurate color documentation existed. The colors for these paintings were based on other collectors' fragmentary field notes and on my own intuition judging from closely related



Top: Immature males of *M. boesemani* have not developed their final color pattern. They are basically yellow with some blue highlights. Bottom: The dark blue in the front half of the body intensifies as the fish grows older. A vertically banded pattern such as this is a bit unusual among rainbow species. This is a large wild-caught male from Ajamaru Lakes.

The live colors of this fish were completely different from what I had imagined.

species. One of the paintings depicted *Melanotaenia boesemani*. I had surmised a pattern of narrow orange stripes on a reddish ground color. How wrong this guess turned out to be!

In November, 1982, I had an opportunity to collect specimens of *Melanotaenia boesemani* during a visit to the remote Vogelkop Peninsula. The live colors were found to be completely different from what I had imagined and were virtually unlike any other rainbowfish previously encountered. The beauty of the living males in particular is stunning. The head and anterior portion of the body are bluish gray, sometimes almost blackish, with the fins and posterior half of the body largely bright red-orange. Between these two areas, or roughly just behind the pectoral fin, there are a pair of alternating light and dark vertical bars. Females are more similar to many of the other





species of *Melanotaenia*, displaying a broad dark midlateral stripe accompanied by a series of narrow red or orange longitudinal stripes that correspond with each scale row.

Nearly one month after returning home to Australia from New

Guinea, I received a shipment of rainbowfishes from Helko Bleher in Frankfurt. Helko had accompanied me on the trip and ultimately transported back to Germany a number of live fishes captured during the expedition. Among the ship-

As one might expect, the female *M. boesemani* is not nearly as colorful as the male, although the stomach region is a rich violet-blue. One or two faint orange lines run down the flanks, while the dorsal surface is an unusual shade of yellow-green.

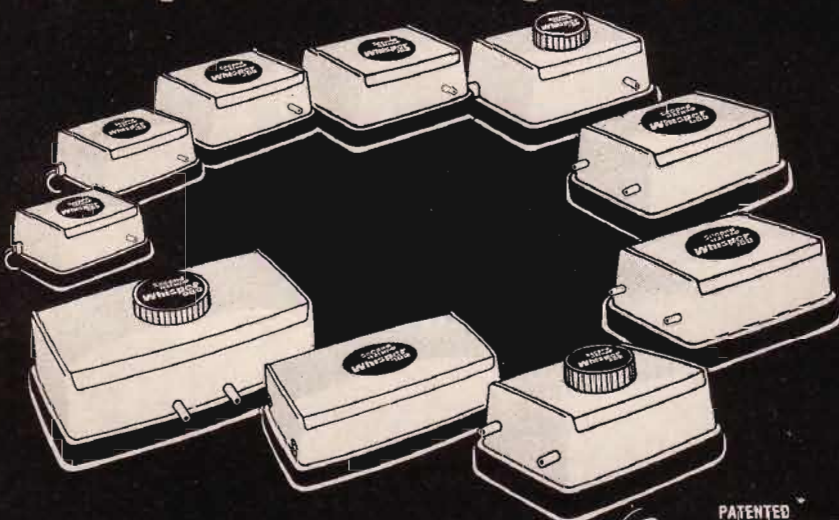
ment from Helko were six specimens of *Melanotaenia boesemani*. These were between 1 and 2 inches in length. Because of their small size, it was initially difficult to determine sexes. They were placed in a well planted 25-gallon tank and gradually acclimated to captivity. After two months it was easy to distinguish the sexes on the basis of color pattern. Two weeks later I noticed courtship and spawning activity, and after three more days I removed about 60 fry and set them up in a separate nursery tank. In the meantime the adult fish continued producing offspring. Each day I noted additional larvae swimming near the surface. Unfortunately I lost the first batch of young due to a partial water change in the nursery tank. Evidently the young are extremely sensitive to even small changes in water chemistry.

By now it was apparent that, unlike other rainbowfishes, the adult *M. boesemani* were not eating the newly hatched fry that appeared each day, so I decided to leave these fry in the main spawning tank in order to avoid another nursery tank disaster. After one month they were growing rapidly and still the adults paid no attention to them.

Breeding Boeseman's rainbow is easy. All it requires is a plentiful food supply and a suitable spawning medium such as Java moss where the eggs can be deposited. My fish are kept at pH 7.5 and at temperatures ranging between 70 and 77°F. Twice-daily feedings are administered consisting of dry flake food and a fresh-frozen beef-fish mixture. The tiny young are being raised on a diet of commercially prepared fry food and powdered daphnia.

We can hope that this rare "pearl" from Irian Jaya will soon be available to all aquarists. It's certainly worth waiting for.

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