THE RAINBOW DARTER

(Etheostoma caeruleum)

(Too Bad It's Canadian!)

by John Beaulieu

For many years now, I have been collecting local species of fish commonly called darters. One of the local varieties, the Rainbow Darter, is perhaps the most colorful of all Canadian fishes, but because it is a native, it is overlooked by aquarists in favor of fishes from other countries-- some not as colorful. If it were stocked in stores and called "South American Rainbow Fish," it would be an immediate success. Remember what happened a few years ago when the North American Redhorse Minnow was selling for up to $7 each as an "Imperial Barb"! Now, let me make my plug for a local Canadian.

Darters are members of the perch family. Their swim bladder is unable to adjust to the density of the water, so they move around in "darting" movements, and rest on the bottom. One might think they belonged to the Goby family (which includes the common Bumblebee Fish).

There are two common types of Darters found in my area: the Rainbow and the Johnny Darter. The Johnny Darter is a gray/brown color (males black in the spring) with a long, tubular body. The Rainbow Darter has a higher body with 11-12 blue bars running along its sides. There is bright orange around the chin and between the blue bars. The fins are red and blue. This color pattern is very similar to that of a male Dwarf Gourami and is at its best in the spring. Like the gourami, most of the color is on the male with the female Rainbow being a basic sandy color with scattered,darker dots.

The Rainbow Darters seem to grow to about 2", and I have caught Johnnies slightly larger. This makes them a good size for your average aquarium.

Maintaining the darters in an aquarium is much like keeping marine fishes. They cannot tolerate much pollution, and the tank must be well aerated and filtered. They come from fast-flowing streams that empty into lakes, and because this water is usually cool, it holds more oxygen than our aquarium water usually does. Their aquarium need not be high, as the darters stay on the lower level (except when they think you're dropping in some food). The best method of filtering (at the same time creating a strong current, which the Darters play in) is with an outside power filter. Without one, you would need a strong flow from an airstone to give much-needed circulation.

The streams in which they are found usually will have a gravel bottom or some gravel areas. This is where you will catch the most Rainbows and this is where they spawn, abandoning their eggs in the gravel. Some rocks to climb on and hide around make them more at ease in the aquarium. The Johnny Darters are found in the deeper sections, where they blend in with the sandy or muddy bottom.

In the wild, darters feed on plankton and small insects. In the aquarium, I have had them eating live tubifex, frozen brine shrimp, and glassworm larvae. They will catch and eat baby fishes as well, but do not readily accept dry flake foods.

When kept with medium-sized fishes (1.5-3"), they are peaceful, and if enough filtration is available, they may be kept in a community aquarium. They are fish that seem to recognize their feeder, and all start springing around in anticipation of what is going to be dropped into the tank. If you drop in a single item such as a crushed snail shell (a favorite treat), you will see about six darters crash head-on together to get it.

The darters are found in the company of two other desirable aquarium fishes--the Red-Belly Dace and the Brook Stickleback. The sticklebacks hide in the slower, planted areas of the stream. The dace are found throughout the whole system. Dace are gold above with two black lines and a white belly with a bright red area. The sticklebacks are mottled green to blend in with the areas of anacharis and hornwort. These species along with the darters make a nice Canadian Fishes tank. A small bullhead catfish for a scavenger, and you're all set.

> --adapted from Willowdale Aquarium Society,
> Ontario, Canada, which reprinted it from
> "Canadian Fish Fanciers."