

Tropical Marine Fish

How to care for blennies

Blennies make excellent aquarium inhabitants due to their small size, bright colours and interesting behaviours. They are from the *Blenniidae* family and occur on coral reefs all over the world. Most Blennies remain a manageable size and are generally tolerant of other species. Always consult your OATA retailer before purchasing any blenny to ensure they will mix with current tank mates.



Water requirements

Blennies are usually undemanding of water chemistry and their suggested parameters are shown below. These parameters are a general guide for this group of fish, so it is important to check with your OATA retailer for any species-specific requirements before purchasing. Please also note that if keeping these fish in a reef aquarium, some parameters will need to be altered to accommodate more sensitive species.

Salinity:	Between 1.020-1.025
Temperature:	Between 24-26°C
pH:	7.9-8.3
Ammonia:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrite:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrate:	Not to exceed 50 mg per litre
Carbonate hardness:	Hard (8-12°dkH)
Calcium:	Between 380-450 ppm
Magnesium:	Between 1250-1350 ppm

Biology

Some species, such as dragonets, are sometimes referred to as blennies when in fact, they are from a different family. For more information, please see our *Dragonets* care sheet. Blennies attain a smaller size, with most species growing to around 10cm. However, there are larger species, such as the algae blenny (*Salarius fasciatus*), which grows up to 15cm. Blennies can live for many years in a well-matured set up with good water quality. In the wild, some species of blenny spend most of their time perching on rockwork and swimming between outcrops looking for food or predators. Others are more free-swimming and will spend their time hovering in the water column. Some species, such as members of the *Meicanthus* genus are bred commercially and tank-bred individuals are readily available.



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It is usually best to keep blenny species alone as they may become territorial with other blennies in the same aquarium. It is difficult to identify the sex of most blennies unless they are in breeding condition. Many blenny species from the *Meiacanthus* genus have a venomous bite, with toxin delivered by their fangs. However, this usually only occurs when they are threatened. Potential owners should be aware of this risk. Please see our *Hazardous Aquatic Animals* guidance for more information.

Aquarium requirements

As a general rule, you should within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. It is recommended that an aquarium of at least 40 litres is used for an individual of the smaller species. For larger species an aquarium of at least 80 litres is recommended. Aquariums will need to be larger if you wish to keep blennies with other species. A larger aquarium will also provide more stability to environmental conditions such as temperature and water quality. Whatever the size, **a filter is essential**. For marine set-ups this can be in the form of live rock with sufficient water flow, an internal or external filter, or a sump-based filter. A protein skimmer can also be beneficial for maintaining water quality as it will help to remove dissolved organic waste before it can break down into more harmful substances.

Blennies are relatively undemanding in terms of aquarium décor. However, live or artificial rockwork is essential and should be arranged to provide crevices, overhangs and outcrops to allow them to behave naturally. It is also important to include space for them to swim, particularly for the more active species, and other areas of rock work should other species wish to be kept. A thin layer of coral sand (approximately 2cm) is useful to make blennies feel secure and to maintain carbonate hardness levels. There should be a moderate water flow to provide good surface movement and to ensure detritus doesn't accumulate. A lid or cover is essential as these fish can jump, especially if startled.

A heater is required to maintain a suitable temperature all year round. To minimise fluctuations in water temperature, the aquarium should not be situated near any draughts or heat sources. It should also be out of direct sunlight and away from loud noises, vibrations and sudden movements. Overhead tank lighting is recommended to maintain a correct day-night cycle. This will not need to be particularly bright for blennies alone but may need to be brighter if keeping with coral species - see our coral care sheets for more information.

Water testing kits are essential so that water quality can be checked on a regular basis (once a week) to ensure it does not slip below the water requirements stated above.

Introducing your fish

Before adding any fish, seek advice from your OATA retailer to make sure that your aquarium is an appropriate size for the blenny you would like to keep. Check



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that the water quality in your aquarium is suitable i.e. levels of ammonia and nitrite are zero. Only increase the number of fish you have in your aquarium slowly as the population of beneficial bacteria established when maturing your aquarium filter need to increase every time more fish are added and feeding increases. Overstocking or stocking your aquarium too quickly can result in 'new tank syndrome'. This occurs when there are not enough nitrifying bacteria to cope with the increased waste from the fish, leading to unhealthy levels of ammonia and nitrite, which may cause fish to become ill or die.

Healthy fish have clear bright eyes, undamaged fins, intact scales, no ulcerations or bumps, appropriate swimming behaviour and steady breathing. Do not purchase a seemingly healthy fish if sickly fish are present in the tank with it. Signs of disease can include clamped fins, flicking against gravel or décor and shimmying (shaking). Diseases can be easily carried by fish that do not show any clinical signs. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice as they will have in-depth knowledge and experience.

Your OATA retailer will usually sell your fish to you in a plastic bag, try not to keep them in this for too long. Once purchased, take your new fish home as quickly as possible because fish are easily stressed by bright lights, extreme temperatures, noise and movement.

Once home, your fish will need to acclimatise to their new environment and a common method of doing this is known as the 'floating bag' method. Switch off the aquarium lights and take the bag containing your new fish out of its outer wrappings carefully, avoiding exposure to bright light. Float the bag in the water of your tank to ensure the temperature in the bag is the same as the aquarium water. After 10 minutes, slowly introduce small amounts of aquarium water into the bag containing the fish for up to 30 minutes. Once complete, carefully release the fish into the aquarium whilst introducing as little bag water into the aquarium as possible. This is especially important if keeping fish with any invertebrate species as some retailers run copper in their systems, which is toxic to invertebrates. After this, dispose of the bag and any excess water appropriately.

For sensitive species or to ensure retailer water does not enter your aquarium, a better method might be the use of drip acclimation. This could be achieved by keeping the fish in the container in which it is sold and a small airline siphon started to drip water into the container, slowly changing the water parameters to that of the aquarium. Ensure that the temperature does not fall too low during this procedure. Once conditions match, carefully net the fish from the container into the aquarium. Dispose of the water in the transport container appropriately. Monitor your new fish carefully for the first week, paying particular attention to water quality. If in doubt, contact your OATA retailer for advice.

If possible, quarantining new livestock in a separate aquarium for at least a week before they enter the main tank can help reduce any risk of disease spread from new inhabitants. Ask your OATA retailer for advice on this topic.



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Maintenance

At least once every week, a partial water change of 25% is strongly recommended (a siphon device is useful to remove solid waste from the gravel). Filters should be well maintained, with regular checking and cleaning to prevent blockages. If the filter needs cleaning, do not run it under the tap because any chlorine or chloramine present may kill the beneficial bacterial population that has established in the media. Instead, it should be rinsed lightly in the tank water which is removed during a partial water change as this reduces the amount of bacteria which are lost. Protein skimmers should be regularly cleaned to maintain their performance.

Good husbandry is essential as blennies can be stressed by even the smallest amounts of ammonia and nitrite which may then cause them to develop various diseases. Test the water to monitor the ammonia, nitrite and nitrate levels, together with pH and carbonate hardness every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish. It is also important to regularly monitor salinity and use reverse osmosis water to replace any water lost through evaporation.

What to watch out for

All fish will have slight variations in their behaviour or appearance, but keeping an eye on any changes in the following will help to identify any potential problems before they become a real health issue:

- ▶ swimming behaviour – hanging at the surface, sitting on the bottom or erratic swimming
- ▶ colour – turning a darker or paler colour than normal
- ▶ temperament – changes in level of aggression or hiding more than normal
- ▶ breathing – gill covers moving at a slower or faster rate than normal
- ▶ appearance – development of white spots or fluffy growths, loss of fins or scales
- ▶ condition – increase or decrease in body weight and condition
- ▶ feeding – reduced intake or lack of interest in food

If you are concerned about the health of any of your livestock, then test your water quality and contact your OATA retailer for further guidance.

Feeding

Some species of blenny are herbivorous and will require foods with a high algae content, such as nori algae sheets, as well as grazing on algae growing within the aquarium. Other species are omnivorous and will appreciate feeds high in algae, alongside smaller frozen meaty items such as mysis shrimp, enriched brine shrimp or copepods. Ask your OATA retailer for feeding advice on your particular blenny species.

Blennies should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes, twice a day. Take care not to overfeed as this can lead to a build-up of uneaten food which



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breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

Compatibility

Most blenny species will mix well with other fish species. However, no more than one blenny species should be kept in the aquarium unless the aquarium is large with many visual barriers. Some blennies, such as the algae blenny, can become quite territorial as it grows older and should not be mixed with shy species. Other blenny species are generally more peaceful but may become territorial towards similar looking species that live near the bottom of the aquarium, such as firefish or shrimp gobies. Additionally, some blenny species may nibble corals or clams, particularly if underfed.

Breeding

Blennies have been bred in captivity by dedicated hobbyists. The female will deposit hundreds of eggs onto a hard surface, which are then tended to by the male. After approximately a week, these hatch and hundreds of larvae are produced. In the wild, these larvae drift in ocean currents as they develop. However, they are too delicate to survive in a home aquarium as they are likely to get sucked into filters and pumps or eaten by other aquarium inhabitants. They also require specific live feeds and so a specialist set up is required to raise them to adulthood.

Checklist

Before purchase make sure:

1. You have the appropriate equipment and position for the aquarium.
2. You have researched all the species in which you are interested and your final choices are all compatible.
3. You are familiar with how to transport and release your fish.
4. You are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance your aquarium will require.
5. You are prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life.

Shopping List

- ▶ Glass or acrylic aquarium
- ▶ Filter*
- ▶ Heater*
- ▶ Lighting*
- ▶ Gravel or sand
- ▶ Water testing kits (ideally ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH and water hardness)
- ▶ Gravel cleaner/siphon cleaning device (recommended)
- ▶ Aquarium decorations



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- ▶ Aquarium salt and a hydrometer or refractometer
- ▶ Access to reverse osmosis water or a reverse osmosis unit

- ▶ Bucket for water changes
- ▶ Live or artificial rock
- ▶ Protein skimmer* (optional but recommended)
- ▶ Ultraviolet steriliser (optional but recommended)

*may be included in branded aquarium sets but can be purchased separately.

Before purchase make sure:

- ▶ The aquarium is of a suitable size that ideally can accommodate the fish once they are fully grown
- ▶ Water parameters are as advised in this leaflet.
- ▶ Aquarium is cycled and ready to receive fish.

Always buy...

test kits and regularly check the water for ammonia, nitrite, nitrate and pH. This will allow you to make sure the water in your aquarium is not causing welfare problems for your blenny.

Maintain...

the water in the aquarium within the accepted parameters highlighted above. You may need to do regular water changes to achieve this.

Never siphon by mouth...

A fish tank can harbour bacteria which can be harmful if swallowed. Buy a specially designed aquarium gravel cleaner which can be started or primed without the need to place the siphon in your mouth

Establish a routine...

for testing the water in your aquarium. Record your results to enable you to identify fluctuations quickly. Also check the temperature of the water.

Always wash your hands...

making sure to rinse off all soap residues, before putting them into your aquarium, or use long sleeved rubber gloves. Wash your hands again afterwards and certainly before eating, drinking or smoking.

Five Welfare Needs Checklist:

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 states that all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be prosecuted.

- ▶ A **suitable environment** e.g. appropriately sized tank (with water heater if tropical set up) within a suitable location in your home.
- ▶ A **suitable diet** which meets the needs of your chosen fish.



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- ▶ **Behaviour** - Fish are able to exhibit their normal behaviour e.g. hiding places for timid fish, enough room for fish to swim freely.
- ▶ **Companionship** - Ensure you know whether your chosen fish need to be kept with, or apart from, other fish.
- ▶ **Health** - Protected from pain, injury, suffering & disease e.g. you are aware of the daily, weekly and monthly maintenance that your aquarium will need.

- ▶ **Water quality test kits are a necessity not an optional extra**
- ▶ **You must be prepared to look after your fish properly for the duration of their life and provide an aquarium which can accommodate your fish when fully grown**



*Never release your aquarium animals or plants into the wild. It is illegal and for most fish species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to our native countryside. Take care to properly dispose of any soiled substrate (e.g. sand or gravel) water or decorations so that non-native organisms do not enter natural watercourses.

Visit ornamentalfish.org to find a full range of how to guides and species-specific care sheets to help you look after your fish successfully.



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