

Tropical Freshwater Fish

How to care for tank busters

'Tank busters' are a group of fish which grow much larger than most aquarium fish. They can come from all over the world and in various shapes and colours. Common species include giant gourami (Osphronemus goramy), large catfish species (including the larger pleco species) and knifefish. Just like any other pet animal, a large fish in the home can require a lot of commitment. **Their greater longevity than smaller fish means that any decision to keep**



one of these fish should be made very carefully. It is also unlikely that an "off the shelf" aquarium will be large enough to care for these species in the long term. Therefore, it is imperative that the welfare needs of these species are taken into account before they are purchased. Because of their sheer size, there are a few aspects that are important to remember when keeping these fish.

Water requirements

The water chemistry requirements for tank busters will vary because they originate from many different habitats. It is important to check with your OATA retailer for any species-specific requirements before purchasing. Regardless of species kept, it is essential that the following parameters are maintained:

Ammonia:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrite:	Zero mg per litre
Nitrate:	Not to exceed 20 mg per litre above normal tap water levels

Biology

Most tank busters are much larger versions of their small relatives that we usually see for sale. Although there are some species which do not have any smaller relatives.

Stingrays are closely related to sharks and are elasmobranchs, meaning they are cartilaginous fish. They have a venomous spine in their tails and it is important that appropriate safety measures are followed when dealing with these fish - see our 'Hazardous Aquatic Animals' guidance for more information. Males can be identified by external sex organs known as claspers.

Knifefish belong to the family *Gymnotiformes* and are characterised by the lack of dorsal and pelvic fins and an elongated anal fin which runs the entire length of the body. Many species have limited eyesight. Instead, they navigate their surroundings by emitting weak electrical impulses into the water and "listening" to the electrical echoes in a



Sept 2022

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similar manner to a bat using echolocation.

Aquarium requirements

The size of these fish means that an exceptionally large aquarium is required, often in excess of 500 litres. While these fish can be kept in smaller aquaria when they are first purchased as small specimens, many of the tank busters grow very quickly. Therefore, when considering getting a tank buster, always make sure that you are able to accommodate their adult size. Alternatively, indoor heated ponds can be constructed to house these animals. The size of aquarium required may also be judged by their activity level. Some sedentary species, need a large volume with stable water quality, but may not need quite the same volume as active swimmers.

Whatever the size, **a filter is always essential**. A number of large aquarium filters, or even a pond filter, may be required to not only help keep the water quality under control, but also to remove the large quantities of solid waste these fish produce. 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.

Large fish also have a tendency to disturb aquarium décor and can sometimes knock over aquarium ornaments and plants. Any ornaments, including rocks placed in the aquarium should be securely positioned to avoid them from becoming dislodged and damaging your aquarium. Aquarium heaters should also be protected from damage. Care should be taken when choosing aquarium gravel or sand, to ensure that rays or other bottom dwelling fish aren't injured by any sharp edges and that it can be kept clean enough to prevent any deterioration in water quality. Additionally, large fish have a habit of being quite 'jumpy', especially when introduced to a new environment. It is wise to ensure that there is a fish-proof cover over the tank or pond.

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 species you would like to keep. Check 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



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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, but tank busters may be sold in boxes or buckets. Try not to keep them in this for too long. Once purchased, take your new fish home as quickly as possible as 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 20 minutes. Once complete, carefully release the fish into the aquarium whilst introducing as little bag water into the aquarium as possible. After this, dispose of the bag and any excess water 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.

Due to their large size, sometimes a tank buster is sold in a bucket or box. In this case, it is best to add aquarium water into this slowly until the conditions match that of the aquarium. This could be achieved by using a small airline siphon to drip water into the container, slowly changing the water parameters in the bucket or box to that of the aquarium. Ensure that the temperature does not fall too low during this procedure. Once conditions match, 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.

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). The water should be tested regularly (at least once per week) to ensure that ammonia and nitrites don't build up. Ensure that the replacement water is treated with tap water conditioner to remove any harmful chlorine or chloramine present before adding to the aquarium.



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Filters should be checked for 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.

Good husbandry is essential as these fish 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 water hardness every week, especially during initial set-up and after adding extra fish.

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

Tank busters will need different foods depending on their natural diets. Since they will often ignore most foods used to feed smaller fish, they must be fed appropriately sized food and many manufacturers make large pellets for this purpose. The carnivorous species will also require larger frozen food items such as frozen mussel, shrimp or lance fish. The herbivorous species will still be able to consume fresh vegetables.

Tank busters should only be fed what they can eat within a few minutes once a day. Take care not to overfeed as this can lead to a build-up of uneaten food which breaks down releasing toxic waste into the water. If in doubt, ask your OATA retailer for advice on appropriate feeding levels.

Compatibility

Owing to their large size and in most cases, their equally big mouths, mixing with much smaller fish should be avoided. Some tank busters can be particularly aggressive or predatory and may not mix with any other species. Herbivorous



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species are more likely to be compatible with other fish, but this may not always be the case.

Breeding

Due to their large size, it would be unusual for tank busters to breed in a home aquarium. However, if they do, they will usually reproduce in a method similar to their smaller relatives.

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 (required for live plants)*
- ▶ Gravel or sand
- ▶ Tap water conditioner/dechlorinator
- ▶ Water testing kits (ideally ammonia, nitrite, nitrate, pH and water hardness)
- ▶ Gravel cleaner/siphon cleaning device (recommended)
- ▶ Aquarium decorations and/or live plants
- ▶ Bucket for water changes

*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

Establish a routine...

for testing the water in your aquarium. Record your results to enable you to identify



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aquarium is not causing welfare problems for your tank buster.

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

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.
- ▶ **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) 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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