

Tropical Freshwater Fish

How to care for wild caught freshwater fish

The vast majority of freshwater fish offered in shops have been bred in captivity. However, wild caught fish add exciting species to the trade, increase genetic diversity of cultured species and help to provide livelihoods for families who collect them from the wild. This, in turn, will maintain these natural habitats to ensure the livelihoods of future generations. Because of their wild origin, there are a few extra key points to consider when looking after them in captivity.



Water requirements

Wild caught freshwater fish vary in water chemistry requirements as they originate from many different habitats. It is important to check with your OATA retailer for species-specific requirements before purchasing.

However, one important factor that will apply to all wild caught fish is that they have also evolved to live in particular water requirements. In contrast to captive bred fish, wild caught fish can be less tolerant of water quality parameters outside of their normal range. As such, care and patience must be taken when acclimating them to water that differs to the parameters from which they originate.

Biology

The fundamental biology of wild caught fish is not significantly different to that of captive bred fish. However, there are some minor differences that do occur due to their development in natural bodies of water.

Wild caught fish offer natural colouration, genetic diversity and may be more hardy than captive bred individuals. Additionally, wild caught fish offer a sustainable livelihood to communities all over the world and an incentive for them to protect threatened habitats.

It is important to have an effective quarantine procedure in place when mixing wild caught and captive bred stocks to prevent potential disease transfer. Some retailers may do this in-house, so ask your OATA retailer for advice. Once they are settled, take appropriate care of them as you would for all new inhabitants.



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Aquarium requirements

As a general rule, you should within reason, buy an aquarium as large as possible. If the species you are interested in are social, it should be able to accommodate a group of the minimum size recommended. The larger the aquarium, the more stable the environmental conditions such as temperature and water quality will be. Whatever the size, **a filter is always essential**.

For most species, the tank should also have aquarium gravel or sand and ideally live plants present to provide cover. If live plants are not used, then the addition of plastic plants and suitable ornaments is recommended, such as plant pots or model caves, which supplies the fish with shelter. Wild caught freshwater fish will benefit from more cover than captive bred species until they get used to their new surroundings. Additionally, dim lighting and lids are essential to prevent any sudden movements or changes in lighting causing fish to jump from the aquarium.

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.

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

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 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.



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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 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.

For some fish which may be very sensitive or may be kept in specialised water conditions, 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, 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.

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 wild caught freshwater 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



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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

Wild caught freshwater fish will need various foods depending on the species kept. Some wild caught fish may take time to adapt to dried aquarium feeds. If so, their diet may have to be supplemented with live or fresh foods before they can reliably feed on a prepared diet. In addition, there are many formulated feeds available now that mimic natural feeds. If in doubt, always ask your OATA retailer for advice – they may have already acclimated them to dried feeds for you!

Most wild caught freshwater fish 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

Compatibility will be species-dependant, however, as already mentioned some of these fish may be timid until they settle into captivity. Therefore, it might be wise to introduce wild caught individuals before more boisterous species.



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Breeding

Wild caught freshwater fish can be bred in home aquariums, however, they may need a trigger to replicate the seasonality they will have experienced in the wild. See species-specific care sheets or ask your OATA retailer for more information.

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 your 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 wild caught fish.

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) 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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