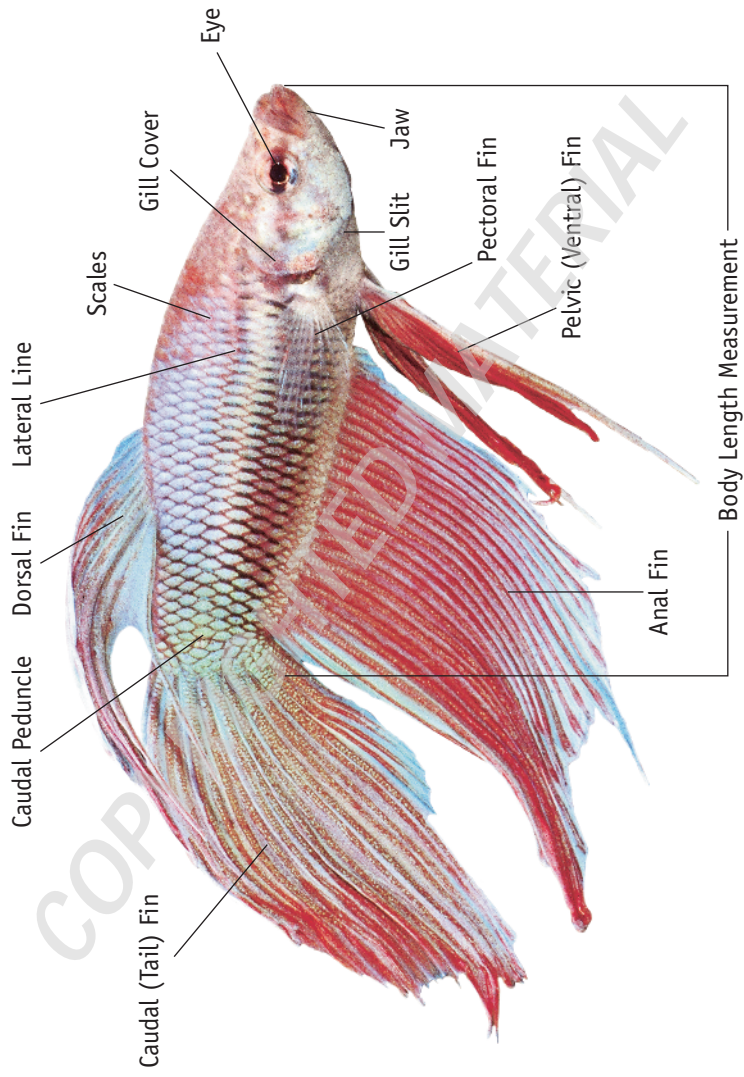


The Betta





Chapter 1

The Jewel of the Orient



Imagine for a moment a cheerful and brightly colored aquarium. The wispy, delicate leaves of a green aquatic plant sway gently in the filter's current. The translucent floating leaves of a dwarf water lily dapple the light streaming in from above. As your eyes drift toward the center of the tank, you notice a bright red Betta with majestic, flowing fins moving casually along as it patiently surveys its surroundings. Darting in and out among the plants, a school of Harlequin Rasboras patrols the depths below. Sounds inviting doesn't it?

This is the enchanting realm of the Betta, one of the most beautiful inhabitants of the tropical aquarium. If the fascinating world of tropical fish delights and amazes you, then you and I share a passion that has captured the hearts of a wide variety of hobbyists for over a century. Withstanding the test of time, the Betta quickly became a favorite choice among freshwater aquarium keepers, and has remained popular for many years. Keeping a Betta will give you and your family years of never-ending enjoyment, and it provides the perfect introduction to tropical fishkeeping. Creating an underwater world that is diverse in color and form rewards tropical fishkeepers with years of pleasure.

Satisfaction, relaxation, and pride go hand in hand with success in the aquarium hobby. You will experience that success when you learn how set up and maintain a healthy aquarium for your new Betta. Come along as we explore the amazing world of the Betta together.



These Pearl Gouramis belong to the same family as the Betta.

The Betta Family

Bettas belong to the family of labyrinth fish (*Anabantidae*). A structure known as the labyrinth organ enables them to breathe atmospheric air, a valuable trait in waters that are low on dissolved oxygen. Other members of this unique family include Gouramis (*Trichogaster*, *Colisa*), Paradise Fishes (*Macropodus*) and the Climbing Perch (*Anabas testudineus*), which can even use its air-breathing ability to move short distances across land.

In their homeland waters of Thailand, Bettas live in shallow rice paddies, stagnant pools, polluted streams, and other places where the water has a low oxygen content. In these locales, the water temperature can reach 90 degrees Fahrenheit under the direct rays of tropical sunlight. Thus, in nature Bettas live in warm, stagnant water.

In the aquarium Bettas prefer water that is 79 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit—slightly warmer than the water temperature favored by other freshwater tropical fish, which prefer a temperature between 76 and 78 degrees Fahrenheit. Bettas also prefer quiet currents, unlike fish that are naturally found in flowing streams and rivers. Successful aquarium keeping always involves providing conditions in the aquarium similar to those the fishes encounter in nature.

A History of Betta Keeping

Undoubtedly, fishkeeping began when fish were first maintained in ponds or containers as part of the food supply. But no one knows exactly when people first started keeping fish in containers purely for enjoyment. The bright colors of some fish may have led people to regard them as special, perhaps in the same way that colorful gems came to be valued more than drab-colored rocks.

Thai workers refer to the Betta as “the jewel of the Orient.” Wild Bettas have plain colors compared to their gaudy modern descendants, but perhaps a rare colorful fish turned up in fishing nets from time to time. Considered, perhaps, a token of good luck, the fish would be kept in a bowl and cared for. We don’t know for sure how keeping Bettas started.

TIP

Almost anyone can keep tropical fish—even people who live in apartments or in small homes where other types of pets, such as cats and dogs, are not practical or are prohibited.

We do know the history of the scientific study of this fish. The Betta (*Betta picta*) was first described in 1846 by French biologists Valenciennes and Cuvier. After the first shipment arrived in the United States in 1909, C. Regan gave this marvelous fish the scientific name *Betta splendens*.

The beautiful Betta varieties found in today’s tropical fish market are the descendents of Asian stock, selected by breeders for vivid colors and long, elegant fins for more than a century. Americans such as Warren Young have also contributed much to the production and development of the long-finned and highly colorful Bettas that you can buy today. Young developed the Libby Betta, the prototype of the large variety of strains that are now available. These brilliant new strains no longer resemble the plain-looking wild Bettas from which they were originally developed.

Commercial breeding offers the hobbyist plenty of choices among a wide range of patterns and fin styles. Most tropical fish dealers stock Betta varieties to match almost any individual taste.

Betta Fighting

Thai people call the Betta *pla kat*, which means “tearing or biting fish.” No doubt rice paddy workers saw nest-guarding males defending their territories against all comers, most notably other male Bettas seeking territories of their

Fighting Fish

Wild Bettas selectively crossed with more aggressive-natured domesticated species yield champion fighters. Placed together in a suspended glass bowl where neither can escape, they do what comes naturally to a male Betta when confronted with a competitor. They fight. Large monetary bets are placed on these competitions—explaining, in part, why such cruel spectacles endure.

Organizers seldom permit the two Bettas to fight until one kills the other. Nevertheless, many die shortly afterward from injuries sustained during the bout. Fortunately, Betta fighting is illegal in the United States.

own. Their pugnacious tendencies led to their use in the sport of Betta fighting. Even today in the United States, the colloquial name for the Betta is Siamese Fighting Fish.

The wild Betta differs in many respects from the captive-bred fighting fish. The fighting fish is stockier and has a pug nose. The wild Betta rarely fights—usually only to defend territories or mating partners. Such ritual fights, limited to threatening displays of flared gills and spread fins, are mostly for show and confrontations rarely end in death. One male gives up and retreats. Better to find another, even a less desirable place to raise a family than to die and raise no offspring at all.

In the home aquarium, a Betta's aggressive behavior toward other males of the same species will be intensified because of confinement and the lack of escape routes. Only one male Betta should be kept in an aquarium. Female Bettas rarely fight with each other. Once in a while a little fin nipping and other acts of bad temper take place among squabbling females, but usually little or no serious damage ensues. In general, it is not advisable to place a male and a female Betta together in a community aquarium, because it is possible that other innocent tankmates may be injured if the pair decide to bicker or spawn.

None of this should discourage keeping a Betta with other types of community fish. Tankmates for the Betta should be non-aggressive. Rasboras, Danios, small Barbs, and a host of other popular aquarium fish originating in Asian



These two males are squaring off. Only one male Betta should be kept in an aquarium.

habitats often make the best companions. Beware of Cichlids and large Barbs that can become fin nippers. A fish that decides to take a small taste of a Betta's beautiful fins may chase it to the point of exhaustion and collapse.

A Suitable Environment

Because of the Betta's reputation for physical hardiness, many hobbyists make the mistake of providing Bettas with inadequate living accommodations (small glass bowls and jars) and poor water conditions. While it is true that a Betta may be capable of living for several years (actually just surviving) in a small bowl of cool water, it will reach full coloration and robust health only in a properly designed aquarium.

Bettas deserve the same good care and quality aquarium conditions as all other species of tropical fish. In an aquarium with warm water and a good filtration system, your Betta can achieve its full physical potential and be happy. And making your Betta healthy and happy is what this book is all about.

You can easily see the effects that good living conditions have on your fish's health. Set up a small aquarium according to the guidelines in this book. Then



Arrangements like this may look beautiful, but they are not healthy for your fish. Bettas deserve the same good care and quality aquarium conditions as all other species of tropical fish.

purchase one of the Bettas lurking lethargically in small bowls at your local fish dealer. Take the Betta home and place it in your well-maintained aquarium. Within a matter of hours, you will notice an increase in coloration, activity level, and alertness as your Betta happily settles into its new home.