

# THE NORTH AMERICAN KILLIES

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Battered and abused, unknown and unloved. Sounds like a movie of the week doesn't it? Well in fact it describes our North American killies. North American killies? I didn't know we had any you may say. You are not alone in thinking that and nothing could be farther from the truth! We have an excellent variety of killies on this continent from brackish to freshwater and possess a multitude of dramatic sizes, shapes and colors which are also a hit overseas. Here, sadly they are a flop and relegated to use as an occasional bait minnow!

C'mon folks we can do SO much better than that! While we talk about the rain forest and other ecological crisis, we let our ignorance of local flora and fauna and thus our local killies go unchallenged. These poor guys lie waiting for SOMEONE, anyone to notice them. Why not you! If tomorrow your local newspaper ran a story saying XYZ killi was now extinct, would you be surprised? Would you know what they were talking about? Would you be ashamed? Maybe we all should be at least a little!

For those of you unfamiliar with our native killies, the family represents a broad group of small (under six inches) minnow-like fishes which exhibit a large degree of color variation and temperaments within the group. Almost all of them are suitable aquarium specimens. They have several characteristics that make them something your average aquarist should look into. First and foremost, they are tough as nails. Their tolerance to heat, cold, poor water conditions, and jumping on the floor would make better press as far-fetched fiction when actually fact. I had one jump out of the tank and not rescued for hours. When finally finding the hapless victim, it was dry, dusty, and pitiful looking that twitched just a bit in my hand. Back in the tank it went and, believe it or not, fully recovered by the end of the day! Second, they are colorful, not like a neon tetra, but display colors equal to many tropical and a heck of a lot easier and cheaper to keep. Finally, their behavior and habits are very interesting. Average aquarists have excellent chances at successfully breeding most killies. Sadly, so little is known about the spawning triggers which means breeding data is generally not available for most species. On the positive side, when you discover how to breed these gems the data would be a treasure trove to University and Department of Natural Resources fish biologists, who by the way, have found killies, not the Gambusia family, are the real mosquito fish. A killi will eat 5-10 times more mosquitoes than a Gambusia. They are truly mosquito munching machines! With all that going for them they still have been virtually ignored by sportsmen, naturalist, and most aquarists. Only a few of us nuts keep the faith and the killies!

That's been the hurdle our native fishes have had to conquer! They don't lack in durability, they don't lack in looks, they certainly don't lack in interesting behaviors. What they lack in is advocates! Very few people care

enough about them to speak up for them. That is their downfall. Book after book contains no relevant breeding or rearing information which all say the dreaded - see species description. Why is that? Is it possible that all killies, sunfish, darters, and shiners are alike? Needing the same water, conditions, food, and temperature requirements? Is it possible that the entire continent is inhabited by only a single species of killi, darter, sunfish etc? Of course not. It's simply information is sorely deficient.

There is great diversity out there and for the aquarist there is great opportunity to work with species which are poorly known. Imagine, you could be the first to document breeding conditions of a seldom studied killi and you wouldn't even have to journey to Africa. You could begin to document the range of a species that has been passed over in the past as only an undescribed killi! It's not SCI-FI, it's reality! All it takes is folks across the continent to get busy investing their time and resources into studying the world around them. You could make a great difference, without significantly changing your hobby. Keep doing what you're doing just change subjects a bit. It matters - it really does!

"OK, OK", you say, "You've convinced me, but where do I start?" First, check out your local library and see if you can find *Peterson's Field Guide to Freshwater Fishes* by Brooks M. Burr and Larry Page. This reference will give you a real good idea of what killies are available locally. Also check out and see if any people in your area are involved in keeping native killies. Contact the local aquarium society, nearest NANFA (North American Native Fish Association) chapter, or the AKA (American Killifish Association). The latter two are active across the country in keeping and rearing native killies and great places to "get your feet wet."

So what killies do I recommend? A ton come to mind, but for the sake of brevity and also help the cause, I'll cut my list down to five. This selection has been based on overall beauty, hardiness, availability, and author's bias.

**golden topminnow (*Fundulus chrysotus*)** - The classic North American killi. Large, colorful, and extremely tolerant of poor conditions, but a bit on the mean side. Readily available in the pet trade or through fish clubs.

**blackstripe topminnow (*Fundulus notatus*)** - An excellent addition to any community tank. This small, colorful killi has a shy temperament and an unusual habit of living almost exclusively in the top three inches of a tank. Very common across the Midwest and south. Extremely easy to collect. Even my five year old daughter has caught them on many occasions.

**lined topminnow (*Fundulus lineolatus*)** - Hard to find, but easy to love and this guy is cool. The male takes on

horizontal striping over a light gray background while the female takes on the vertical stripes. The contrast makes them a striking pair to say the least. They are hardy and make an excellent species for study or hobby aquarists.

**plains killifish (*Fundulus zebrinus*)** - This charming fellow looks like an escaped convict with his vertical bars and golden backdrop. This is a very hardy species which has spawned in both my pond and aquarium. This guy takes to food like it takes to life - with hardy abandon. One of the finer specimens you can keep. It occurs in the Midwest and sporadically from Colorado to Texas.

**bluefin killifish (*Lucania goodei*)** - Probably the most well known of the American killies which is an excellent pond or aquarium species. The male is strikingly colorful with fins of blue and red. The fish's tiny size and excellent temperament make it suitable for small tanks and jars. Occurs in southern regions, but is available commonly in the pet trade or through fish clubs.

Finally, there is help for hobbyists afflicted with this addiction. Join the AKA (American Killifish Association) where you can meet other enthusiasts and receive the bimonthly *Journal of the American Killifish*. For more information, contact Ronald Coleman, 903 Merrifield Place, Mishawaka, IN 46544.

