

The Names You Know, the People You Don't: *Dr. Marinus Boeseman*

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In this hobby we often throw around the names of various species of fish. Often, instead of saying the true binominal name of the fish, say *Nannostomus beckfordi*, we say the name of the person the fish was named after, in this case Beckford's Pencil Fish. But do we know who Beckford was? That person was honored when the fish was named, and we continue to honor him every time we or others discuss the fish. But what are the reasons people are honored in this fashion? Quite often there is an interesting story associated with the person being honored.

Following along in the theme "Year of the Rainbowfish", I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Marinus Boeseman, the person that *Melanotaenia boesemani*, or Boeseman's Rainbowfish, was named in honor of, and share a bit of his rather interesting life.

On June 22nd, 1916 in the midst of the Great War (aka World War I), in the Netherlands port city of Ziderzee, Marinus Boeseman was born. Not much was written about his early life, but we do know that age the age of 11 his father died. Marinus, his two elder sisters, and his mother moved to Oegstegeest, a neighboring town of Leiden, the Netherlands. It was in Leiden where Marinus would leave his mark.



Apparently Marinus was quite the draftsman, and given that talent considered a career as an artist. But instead in 1935, at the age of 19, he entered Leiden University to study biology. As an undergraduate he published his first paper on the behavior of bitterlings (*Rhodeus sericeus*). He continued in school, obtaining his Bachelors degree and then his Masters degree in 1941.

But then the Second World War interrupted his life. The Netherlands had tried to remain neutral in World War II, but in May 1940 Nazi Germany invaded and subsequently occupied the country. As history has recorded, the Nazis deported a vast majority of the Netherlands 140,000 Jewish population to concentration camps. This deportation and the prior persecutions of the Jewish population lead to protests, one of which was held by the students at Leiden University. As a result, the Nazis closed the university, and the graduation ceremony where



Marinus received his Masters degree was instead held at the University of Amsterdam.

It was at this point where Marinus became associated with the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (the National Museum of Natural History) in Leiden, the Netherlands, and the institution where he would make his most notable impact. On April 1st, 1943, while awaiting permission to publish his thesis in English, Marinus was appointed to the Entomological Department of the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke.

However, unknown to his colleagues at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke, Marinus was active in the Dutch resistance against the Nazis. On October 4th, 1942, he was arrested by the Nazis and jailed. Three months later he was transferred to Kamp Vught, the only concentration camp run by the Nazi SS outside of Germany. Then, on May 25th, 1944, he was transferred to and forced to work at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

He remained there until freed on April 25th, 1945. He returned to the Netherlands in June, resumed work at the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke in July, but then, as a result of poor health resulting from his imprisonment and associated experiences, fell ill in August.

Fighting through the ill health that would continue to afflict him throughout the next two decades, Marinus was appointed curator on March 1st, 1947, and then head of the fish department on November 1st, 1947.



He proceeded to undertake several small collecting expeditions in 1947 and 1948, and then in 1953 collected in El Salvador for six months. From October 1954 through to May 1955 Marinus was part of large collecting expedition in New Guinea, where he discovered *Melanotaenia boesemani*. Still battling his physical afflictions (which now included being a victim of the last Dutch epidemic of polio and the subsequent restricted use of his right arm) he

undertook further collecting trips to Surinam, Trinidad, the eastern Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic.

Through his career he seemed to appreciate sharks and rays, but was acknowledged as an expert in the South American *Loricariidae* family of catfish. Over the span of his career he published over 100 papers, very few of which had co-authors, and collected thousands of fish.

He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Orange-Nassau (the order of the Netherlands government dating back to 1892) in 1980 and was awarded the Dutch Cross of Resistance in 1981 for his actions during World War II.

He retired from the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke in 1981, but continued to write ichthyological papers up until 2004.

Two years later, on July 14th, 2006, and at the age of 90, Dr. Marinus Boeseman passed.

One genus of fish, *Boesemania* (1 species – *Boesemania microlepis* [Boeseman's Croaker]) and six species of fish have been named in honor of Dr. Marinus Boeseman. The species of fish are;

- *Corydoras boesemani* (Boeseman's Cory)
- *Halaelurus boesemani* (Speckled Catshark [Marine])
- *Hemigrammus boesemani* (Boeseman's Tetra)
- *Melanotaenia boesemani* (Boeseman's Rainbowfish)
- *Okamejei boesemani* (Boeseman's Skate [Marine])
- *Scolopsis boesemani* (Redfin Dwarf Monocle Bream [Marine])

The species that aquarium hobbyists are most familiar with is undoubtedly *Melanotaenia boesemani*. It was discovered in 1955 during his aforementioned expedition in the Ajamaru Lakes region of Papua New Guinea and preserved specimens returned with Dr. Boeseman. They remained undescribed for 25 years until 1980 when Dr. Gerald Allen, with the permission of Dr. Boeseman, studied and described them.



In honor of Dr. Boeseman, Dr. Allen named the species *Melanotaenia boesemani*. During an expedition in 1982 Dr. Allen, in the company of Heiko Bleher, found the fish in its native habitat. Since the original specimens had been preserved and therefore not exhibiting natural coloration, the actual physical appearance of *Melanotaenia boesemani* astounded them. Heiko Bleher captured and transported several specimens back to Germany where he was able to successfully breed them. It wasn't long after this that they entered the hobby. Today they are probably the most known and recognizable species of Rainbowfish.

So next time you see the beautiful half-blue, half-orange Rainbowfish, know that its name is *Melanotaenia boesemani*, and is named after the late Dutch ichthyologist Dr. Marinus Boesemani, a renowned curator, explorer, author, patriotic resistance fighter and survivor of the Nazi Dachau concentration camp.