

# Year of the Catfish

A monthly column about Catfish

## Talking...

### (Doradidae)

by Derek Tustin

(Author's Note: I started *The Year of the Catfish* with the intention of writing an article relating to some aspect of Catfish in the aquarium on a monthly basis. Last month, April 2013, I did not. I know this caused a bit of consternation on the part of Klaus Steinhaus, the editor of *Tank Talk*, and he had to find another article to fill the space. As such, I offer both he and the readers of *Tank Talk* my sincere apologies and to make up for it, give you a double helping of *The Year of the Catfish* this month. – Derek P.S. Tustin)

**D**o you have that one fish species of fish that you have an unbridled affinity for? That

one special species that just strikes a chord with you that you want to keep no matter what? Perhaps something that you have kept every time the opportunity presents? I think we all have a small group of species that no matter how unattractive other aquarists may find them, we want to keep them.

I think you all know by now my absolute fascination with rainbowfish, and the extent that I am willing to go to obtain certain species. Given that, you might be surprised to know that my “soft-spot species” isn't a rainbowfish, but rather a catfish, specifically the White-Spotted Doradid, *Agamyxis pectinifrons*. (Or it actually might be... but I'll get to that in a bit.)



*Agamyxis pectinifrons*



*Agamyxis pectinifrons*

*Agamyxis pectinifrons* is a member of the *Doradidae* family. The etymology (or meaning of the word) of *Doradidae* is from the Greek word “doras”, which literally translates as “leathery skin”, and the “idae” being a suffix attached to denote the naming of a zoological family. Essentially, these the family of catfish with a leathery skin.

Planetcatfish.com currently lists 95 species of *Doradidae* across 32 genera. All members of the family are from South America river basins, but are absent from the Pacific coast drainages and from drainages south of the Rio de la Plata. The majority of the species, 70%+, are from the Amazon basin.

They are nocturnal for the most part, and physically have scutes, or a line of bony projections, along the lateral area of the body. These projections are very sharp, and are the method of natural protection of the fish. In general, they are not the most stream-lined of catfish, but as a group they are very interesting in appearance. The species range in size from 3.5 cm (1.5") (*Physopyxis lyra*) to 120 cm (47") (*Oxydoras niger*). They have three pairs of barbels, an adipose fin, and... they talk!

I currently have ten *Agamyxis pectinifrons* in my largest tank at home, with the longest living being over 8 years old. Over that time that I've kept this species, I've had to move the fish on several occasions, either due to residential moves or tank re-arrangements. Each time that I have done so, I've marveled (and my wife has shivered – she finds it eerie) as the catfish makes audible sounds when removed from the water. This sound, often referred to as "talking" is the result of the fish grating its pectoral fins against the fin socket. This noise is then amplified by the swim bladder and sounds like a croaking noise. Every fish in the family has the same ability to produce audible sounds. (By far the best way to move the fish is via a jar or pitcher.



***Amblydoras nauticus.***

The scutes of the fish tend to get caught in any net used, making it very difficult to remove the fish. Further, I've experienced the scutes of the fish puncturing plastic bags, so I recommend moving these fish in harder containers such as Tupperware.)

While there are 95 species, only three species (or maybe five depending on how you look at things... but I'll get to that in a bit) are commonly available to the aquarist. In fact, two species were available at our auction in April. The three named species that you will most often see offered for sale are the aforementioned *Agamyxis pectinifrons*, *Platydoras armatulus*, and *Amblydoras nauticus*.

### ***The Raphael Catfish***

The most commonly available of the Talking Catfish is *Platydoras armatulus*. Commonly called the Raphael Catfish, it is also sometimes seen labeled as the Humbug Catfish, the Stripped Talking Catfish or the Chocolate Talking Catfish (the latter being used mostly in the United Kingdom). However, most aquarists will believe the correct binomial name of this fish to be *Platydoras costatus*. For decades, *P. costatus* was believed to be the correct name,



***Platydoras-costatus***

but a paper published in 2008 (*Platydoras brachylecis*, a new species of thorny catfish [Siluriformes: Doradidae] from northeastern Brazil by Nivaldo M. Piorski, Julio C. Garavello, Mariangeles Arce H. and Mark H. Sabaj Perez) determined that the correct binomial name of the fish was actually *P. armatulus*.

Growing to approximately 20 cm (8") in length, they have a dark brown upper part of the body, with a white / beige coloured lateral line which runs back down the body from the head. This strip actually runs right along the line of scutes on the side of the body. The ventral surface is usually cream or beige in colour.

Native to Paraguay and portions of both the Amazon and Orinoco River basins, they prefer to be kept in a group (with four fish being the minimum desired number), but care needs to be taken to provide sufficient retreats for each fish, as they can squabble over the best hiding place, and the strong pectoral fins can result in minor injuries from such disputes.

They are a nocturnal species and as such are much more active during the night. A red light flashlight can assist in viewing of these fish after "lights-out", although as they age they may become active during feeding time and hence viewable with the tank lights on. Very easy to feed, they will relish frozen bloodworms, and sinking foods including both shrimp pellets and algae wafers. Interestingly enough, they also are an excellent fish for snail control.



***Agamyxis pectinifrons***

*eigenmanni*. If you carefully examine a tank full of *P. armatulus*, you may find the occasional *O. eigenmanni*, and several aquarists have been known to gather a school of them in this fashion, keeping them separate from the *P. armatulus*. The two main differences are that *O. eigenmanni* has a more pointed nose and the scutes tend to be smaller.

### ***The White-Spotted Doradid***

The next most commonly available of the Talking Catfish is my personal favourite, *Agamyxis pectinifrons*, commonly labeled as either the White-Spotted Doradid, the Spotted Talking Catfish, or the Spotted Raphael Cat. Four of these fish were available at the 2013 Aquariama.

Native to Ecuador and Peru, the basic colouration of the fish is black to chocolate brown with an irregular smattering of white or beige coloured dots over the body and fins, with no two fish having identical patterns. They are a hardy species, with reports of a potential life span in excess of 17 years. They will remain slightly smaller than *P. armatulus*, usually only reaching a maximum size of 15 cm (6").

Unfortunately, while first described in 1840, there have been no reports of breeding in home aquaria, and as a result all available fish are wild-caught.

Now, remember how I mentioned that there may actually be five species of *Doradidae* that are commonly available? *Orinocodoras eigenmanni*, native to the Orinoco River as the genus name suggests, is a separate species of *Doradidae* that appears very similar, at least at first glance, to *Platydoras armatulus*. As such, some imports of *P. armatulus* (likely those gathered from the Orinoco River) have been known to contain the odd contaminant of *O.*

The recommended care and diet is essentially the same as *P. armatulus*. However, unlike *P. armatulus*, there have been scattered reports of this fish breeding in the home aquaria, with the fish apparently being a bubble nest builder, or laying eggs on floating vegetation at the water surface, and further reports that breeding can be induced via the use of hormones.

Also like the relationship between *Platydoras armatulus* and *Orinocodoras eigenmanni*, *Agamyxis pectinifrons* has a sister species, *Agamyxis albomaculatus*, that may often be a contaminant in imported shipments. However, unlike *P. armatulus* and *O. eigenmanni*, there are no visual differences between the two species, and the only way to tell the two species apart is via dissection to determine the number of gas bladder tendrils. As such, there is no way to know if a fish identified as *A. pectinifrons* is indeed that species or actually *A. albomaculatus*...at least not and still have a live fish.

### **Marbled Talking Catfish**

The third of the commonly available Talking Catfish is *Amblydoras nauticus*, commonly known as the Marbled Talking Catfish, Blue-Eyed Catfish, Croaking Spiny Catfish or Hancock’s Catfish. Two of these fish were available at the recent Aquariama.

This is another fish that for a number of years was known under a different name, specifically *Platydoras hancocki*. As a result, this fish is often still referred to as Hancock’s Catfish. Sometime in either 2008 or 2009, it was realized that the genus had been misidentified, and that the fish was actually *Amblydoras nauticus*.

The smallest of the three common Talking Catfish at 10 cm (4”), it should also be kept in a group with a minimum of four fish. Widespread throughout the Amazon region, this is a fish with a beige to caramel coloured body, a slightly lighter coloured ventral region, and a light scattering of small black dots across the body.

Care and dietary requirements are the same as *Platydoras armatulus* and *Agamyxis pectinifrons*, and again is a fish that has not been bred in captivity.

So there you have it, three species (or five if you count the contaminants) of Talking Catfish that are sometimes available and would make an excellent addition to any community aquarium. But I would ask that if you consider keeping these fish, you remember that they really like to find a secluded spot to spend the daylight hours. If you don’t provide caves in rocks or under driftwood, they will try and wedge themselves in any place that they feel provides some sort of cover. One common place will be between the side of the tank and an aquarium heater, and this often results in burns to the body of the fish, sometimes resulting in death and often in badly burned skin. If you keep them, please provide the appropriate cover, and strongly consider heater shields to keep these reclusive creatures safe.

Current Latin Name	<i>Platydoras armatulus</i>	<i>Agamyxis pectinifrons</i>	<i>Amblydoras nauticus</i>
Old Latin Name	<i>Platydoras costatus</i>	-	<i>Platydoras hancocki</i>
Common Names	Raphael Catfish	White-Spotted Doradid	Hancock’s Catfish
	Stripped Talking Catfish	Spotted Talking Catfish	Marbled Talking Catfish
Length	20 cm (8”)	15 cm (6”)	10 cm (4”)
Temperature	24 – 30°C (75 – 86°F)	22 – 26°C (72 – 79°F)	23 – 28°C (73 – 82°F)
pH	5.8 – 7.5	5.5 – 7.5	5.5 – 7.5
Difficulty	Easy	Easy	Easy
Compatibility	Community	Community	Community