

The Catfishes of Asia

Family Bagridae part one

by R. Shane Linder

Author's Note: This series was originally written in early 1997. Since that time there has been enough taxonomic work done on the family Bagridae to warrant an update. At Ian Fuller's urging, I have updated the series as a whole for the millennium rather than just issue an article containing corrections. The updated series contains not only taxonomic changes but also identification corrections and a host of other new information.

Of all of the catfishes in the world, hobbyists are probably the least familiar with those species that come from Asia. These days even general pet stores often carry a wide assortment of loricariids, pimelodids, and *Corydoras* from South America. Catfishes from Africa that used to be considered rare, such as *Synodontis angelicus* and *S. multipunctatus*, can now be found with little effort. However, try find a single Asian catfish, other than a Glass cat (*Kryptopterus bicirrhis*) or Iridescent Shark (*Pangasius hypophthalmus*), and the hunt is on! Multitudes of barbs, danios, rasboras, and gouramis from Asia are widely available in our hobby and yet the catfish that share habitats with all of these common fish are rarely available. It is the purpose of this series of articles not only to inform the reader, but also to pique more interest in this understudied area of our hobby.

Asia, including the subcontinent of India, is home to wide variety of catfishes. Catfishes from the families Cranoglanididae, Siluridae, Schilbeidae, Clariidae, Akysidae, Amblycipitidae, Heteropneustidae, Parakysidae, Chacidae, Pangasiidae, Plotosidae, Ariidae, Sisoridae, and Bagridae can all be found in Asia. One of the largest families in Asia is the family Bagridae. Bagrids are of special interest to us because more species of this family are available in the hobby than of any other Asian catfish family.

The family Bagridae has a huge range and members of this family can be found throughout all of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The bagrids are also a very diverse family ranging from *Bagrus meridionalis*, the largest fish native to Lake Malawi, to the diminutive *Hyalobagrus ornatus* of Southeast Asia that rarely exceeds one inch. Bagrids are sometimes referred to as Old World pimelodids and many bagrids do in fact look very similar to some pimelodids. Perhaps it would be fairer though to refer to pimelodids as New World bagrids since many scientists believe that several other catfish families evolved from a bagrid-like ancestor. More than one aquarium book has a photo of a pimelodid that is mislabeled as a bagrid. However, bagrids with barbels can be distinguished from pimelodids easily as pimelodids always lack nasal barbels.

At present, Bagridae is divided into two subfamilies. The subfamily Bagrinae includes: *Bagrus* (restricted to Africa), *Aorichthys*, *Bagrichthys*, *Bagroides*, *Batasio*, *Hemibagrus*, *Horabagrus*, *Hyalobagrus*, *Leiocassis*, *Mystus*, *Neotropius*, *Olyra*, *Pelteobagrus*, *Pseudobagrus*, and *Pseudomystus*. The second subfamily, Ritinae, includes: *Rita* and *Nanobagrus*. This arrangement follows the 1991 revision of the family by Tianpei Mo. Much of Mo's work has been recognized as valid, but some of it has not. Mo placed *Horabagrus* in the family Schilbeidae, but subsequent authors have moved this genus back into Bagridae. Mo also moved *Neotropius* from Schilbeidae to Bagridae, but later authors have not followed this placement. Mo's decision to retain *Bagrus* in Bagridae is also problematic. Mo recognized that all the other African genera belonged in their own families and created the African families Claroteidae and Auchenoglanidinae. With the exception of this one genus, Bagridae is an entirely Asiatic family.

Let us begin our tour of bagrids imported for the aquarium hobby with the three closely related genera: *Batasio*, *Chandramara*, and *Rama*. At various times these three genera have been retired or resurrected and the species in each have been placed in the others. The most recent work, Jayaram 1999, resurrected *Chandramara* and *Rama*. The genus *Batasio* presently contains three species. Members of this genus are mainly found in India and it is likely that there are valid members of this genus in Southeast Asia currently placed under *Batasio tengana*. Although not common, the Southeast Asian species placed in *Batasio tengana* are the most widely available in the hobby. The photo on page 307 of Baensch's [Aquarium Atlas III](#) labeled *Batasio tengana* is actually a photo of *Leiocassis*

micropogon from Southeast Asia. The reason for differentiating between the *Batasio tengana* of India and that of Southeast Asia is because the two fish look very different and, in my opinion, represent two or more distinct species.

The *Batasio tengana* from Southeast Asia has been bred in captivity. The fish spawned in soft neutral water, but raising the 200 plus fry proved difficult. *Batasio*, like most other bagrids, are easy to sex. The male has a visible genital papilla just fore of the anal fin. I have also observed that gravid female *B. tengana* (SE Asian form) are easy to identify because the pink eggs can be seen through their semi-transparent belly when they swim near the aquarium light. Both *B. tengana* do well in captivity. It appears that all *Batasio* are rapids dwellers and need a lot of current and a high oxygen content. The temperature for the Indian species should remain between 68-72F. The Southeast Asian form will tolerate slightly warmer waters. In Malaysia, the Southeast Asian form was collected with below a waterfall along with *Glyptothorax* species and hill stream loaches. Another species of *Batasio* found in the hobby, if you have a good eye, is *B. batasio*. This fish hails from northern India where it shares its habitat with another bagrid *Mystus vittatus*. *B. batasio* bears a remarkable resemblance to *M. vittatus* and it takes some practice to tell the two apart. The relationship between these two fish really needs further study because it appears that *B. batasio* is a sort of "imitator" catfish like members of the genus *Brachyrhamdia*. The best way to tell these fish apart is to look at the barbels. Those of *B. batasio* do not extend beyond the head. *B. batasio* reaches a maximum length of about four inches. The final *Batasio* species, *B. travancoria*, is rare in its natural habitat and has only once been imported to the U.S. The fish is an overall golden brown with a dark streak along the lateral line. I found this fish very difficult to maintain and believe they may be a specialized feeder. In captivity my specimens slowly lost weight over six months and perished one by one. They were treated for internal parasites, but the main problem was that they showed little interest in all foods offered. If this species is imported again hobbyists will need to experiment to find the proper diet to maintain this fish in captivity.

Chandramara chandramara may also be found occasionally. This fish is constantly moved from genus to genus. Just as the hobby was becoming used to the name *Batasio chandramara*, Jayaram moved the fish back to *Chandramara*. It should also be noted that Talwar and Jhingran placed this fish in *Rama*. So in the last ten years this wonderful little fish has been in three genera. *C. chandramara* is a pretty little catfish with a semi-transparent speckled body. *C. chandramara* comes from India and is fully-grown at just over two inches. This small schooling bagrid is often referred to as the Asian *Corydoras*. It also needs cooler temperatures. The final member of this group, *Rama rama*, does not appear to have been imported. It looks very much like *Chandramara* but lacks the spots.

The genus *Pelteobagrus* consists of about twenty species that are found mainly in China, Korea, and other parts of Northern Asia. Sadly, only one species of this genus makes it to the American aquarium trade, *P. fluvidraco*. It is most often found under the name "Chinese Dragon Catfish". This fish comes from northern China and southeast Siberia. It is not a tropical fish and requires cooler temperatures. This fish is a good candidate for the outdoor pond.

In 1998 Ng Heok Hee and Maurice Kottelat created the genus *Hyalobagrus* for the small SE Asian bagrid known to the hobby *Pelteobagrus ornatus*. During their research, Ng and Kottelat discovered that there are actually three dwarf bagrids from SE Asia that belong to *Hyalobagrus*. These wonderful little transparent catfish are mid-water swimmers. They seem to do best in a heavily planted tank with tankmates that will not out compete them for food. These fish relish frozen bloodworms and will gorge themselves on them. All *Hyalobagrus* are sexually dimorphic, males possess a genital papilla, and gravid females are easy to spot since their blue-green eggs are visible through their bellies. To my knowledge none of these species have been bred in captivity, but this would certainly be a worthwhile project for the advanced aquarist.

In the next installment we will finish up the remaining genera of Bagridae imported for the aquarium hobby with the exception of the complex genus *Mystus* which deserves its own column.

Below is the current status, as of January 2000, for the above genera:

Batasio Blyth, 1860

Batasio batasio (Francis Hamilton, 1822) India: Teesta River, North Bengal & Bangladesh

Batasio tengana (Hamilton, 1822) India (Bangladesh?)

Batasio sp aff *tengana* SE Asia, the fish from Malaysia and Thailand appear to be distinct spp.

Batasio travancoria Hora & Law, 1941 Southern India

Chandramara Jayaram, 1972

Chandramara chandramara (Hamilton, 1822) North India & Bangladesh

Rama Bleeker, 1858

Rama rama (Bleeker, 1858) India: Assam

Pelteobagrus Bleeker, 1864

Pelteobagrus sp. prox. *crassirostris* noted by Jayaram, 1968 China

Pelteobagrus crassilabris (Gunther, 1864) China

Pelteobagrus eupogoides (Wu, 1930) China

Pelteobagrus eupogon (Boulenger, 1892) China

Pelteobagrus fui Miao, 1934 China

Pelteobagrus fulvidraco (Richardson, 1846) China, Japan, & Siberia: Amur basin

Pelteobagrus hoi (Pellegrin & Fang, 1940) China

Pelteobagrus microps (Rendahl, 1933) China: Chungking, Foochow

Pelteobagrus nitidus (Sauvage & Thiersant, 1874) China

Pelteobagrus nudiceps (Sauvage, 1883) Japan River Azusa, Biwa Ko, Himeji, Matsubara, Okayama, Sasayama

Pelteobagrus ransonnettii (Steindachner, 1887) Japan: Biwa Ko, Kochi, River Kyoto, Osaka

Pelteobagrus tenuifurcatus (Nichols, 1931) China: River Tsien Tang, Chungan Hsien, Suifu

Pelteobagrus vachellii (Richardson, 1845) China & Siberia

Pelteobagrus virgatus (Oshima, 1926) Hainan Island: River Kachek, Nodda

Pelteobagrus wangi (Maio, 1934) China

Pelteobagrus wittenburgii (Popta, 1911) China: Hangchow, Tient-sin Siberia: Rivers Amur, Sungari

Hyalobagrus Ng & Kottelat, 1998

H. flavus Ng & Kottelat, 1998 Sumatra and

H. leiacanthus Ng & Kottelat, 1998 Central Borneo

H. ornatus (Duncker, 1904) Southern Malay Peninsula



Bagrichthys macracanthus



Mystus gulio : as presently understood, is a collection of brackish *Mystus* that likely represent many valid species.



Hyalobagrus flavus: Gravid female. Note clearly visible eggs (greenish in colour)



Pelteobagrus fluvidraco



Mystus cf. albolineatus: This fish matches the colour description of *Mystus albolineatus* but the body shape is very different than the described species. The true *Mystus albolineatus* has a very high and long adipose. This appears to be an undescribed species.



Mystus bimaculatus



NOT *Pseudomystus siamensis*. This appears to be the Malaysian form of ***Pseudomystus stenomus***.



Chandramara chandramara

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