

The Wonder of Wildwoods

The Wonder of Wildwoods

© Dr. Neale Monks

For about a quarter mile running east of Crews Hill station, Theobalds Park Road is home to no fewer than six aquarium shops. Some are small, others large, but one in particular enjoys a unique reputation in the fishkeeping hobby as the best place in Britain to find rare and unusual freshwater fishes. While part of this might be explained by the fact this is one of the larger aquarium stores, with over 200 tanks including a substantial number dedicated to specific groups of fish like discus, L-number catfish, and African cichlids. But there's more to it than that. The management at Wildwoods also go out of their way to import species that are otherwise ignored by the hobby, such as unusual barbs, wild livebearers, and freshwater archerfish. For many aquarists, a visit to Wildwoods may be the first time many of these fish will be seen outside the pages of a book. Fishes completely new to the science often make an early appearance here as well, from undescribed species of snakehead through to the stunning *Microrasbora* sp. "Galaxy" rasbora. Wildwoods is also a great place to track down fish that are well established in the hobby, but just not all that often seen, like the beautiful croaking gourami *Trichopsis vittatus* and the elusive (in more ways than one) jaguar catfish *Liosomadoras oncinus*.

Although famous for its tropical fish selection, Wildwoods also has a good selection of coldwater fish including koi, fancy goldfish, and various pond plants. One nice surprise is the range of exotic coldwater fish, from little fish like Chinese gobies through to big fish like gar. There are also sections containing aquarium plants, marine fish and invertebrates, and a new section of brackish water fish, of which more later.

The place for Barilius

Barilius are medium-sized schooling cyprinids known colloquially as hill trouts. Although historically not that common in the aquarium trade, Wildwoods has been leading the way on importing these fish, and at any one time can be expected to carry at least half a dozen species of Barilius. The common name comes from their trout-like appearance and the fact they normally inhabit upland streams where the water is fast-moving, clear, and well oxygenated. At first glance their streamlined, metallic bodies and prominent (and highly attractive) markings will certainly recall our own trout species to many aquarists. In many ways they are also the ecological equivalents of trout, feeding on a variety of animals including smaller fish and insects. Like trout, they are also adept at jumping, and need to be kept in a covered aquarium.

Among the most popular of these fish is the blue-spotted hill trout, *Barilius bakeri*, a 15 cm species with a silvery body marked with a series of blue-green vertical bars against a thick, coppery band running from behind the eye to the base of the tail. Slightly smaller but no less attractive is the pretty hill trout *Barilius pulchellus*, an 11 cm species with an essentially copper-coloured body marked with irregular greenish-silver vertical bars, and notable for its bright red dorsal fin. The banded hill trout *Barilius barna* is another 15 cm species, this time distinguished by its rather slender, silvery-green body bearing around nine thin, dark green vertical bars.

Hill trout are basically easy to care for, and mix well with peaceful fish of similar size. They are indifferent to water chemistry, and seem to do well in hard, alkaline water. Their prime demand is for plenty of oxygen, especially if kept in water warmer than the 18-22C range that they prefer. Being fish from fast-flowing waters, they are an obvious choice for adding to tanks based around other mountain stream and fast water fishes, such as rheophilic plecs and the big bearded cory, *Scleromystax barbatus*. In ordinary community tanks they can still work well provided water quality is excellent and some additional aeration is added to keep the oxygen levels nice and high. Barilius are predatory though, so choose tankmates with care. The average species is about 15

cm in length, and will happily chow down on substantially smaller fish, like guppies and danios. On the other hand, water chemistry doesn't appear to be critical, and they will do well in the hard, alkaline water enjoyed by most aquarists in Southern England. They also ignore plants (unlike many of the larger barbs) and are neither aggressive amongst themselves or nippy towards tank-mates too large to be eaten whole.

L-numbers!

While Wildwoods isn't the only store to carry L-number plecs, few make quite the same effort to bring in such a diversity, or to settle them in using the soft and slightly acidic water these fish often prefer. As any experienced catfish keeper will tell you, L-numbers are often tough as old boots once settled in, but the first few weeks are critical if you want the fish to get back into condition after the stresses of collection and export. To that end, Wildwoods quarantines their new stock carefully and makes an effort to provide these wonderful catfish with the right water chemistry and plenty of food. It's perhaps indicative of this that the L-numbers live not scattered about the community tanks, but safely settled in with the discus, where they can both receive the extra special care these fishes demand.

L001, the gold spot plec *Glyptoperichthys joselimaianus*, is one of the most popular plecs at the moment, and a regular at Wildwoods. Combining moderate size (around 30 cm) with lovely colours (yellow spots against a dark brown body) this catfish has proved to be hardy and peaceful. Admittedly, it is territorial towards its own kind and other similar plecs, but it otherwise mixes well with smaller plecs such as bristlenose plecs and whiptails, something that cannot always be said for the more commonly traded plecs of similar size. Even better, it eats algae but ignores plants (though delicate plants may be uprooted as it forages). As well as algae, it enjoys all the usual foods such as slices of courgette and carrot, bloodworms, shelled mussels, and catfish pellets. All in all, an excellent species for the community tank.

L025, *Pseudacanthicus* sp., is another popular plec thanks to its stunning appearance: though its spiny body is an unremarkable brown in colour, its fins are marked with vivid orange or red. Known in the hobby as the scarlet plec, this fish naturally inhabits fast-flowing waters and demands good water quality, but beyond that is robust and easy to keep, eating a wide variety of foods and mixing well with barbs, characins, and midwater cichlids.

L174, *Hypancistrus* sp., is a close relative of the very popular (and very expensive) zebra plec *Hypancistrus zebra*. It's a silvery white fish covered in irregular brown blotches, and amazingly eye-catching. Though territorial, at a mere 10 cm in length it is small enough to be kept in groups, provided each fish is not overcrowded. Allotting each fish a 30x30 cm patch with a cave to call home should suffice. As with *Hypancistrus* generally, these fish are distinctly omnivorous and small invertebrates such as bloodworms should form the heart of its diet. They'll also take thin slices of vegetables such as courgette, as well as prepared catfish foods such as pellets and algae wafers. L174 is a typical Rio Xingu fish, and needs slightly warmer than average conditions to do well, making them best suited to cohabiting with other fish that like warm water, such as gouramis.

Cichlids galore

Wild-caught African cichlids are relatively uncommonly sold, but Wildwoods gets regular shipments of fish from Lake Malawi via the legendary exporter Stuart Grant. For the discerning aquarist, paying the premium for wild-caught fish is well worth it because it means you get the genuine fish, not something that might be a mix of different varieties or even different species. *Cynotilapia afra* is one of the most attractive species, being vivid blue in colour but with darker blue bands on the flanks and yellow or white across the dorsal surface. There are a variety of regional variations such as *Cynotilapia afra* 'white top', each differing from the others, and these can be found in Wildwoods periodically. Its modest sized (less than 10 cm) and fairly mild tem-

perament make it a good choice for the cichlid community tank.

Maylandia zebra, formerly known as Pseudotropheus zebra, is another variable species much sought after by aquarists for its bright colours and outgoing personality. Though far from peaceful, it otherwise adapts well to aquarium life and is relatively easy to breed, but on the downside frequent hybridisation of different varieties of Maylandia zebra as well as Maylandia zebra with other species has meant that the tank-bred stock is often of variable quality. Wildwoods gets in regular shipments of wild-caught fish, ensuring the aquarist gets the ideal fish for beginning a serious breeding programme. Among the varieties on offer at the moment are "Chilumba", "Mbowe Island", "Maison Reef", and "Nkata Bay". Other wild-caught Malawi cichlids include varieties of Copadichromis borleyi, Labeotropheus fuelleborni, and Pseudotropheus elongatus.

As handsome as these fish are, one cichlid stands out as even more eye-catching -- in fact it literally grabs your attention even seen from halfway across the shop! This is the pearl-spot chromide, *Etroplus canarensis*. It's difficult to describe these fish and do them justice, because on paper at least their colours don't sound that dramatic. They're medium-sized, very deep-bodied cichlids that are basically yellow in colour but with dark brown vertical bands that form criss-cross shapes on the flanks. What this description can't really convey is their pearly-pink sheen and the incredible contrast of the colours. These are very rare fish in the wild, and even rarer in the hobby, but are well worth visiting Wildwoods just to see.

South American cichlids also score well at Wildwoods, and this is a good place to find Apistogramma, various types of discus, and things like the gorgeous checkerboard cichlid *Dicrossus maculata*. A real treat for any aquarist is the sight of wild-caught angelfish, *Pterophyllum scalare*. While tank-bred forms of various types are easy to find in practically every aquarium shop, "the real thing" is much less often seen, but a true beauty.

Freshwater oddballs, large and small

Though Wildwoods has plenty of the old favourites like tetras, gouramis, and cichlids, for many people it's the oddball freshwater fish that makes this store so special. The chameleon perches, *Badis* and *Dario* spp., are good examples. Hardly seen in most aquarium shops, these small, hardy, perch-like fish are ideal residents for the species tank or communities containing other gentle species. As their common name suggests, these fish are remarkable for their ability to perform quick colour changes. The common badis, *Badis badis*, can change its colour from reddish brown to green to brilliant blue, and was for many years the only species ever traded, and even then, rarely. The red badis, *Badis blosyrus*, can look rather unprepossessing in a holding tank, being essentially pinkish brown with a scattering of darker spots. But once settled into a planted aquarium with plenty of hiding places, male fish especially becoming much more interesting, the body turning red and the black spots becoming violet or blue-green. *Dario dario*, the dwarf badis, is a smaller but even more vividly coloured species, with a scarlet body overlaid with sapphire blue vertical stripes.

Pufferfish and snakeheads both divide the hobby between those who love these intelligent fishes and those who consider them nothing more than psychopathic thugs! Either way, they aren't fish for beginners, but for the aquarist with some experience and an interest in the unusual, both have lots of potential. Among the snakeheads, perhaps the best aquarium species is the dwarf snakehead *Channa* sp. "Assam", a small species that barely gets to 15 cm in length and mixes well with fishes too large to swallow, such as medium-sized barbs, *Synodontis* catfish, plecs, and so on. They're also remarkably beautiful fish, with lots of red and blue on their body and fins. Turning to the freshwater pufferfish, Wildwoods regularly has a good range of these intriguing fish, including *Tetraodon mbu*, *Tetraodon miurus*, *Tetraodon palembangensis*, and *Tetraodon suvattii*. The humpback puffer *Tetraodon palembangensis* is typical in many ways: territorial, aggressive, and best kept alone. On the other hand, it doesn't need a huge amount of space, though good water quality is essential. Once settled in, it becomes tame and more like a pet than

a fish, swimming to the front of the tank and begging for food whenever it sees its keeper.

Among the other rarely seen oddballs that Wildwoods gets in stock are freshwater archerfish, *Toxotes microlepis*, the threadfin paradise fish *Polynemus multifilis*, and the humphead glassfish *Parambassis pulcinella*. *Toxotes microlepis* make a nice addition to any aquarium, being handsome fish in their own right, but for many people the great thing about them is their spitting ability. In a half-filled aquarium these fish will knock bits of food, such as prawn, carefully stuck to the glass. Unlike the other archerfish in the trade, these are quite small (12-15 cm) and don't need brackish water (though they'll do equally well in slightly brackish water if you want them to). Threadfin paradise fish are virtually unknown in the aquarium hobby despite being widely farmed for food. Flavour aside, these fish are among the most bizarre fishes any aquarist will encounter, having long, threadlike feelers emerging from the throat that they use to hunt for food in sand and mud. These are peaceful, constantly active fishes that have a bit of a cult following among serious aquarists, partly because they're so weird and partly because they're almost never traded. Wildwoods is one of the very few places to ever stock them. They are a bit delicate though, and need a big tank with perfect water quality and a keeper experienced with oddball fish. Finally, the humphead glassfish is a species only described a couple of years ago but now firmly on the wish-lists of many aquarists. Despite their size, around 10-12 cm, these fish are wonderfully transparent, and given good, clean water don't seem at all delicate. Basic care is similar to their smaller relatives like *Parambassis ranga*, though being a bit bigger they should be treated as potential predators on very small fishes and housed accordingly.

A brackish water bonus

Rounding off our look at Wildwoods is the brackish water section. Very few aquarium shops maintain a dedicated brackish water section, despite the popularity of brackish water fishes in the hobby. In fact, this is relatively new addition to the Wildwoods service, having only opened towards the end of 2006. Nonetheless, Wildwoods seem to be doing with brackish what they've routinely done with freshwater fishes, that is, brought in new and unusual species to appeal to hobbyists at every experience level. For the aquarist with only a little space to spare, the brackish water blenny *Omobranchus zebra* is a standout addition. Hardly ever seen in the hobby, this little fish is territorial and needs fairly brackish water to do well, but it is a charming, fun-to-watch fish worth the extra effort. Almost as rarely seen is the desert goby *Chlamydogobius eremius*, a colourful and hardy alternative to the better-known bumblebee goby.

For aquarists with a bit more space, *Rhinomugil corsula*, is hard to beat as a surface-dwelling oddball. Known as the "false anableps" in some circles, like its namesake, this small mullet swims about with its head poking out of the water. It is adaptable and easy to care for, and does best kept in small groups alongside peaceful fish of similar size. Said to reach up to 40 cm in the wild, aquarium specimens do not even get half as big. Target perch, *Terapon jarbua*, are another of those fish often shown in books but rarely ever seen in shops. These pushy, hardy brackish water fish need much the same thing as scats and monos with which they can be mixed, but be careful with the juveniles, which tend to be a bit aggressive and territorial. This is lost as they mature, and eventually they become rather nice schooling fish. Last but definitely not least is *Gymnothorax polyuranodon*, a big, beautiful brackish water moray eel. Extremely rarely imported, this is a substantial fish (up to 90 cm) and needs a good sized aquarium to do well, but like all morays is hardy but predatory, and is best kept alone or with very robust tankmates able to look after themselves.

Wildwoods is one of those very few aquarium shops worth a visit even if that means setting aside a day for a special trip; it really is that good. From giant catfish to tiny gobies, the range of stock on sale spans pretty much every niche of the freshwater hobby.

