

# PERSIAN GULF AQUARIUM FISHES



Text and Photos by John Hoover

Arab dhows at Khasab, Sultanate of Oman.



Orange Dottyback (*Pseudochromis aldabraensis*).

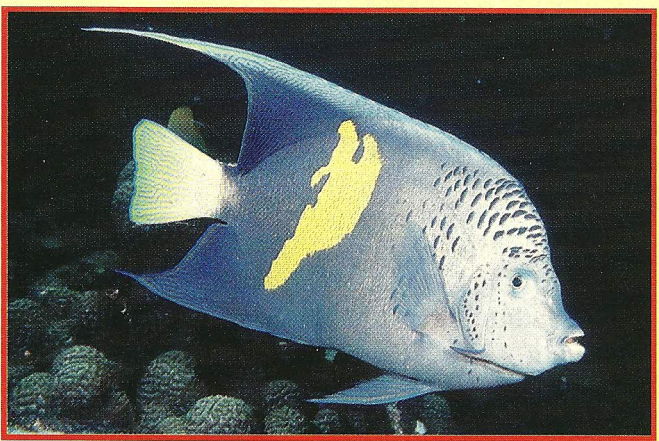
□ Mention the Persian Gulf these days and the last thing people think of is aquarium fishes. Nevertheless, this shallow body of water and its neighbor, the Gulf of Oman, are both home to a number of attractive reef fishes seldom available to enthusiasts

in other parts of the world. Unusual environmental conditions in the two gulfs have produced at least a dozen common reef species endemic to the area, including one of the world's most beautiful butterflyfishes. Fishes from this part of the world

have one overriding advantage for the aquarist --- they are hardy. Consider: water temperatures in the Persian Gulf can dip into the 50's in winter, and approach the 90's in summer. Unusually high salinity further stresses marine life. Sound

Yellow-Bar Angelfish (*Pomacanthus maculosus*).

Yellow-Bar Angelfish, juvenile.

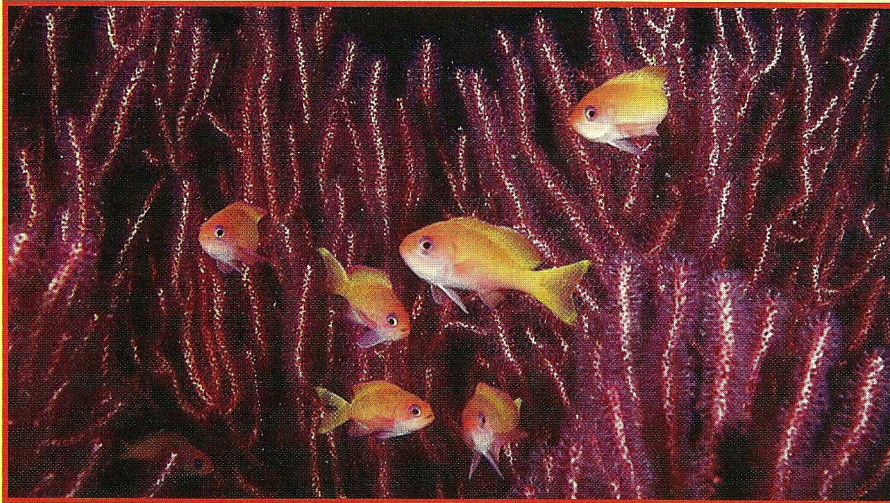


familiar? These temperature swings rival those of the worst home aquarium. According to the textbooks, extensive coral reefs and their inhabitants could not survive here, yet they thrive. In the Gulf of Oman, which is deeper and closer to the Indian Ocean, conditions are somewhat more favorable. Even here, however, drastic temperature changes occur in summer, due to upwellings of cold, nutrient-rich water driven by monsoon winds further south. Again, fishes living here must be hardy to survive.

Now, let's take a look above



**ABOVE:** Male Townsend's Basslet (*Pseudanthias townsendi*).  
**LEFT:** Female Townsend's Basslets (*Pseudanthias townsendi*).



water. Life is comfortable for the thousands of western expatriates (mostly British and European) who live and work in the gulf region. Salaries are high, there are no taxes, and the workday often ends at 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon. Because of the hot climate and limitations on other leisure activities, expats tend to spend a lot of time at the beach. Many of them are active snorkelers and divers, and a surprising number maintain home aquariums. In short, they have plenty of money and ample time to indulge their hobbies. Sound good? It has to, or few westerners would leave the comfort of their home countries for the uncertainties of life in the gulf.

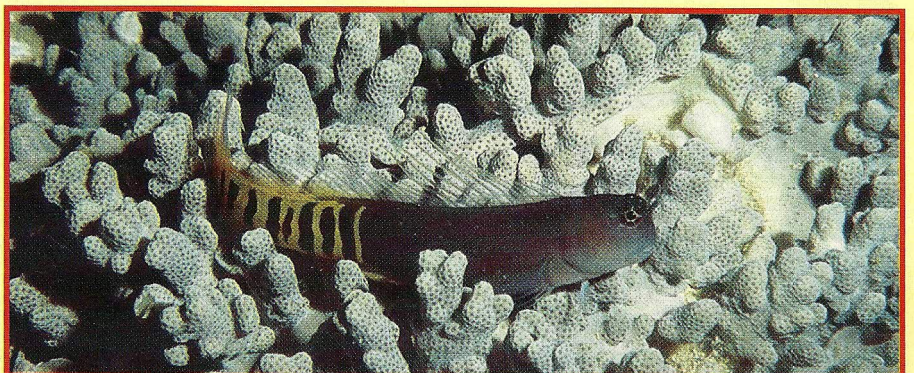
What sort of fishes do marine aquarists in the gulf countries keep? While there are pet and aquarium stores selling standard fare such as Percula Clowns and Blue Devils imported from Singapore, they seldom stock local marines. The real fun, of course, in keeping an

aquarium in this part of the world (or anywhere, for that matter) is in finding and catching your own specimens. As an added bonus, these waters have not been exhaustively surveyed by ichthyologists and there is a very real chance of coming up with something unusual or even new to science.

So, you've got your aquarium set up and you set out on your first collecting trip. Driving your 4x4

vehicle (all expats have 4x4's) to some rocky intersection of desert and sea, you plunge in. What will you see? What should you go after? One of your first exciting finds might well be a Yellow-Bar Angelfish, *Pomacanthus maculosus*. Small juveniles, dark blue with yellow tails, are covered with iridescent blue swirls; adults are gray-blue with a yellow crescent-shaped bar or blotch on the side. Ordinarily, adult *Pomacanthus* angels of any species are too large for the home aquarium; however, in the Persian Gulf (but not in the Gulf of Oman), Yellow-Bars often attain adult coloration at the small size of about 3 inches, making them ideal pets. In the aquarium or in the wild, these angels can become quite tame and will soon learn to eat

**Star-Eye Blenny (*Ecsenius pulcher*).**





Purple Surgeonfish (*Zebrasoma xanthurum*).



New *Pseudochromis* species, as yet unnamed.

from your fingers. They are found also in the Red Sea and along the coast of East Africa, but are nowhere as numerous as in the Persian and Oman Gulfs.

While you are collecting your angelfish you will surely notice the splendid orange-yellow butterflyfishes with jet black fins that thrive wherever coral grows. These are *Chaetodon melapterus*, the Arabian Butterflyfish. Tiny aquarium size juveniles often shelter among branches of coral --- their bristly dorsal spines make them look like little punk rockers. Wouldn't one of these look fantastic in your tank? It's a temptation, but forget it. These elegant creatures eat live coral and nothing else.

Closely related to the Red-Fin Butterfly, *C. trifasciatus*, of the Indo-Pacific, and the Exquisite Butterfly, *C. austriacus*, of the Red Sea, they are more striking than either. Arabian Butterflyfishes are

endemic to the coasts of Arabia (excluding the Red Sea), although rare specimens have been reported from other parts of the western Indian Ocean. They are quite plentiful in the two gulfs, usually in pairs but sometimes in schools of a dozen or more. The only other butterflies you are likely to see in the Persian Gulf are the familiar Pennant Butterflyfish, *Heniochus acuminatus* and the rather plain brown Blackspotted Butterflyfish, *C. nigropunctatus*. The latter makes a satisfactory, although unexciting, aquarium fish. Curiously, it most closely resembles another rather plain butterflyfish from remote Easter Island, *C. litus*.

No tank is complete without a comical blenny peering out of its hole. The Persian Gulf is home to an excellent candidate, the Star-Eye Blenny, *Ecensius pulcher*, which you will see almost anywhere in the rocky shallows, especially around

coral. It is sometimes called the Pretty Blenny (*pulcher* meaning "beautiful" in Latin). This fish, like so many others, is not in any of the ordinary fish books, and when I first began diving in the Gulf of Oman, I called it the Bumble-Bee Blenny because of its black and yellow stripes. This name, as I soon discovered, was not altogether appropriate. After keeping several, I noticed that they could, over several days, change into two other color patterns; one uniformly dark and the other brown and white. No matter what their color at the moment, they have a unique and easily seen star-shaped pattern around the pupil of the eye. Star-Eye Blennies are endemic to the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and the coast of Pakistan, as far as the Gulf of Kutch.

A striking fish that you'll notice immediately is the Orange Dottyback, *Pseudochromis aldabraensis*, a species widespread in

Arabian Flame Hawkfish (*Cirrhichthys calliura*).



Arabian Butterflyfish (*Chaetodon melapterus*).



the Western Indian Ocean, but especially common in the gulf region. Orange-yellow with iridescent blue stripes along the back, they are constantly on the go, weaving sinuously in and out of openings in the coral. (I found them hard to catch until I tried a slurp gun.) In the aquarium, they will investigate any hole or crack, and if you don't watch out will end up getting sucked through your siphons into the filter. My first specimen disappeared a few days after capture; I thought that a crab had eaten it and I replaced it with another. Six months later, while thoroughly overhauling the large, back of the tank filter, I found the original specimen alive, somewhat thinner but otherwise little worse for its experience. Returned to the tank, it promptly made friends with its replacement, and soon the two were spawning.

A total of four Dottyback species have been recorded from the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman (including two endemics). A fifth will soon be added to the list. In November 1989, I took underwater photos of a straw yellow *Pseudochromis* living in front of the Oceanic Hotel near the port city of Khor Fakkan on the northern Gulf of Oman. Jonathan Mee (then curator of the Oman Aquarium) captured a specimen and has recently identified it as *Pseudochromis candidalis*, a new record for the gulf region.

Surgeonfishes do well in home aquariums. There are two species that you will see almost anywhere along rocky shores: the Purple Tang, *ZebraSoma xanthurum* and the larger Sohol Surgeonfish, *Acanthurus sohol*. Both are found only in waters around the Arabian Peninsula, from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. The Sohol Tang is active and aggressive, suitable only for set-up of 100 gallons or more, so you might want to give this species a pass. The gentle and beautiful Purple Tang, on the other hand, is an ideal pet for the smaller tank. Juveniles, with high dorsal and anal fins characteristic of the genus, are especially cute, resembling small batfishes with purple blue bodies and bright yellow tails. Our friend Jonathan once gave



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my wife and me a tiny Purple Tang no larger than my thumbnail. He frankly thought it was too small to survive, but we put an algae stone in the tank and hoped for the best. It was soon cleaned bare. Thereafter, we replaced the algae stone every few days and the little tang grew amazingly. In a few weeks it was able to accept flake food and minced shrimp. Juvenile Purple Tangs shelter in heads of branching coral where they are not overly difficult to catch. Summertime is the best time to find them. Once they grow big enough to leave the coral, they become wary and hard to approach.

We'll end by mentioning two other interesting fishes that do very well in the aquarium. You'll have to scuba dive to see or catch them, however, as they prefer depths of at least 60 feet.

Townsend's Basslet, *Pseudanthias townsendi*, is a very attractive anthias (or fairy basslet) similar to the Red Sea endemic, *P. taeniatus*. Males are striped red and white with yellow and blue overtones; females are a uniform golden orange. They live in small schools near dropoffs where they feed on plankton. Like other anthias, males maintain a "harem" of females. If something happens to the dominant male, one of the females will change sex and take over. The main problem with collecting these deeper dwelling fishes is that they must be brought up very slowly and allowed to decompress for at least several hours to let their air bladders adjust to the decreasing pressure.

Common in the Gulf of Oman at the same depth as Townsend's Basslet is a bold little hawkfish that often allows divers to approach quite closely. When Jonathan Mee of the Oman Aquarium saw this fish for the first time, he recognized it as unusual. He caught one, and while on home leave, took it to the California Academy of Sciences. It turned out to be *Cirrhitichthys calliura*, a rarity known to scientists from only a few museum specimens; its color in life had, until then, been unknown. Jonathan calls it the Arabian Flame Hawkfish. Quite common off the coast of Oman, it makes an engaging aquarium pet with lots of personality. Like other hawkfishes, however, it is voracious and should not be kept with anything smaller than itself. Incidentally, hawkfishes lack swim bladders and do not need to be decompressed when brought up from deep water.

If you ever get a chance to live and work in a gulf country do not automatically dismiss the idea. It can be a lot of fun, especially for a fish fancier. By the way, the much publicized 1991 Kuwait oil spill did less damage to gulf reefs and their inhabitants than predicted, although the toll on bird life and shorelines was truly awful. As I mentioned earlier, these Persian Gulf fishes are tough. If they can survive in their native environment, they should have no trouble in your tank. Unfortunately, you'll probably have to go to the gulf yourself to get them.

