

PEACEFUL SQUATTERS

What's to be done when the big fish claim the most popular spawning grounds for themselves? Some cichlids in Lake Tanganyika in Africa simply became smaller and smaller until they finally moved into vacant snail shells. They can also be housed in them in a domestic aquarium, say the animal experts from the specialist retail chain Maxi Zoo.



Of course, the shell-dwelling cichlids would have preferred to have their living rooms among the broken rocks and scree where they would have a multitude of hiding places. However, evolution had other plans for them... their lives were to be played out on open sands and ooze where there would be fewer baby snatchers and less competition for the food. But the prospects for hideouts and spawning were the problem. The only option worth considering was the snail houses deserted by their original occupants and which were to some extent already inhabited by shrimps and crabs. However, there was still some vacant accommodation available – even if somewhat seriously cramped for a big family. For the shell-dwelling cichlids, there was only one thing for it... not to grow any bigger! As only the smallest specimens had a good chance of survival, the process of evolution automatically saw to it that

they persistently became smaller from generation to generation – until they fitted the little ready-made snail houses perfectly.

Some species have developed such a close relationship to their snail shells that they are dependent on them throughout their whole lives whereas others use them purely for reproduction. Only empty shells are used, as the fish are not capable of driving a snail from its home when lodgings are scarce. The size of the living quarters can be compared to that of the Burgundy snail shells which are used in aquariums as spawning caves. Keeping has to be matched to the conditions in the wild: their original habitat is Lake Tanganyika in Africa, the water quality of which is very stable because of its enormous size. Due to infiltration from the shore area, the lake features a very high level of carbonate hardness at 15°. The overall hardness is 11° which results in a pH value of between 8.5 and 9. Stable water quality is therefore the foundation of good keeping conditions.

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TIPS ON UPKEEP: THE IMPORTANCE OF SNAIL SHELLS

Tank size is seldom a problem owing to their low growth rate. A floor area of 40 x 40 cm is quite ample for a few pairing species. Exceptions are mainly the harem forming shell-dwelling cichlids which need significantly more space. Otherwise the females could fight amongst themselves and become injured as a result. To avoid this, the number of snail shells must be considerably more than the number of fish. Burgundy snail shells from the delicatessen or from the wild are suitable. And if you're lucky, these little houses won't only be lived in but also used for breeding, in which case, you'll be spending a few suspenseful hours in front of the aquarium.



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