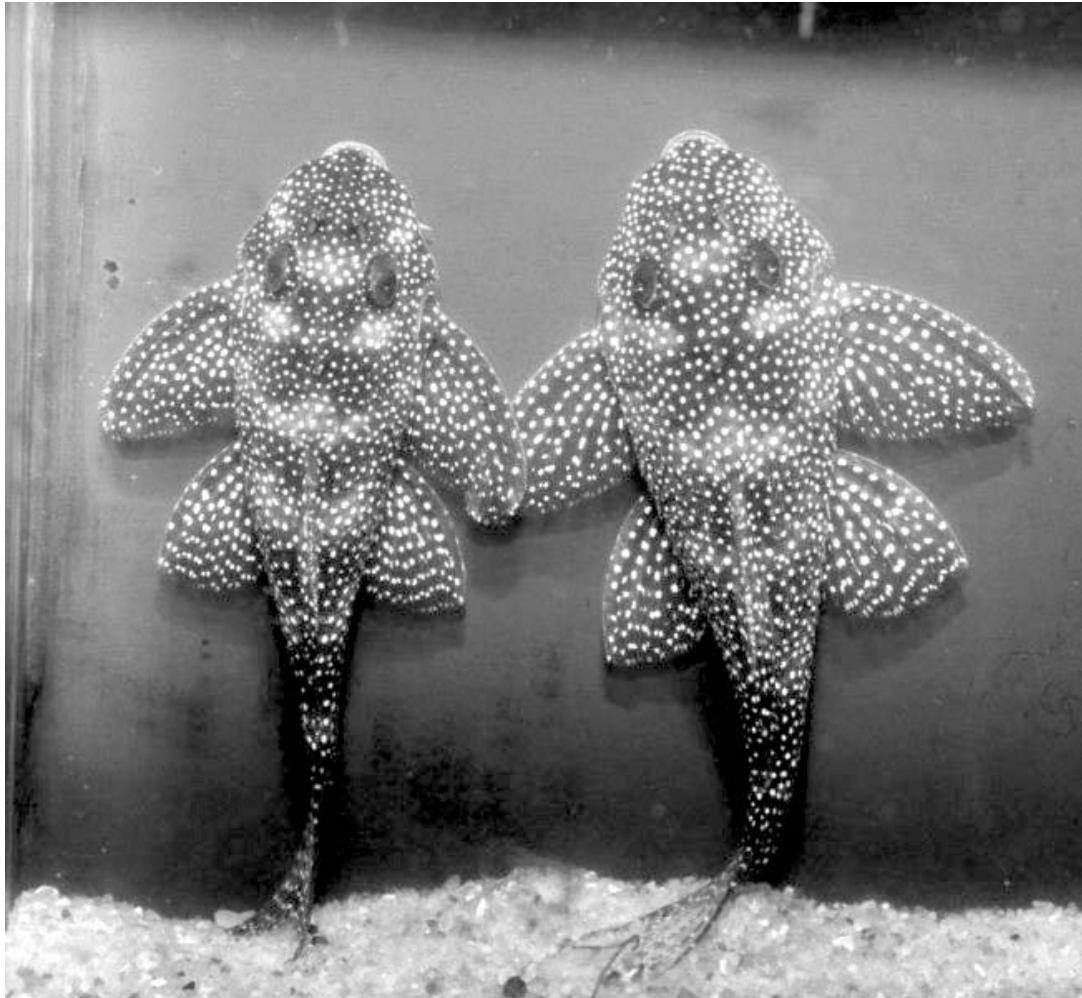


Breeding the 'Stardust Plec'. *Hypancistrus* Sp. L 136a. By Ian Fuller

Some time ago, in fact I think it was in the early part of last year, I decided to diversify a little with my fish breeding programme. At that time my catfish efforts were concentrated purely on Corydoras. There was a lot of talk around the hobby about the brilliant *Hypancistrus zebra*, or 'Zebra plec' as it was commonly called. I decided then that they were a must to try and breed, especially as the price of them seemed to be ever on the increase, making them a good investment. I set out to buy some potential breeding stock, my first port of call was to friend Neil Woodward's establishment in Wigan, where I knew I would find what I was after.

At first I thought my visit was going to be a disappointment, there were only four quite small zebra's left, which I duly bought. On further inspection around the many tanks, I came across two other species of *Hypancistrus*, both of these were as yet undescribed species, with only the now familiar 'L' number code, or common name to identify them. The first species was marked up as L260 with a common name of 'Queen Arabesque' and were strikingly unusual in their body markings, which were silvery white thin wavy lines over a black body. I decided immediately that I must have some of these and went to great lengths, with Neil's help to ensure we selected two pairs. I was sure at this point that I could hear the little plastic card in my wallet growl.

Sexing these fish was not an easy task, especially as they were fairly recently imported and were a little out of condition. The main points of difference to look for are, the shape of the head when looked at from above, females are more pointed. The pectoral fin spine tends to be thicker in males and when mature are covered with odontodes (bristles). Mature females in good condition are generally plumper and a little broader in the body.



L136a – pair.

While Neil was doing his best to select the pairs of Queen Arabesque's, I caught a glimpse of another *Hypancistrus* species in the next tank, they were jockeying for hiding places under a piece of bog wood. I decided to give them a closer look, removing the bog wood exposed just four specimens. They were jet black with tiny silver spots, at first sight you would have thought they were covered in white spot. I promptly decided to have these as well, not knowing whether or not both sexes were present. Now I defiantly knew that there would be some pain when I reached the till, the trick here is to close your eyes when you sign the little slip of paper and not look at it until you reach home.

Prior to my trip up to Wigan, I thought a little research into what conditions would be best suited for keeping zebra's, so I contacted Ingo Seidel in Germany, who I knew had bred them and many more Ancistrine catfishes. His advice was instantly forthcoming, what they require he said was warm water, 80° Fahrenheit and higher for breeding, the water chemistry is not important, but it must be clean, with a good fairly strong current and provide them with plenty of small caves.

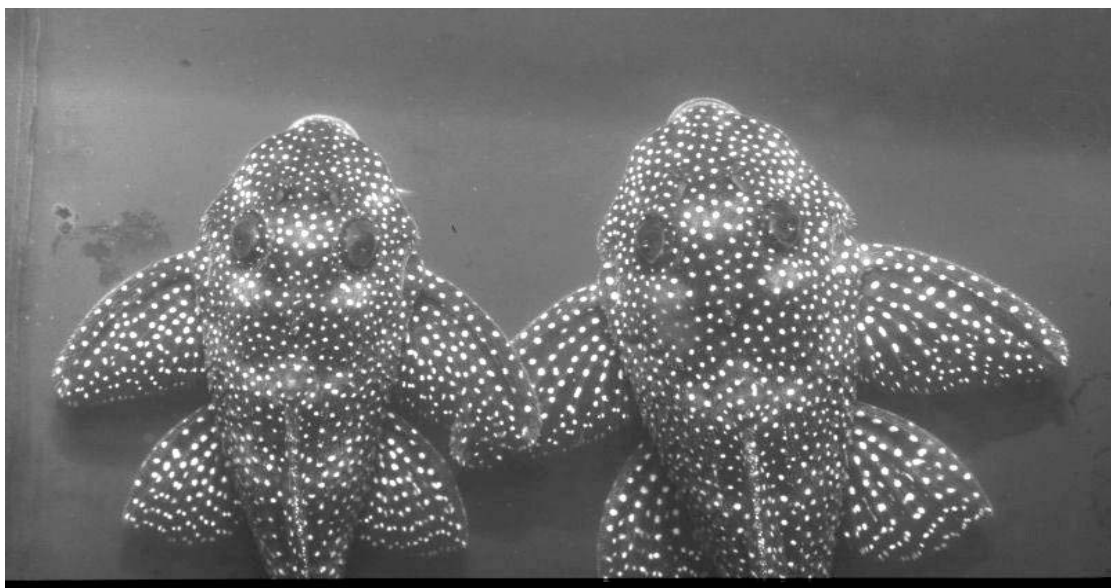
I had set up one tank in readiness for the arrival of the zebra's, which was on the top of the staging in the warmest part of the fish house. Because the normal temperature setting at that level in the fish house is only 74° F. I needed to put an additional heater into the tank, which was adjusted to maintain a temperature of 82° F. A 10 mm layer

of smooth grained sand was put on the bottom and the back wall lined with shortish pieces of cut down ceramic water pipe. A small internal power filter was put in the front left hand corner, to provide the necessary water flow and a box filter in the back left hand corner, to help maintain good clean water conditions.



L136a

Once I had arrived home with my new charges, I suddenly realised that I needed Another two tanks set up the same. So for the first few days of their stay, all three species would have to be kept together, my hope being that they would get on together. Fortunately there were more than enough hiding places, amongst the pieces of cut down pipe for them all to find a place to hide.



L136a – pair.

In the shop all three species had been kept in tanks, which were on the same centralised filtering system, so when I got them home I decided to settle them into the new water conditions together. I opened the bags and gently tipped them into a large bucket; using a piece of airline I started siphoning water from the tank they were to be housed in. Once the bucket was almost full, the siphon was stopped and an air stone put in to keep the water aerated and moving, while I topped the tank back up and allowed the temperature to return to its previous 82° F. After about an hour the fish were carefully netted and put into their new home, albeit temporary for two of the species.

My next move was to make ready two more tanks, with the same conditions as the first. Having moved the inhabitants from the two adjacent tanks, everything was made identical to the first, with the addition of pieces of bogwood, with Java fern attached for all three. After allowing the tanks to settle for three days, it was time to separate the three species. This resulted in all the contents of the tank save for the sand, being removed. This is the problem with this type of set up; to get one fish out everything has to come out. With the fish all moved and settled it just remained to condition them up, except for the zebra's, they needed to be grown on for a while, I estimated it would be at least six months or more before they would be breeding size. The final commodity I was told that I would need was plenty of patients as these fish are somewhat stubborn when it comes to enticing them to breed.

The regime that I put into place to get them into tip-top condition, was regular twice 25% weekly water changes, twice weekly feeds of frozen bloodworm, with helpings of live when I can get it. Additional feeds of chopped earthworm, which they lose all inhibitions for and seem afraid of nothing whenever any is put into the tanks. All other feeding times, which is usually twice a day, they are fed on Tetra Tabimin, pre-soaked flake, or the JMC catfish pellets. A tip here is to not get mixed up between the catfish pellets and the high protean pellets. The can high protean pellets cause serious problems; the fish tend to swallow them whole, then they swell up in the gut causing all sorts of problems with the fish's digestive system and very often resulting in the demise of the fish. The catfish pellets on the other hand, tend to dissolve with very little swelling and are far less likely to cause any problems.

Over the last couple of months, I have fitted outside power filters to the three tanks; this has had a dramatic effect on the water flow, which is directed at an angle across the cave walls. In the tank containing the L136a's or 'Stardust' plec's as I have named them, I put a 220 mm long by 32mm diameter, terracotta tube that is closed at one end. These tubes are produced as watering devices for large pot plants, where they are inserted into the compost in the pot and filled with water, which leaches through the terracotta into the compost, there by watering the plant over a long period of time. These tubes make ideal spawning sites, especially for the Whiptail catfish. I thought it would be worth trying, within ten minutes of putting the tube in the tank, one of the L136a's went in and made it his/her home, after a time I decided it was a him, going by the bristles on the pectoral fins.

About three weeks ago (early May) we had a sudden spell of summer, with lots of sunshine and some reasonably high temperatures, all resulting in the fish house air temperature rising to well over 90° F. In most of the tanks on the top level staging, the temperature rose to 88° F. which seemed to make all three species of *Hypancistrus*

become far more active than usual, I decided that it would be a good idea to make more frequent water changes, from twice weekly to daily, because with the higher temperature the fish were eating more, producing more waste and I wanted to maintain the water quality. There was one fish however that seemed totally unmoved by all the activity and that was the 'Stardust' male. He remained in the tube and would not venture out, even for some chopped earthworm. I thought no more of it, thinking that he was just not hungry at that time and would come out and feed when there weren't any distractions (Me). Because of the angle of the tube it was virtually impossible to see into inside so I left him alone to do his own thing. It wasn't until nearly two weeks later, that I noticed six little fry scurrying around under the bogwood. So now I knew why the male would not venture out side of his tube, he was guarding a batch of eggs.



L135a - fry

My next move will be to slightly rearrange the piece of bogwood and tube, so that I can get a better look at what's happening inside. Now I know that there is at least one pair breeding, I will keep a close watch on them and make notes of what they are doing.

Ian Fuller