

THE DRAGON LOACHES

Schistura & Aborichthys

by Sam Fernald

Long ago: while living in Los Angeles, I kept a 20-long aquarium full of *Schistura pridii* the “Mini Dragon Loach” of Thailand (and parts of Laos) in my sunroom. Another holy grail for many, this species is perhaps the smallest Schisturidae: only growing to maximum size of 2.0-2.5. In Thailand, this species is highly endangered and protected due to its restricted range; so, you could imagine my shock when I found them for sale on 3rd and La Brea in my LA local fish store for \$14.99 each (IIRC).



A companion to “Naga of the Serpent Isles” (Sept. 2025)

I remember them being so brave when I pressed my face to their holding aquarium. Rather than bolt around like kuhlis, or a sink into the substrate like horseface loaches—instead, the mini water dragons blinked at me, scooted a little closer to the glass, somewhat perplexed by the sight of me... Then went straight back to swatting each other with their tails, in typical Dragon Loach fashion. Adorable. They weren't a want, rather a need. I took them all. They were my most precious treasures for several years.



Their aquarium would be my first attempt at a proper Dragon Loach aquarium: I selected inert and polished pea-gravel, pool filter sand and overpriced “river stones” from the same LFS. It was around this time I also began experimenting with partially-submerged Aroids: my houseplants, in my aquariums. Cheekily, I gave them a *Caladium bicolor* var. “Thai Beauty” I found at a local LA nursery for “dirt cheap” (\$14.99 back in the 2010’s. Present day, I had to pay \$90.00USD to get one shipped to Maine for a photo for this article) which served as a technicolor nitrogen fixer and made my living room feel like Pandora from Avatar. I would spend hours laying my sofa, watching them fuss around Thai Beauty’s roots in the Hollywood sunshine. They were my little Na’vi (the aliens from Avatar), and only mine...



Some months later, the same shop would get in *Aborichthys elongatus* from India—a bucket list species for me. The “Red-Tailed Indian Squirrel Loaches” and their little brother Mini Dragon Loaches became fast friends. At night, I’d check on them to find them sleeping communally in excavated burrows. Somewhat like gobies and gudgeons: Dragon Loaches will actively excavate their aquarium substrate using big, wide mouths. Once the *A. elongatus* were introduced, the *Schistura pridii* became even bolder, playfully sparring with the *Aborichthys elongatus* who were twice their size. Three *Serpenticobitis cingulata* “Banded Serpent Loaches” were the next additions and were quickly made comfortable by their little cousins.

ABOVE: Just as beautiful as I remember. It will take a while to reach the grandeur of my long-lost Hollywood specimen. *Caladium* spp. are quite thirsty plants, which allows to work as nitrogen fixers in our aquariums. Be careful when handling these plants, as their secretions from broken bits will irritate the skin. This compound breaks down quite easily in water and doesn’t affect our aquarium in the slightest.



Finally, five *Mesonoemacheilus triangularis* “Zodiac Dragon Loaches,” and a pair of pricey *Barbusca diabolica* “Fire-Eye Scooter Loaches,” came to join the multi-Genera school in the months leading up to the announcement of COVID-19. Without issue, everyone was accepted into the ever-growing “Skittles” school of well-fed, hotdog-shaped water dragons... The pandemic put an end to that aquarium; I like to imagine the aquarium itself broke the matrix we live in. I sold the lot (along with the rest of my wards) back to the same shop to partially fund my move back to Maine.



Fire Eye Scooter Loach (Barbusca diabolica)

Dragon Loaches may not be in the cards for me anytime soon, as breeding peaceful nano fish in community setups are my current undertaking (in addition to importing them). My precious Atheriniformes and Beloniformes seem tasty to them during the night, and my derpy Gastromyzontidae struggle to compete with the dragons for food: Schisturidae are simply too good at their job—being water dragons. A positive aspect about them: they can’t breathe fire, but they can certainly blow bubbles!

Nemacheilidae Family

(the Stone Loaches)

Subfamily Schisturidae

Dragon Loaches
(e.g. *Sumo Loach*)

Subfamily Yunnanilini

Fairy Loaches
(e.g. *Hovering Loach*)

Subfamily Triplophysini

Plateau Loaches
(e.g. *Tibetan Royal Loach*)

Taxonomy

Schistura and their sibling lineages are members of Schisturidae (a subfamily of Nemacheilidae), or “Dragon Loaches,” as they’re called that in the Asian hobbies. Here in America and Europe, we continue to call them “stone loaches” which is a misnomer, and the name for the broader Nemacheilidae family. Sometimes, they are misidentified as Cobitidae. “Little Naga” is also an acceptable common name, as they’re also referred to as such by their local humans. Not to be confused with unrelated “Big Naga” Mastacembelidae... Luckily our English language allows us to make easy distinctions, and our Latin naming system is also of immense benefit.

Loaches from *Schistura* and *Aborichthys* are often referred to as Dragon Loaches or Stone Loaches in the hobby. Packed with personality and non-stop sparring, the “mini-naga” function as India’s little micropredators (somewhat like a *Rhinogobius spp.*), feasting on tiny shrimp and invertebrates in the creeks. The little water dragons are also quite breedable, given a species-only aquarium, lots of live food, and time: loaches take a while to mature; usually over two years, minimum.



Dragon Loach Husbandry

All known Nemacheilidae are manageably-sized for our home aquariums and do well as pets. Packed with high-octane personality and non-stop sparring, the “mini-naga” fill the same niche as freshwater gobies: feasting on tiny shrimp, larvae, and other freshwater invertebrates in the creeks. The little water dragons are also quite breedable—given a species-only aquarium, lots of live food, and time: all loaches take a long while to reach sexual maturity; usually over two years, minimum. All loaches are quite long-lived as well, to which Dragon Loaches are no exception, surviving a minimum of 7-15 years with excellent husbandry, like an amphibian or reptile. Another quirk about loaches is they seem to grow their entire lives, turning into rotund water piglets after settling into their owner’s long-term care.



Like lobsters, Dragon Loaches seem to grow indefinitely - but fortunately aren't crushed to death in their own exoskeleton, being vertebrates.



*Two male *Aborichthys elongatus* having a good spar. Dragon loaches have strict hierarchies in their schools, and each their own individual personality. Some individuals are quite peaceful, able to live long-term in a community aquarium without causing their roommates much damage. Others will decide to go on an eye-gouging spree their first night with nano fish, so it's best to keep Schisturidae only with other Schisturidae.*

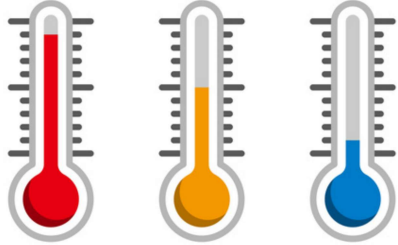
Dragon Loaches are not community fish: they are the pinnacle evolution of specialist micropredators within the riffles. Endowed with many super-powers such as radar-like barbels; eagle-like sight and speed; a ferocious bite and giant mouth for moving pebbles; and like all loaches... intelligence. These mini-naga will outcompete any other bottom-dwellers they're kept with for food. They'll also inhale shiny eyeballs of precious nano-fish in the night. Dwarf shrimp? Break out the cocktail sauce! It's best to keep Nemacheilidae with other Nemacheilidae and nothing else. Different genera within Nemacheilidae get along just swell and can even be tandem-bred together. They can be used to eradicate pests from aquariums and aquatic plant tubs quite quickly (like snails and planaria).





Dragon Loach Breeding

To breed Dragon Loaches, feed them well with a varied diet which has some live foods and allow females time to mature. At around two or three years of age, most female loaches will begin to produce some eggs—ramping up in production as she continues to grow. Diurnal Nemacheilidae tend to all breed the same: releasing eggs and milt over pebbly substrate and underneath rocks, after a succession of coolish water changes. Fry develop in the substrate, feeding on detritus and micro invertebrates. From the substrate and rock crevices: they eventually emerge, usually once miniature versions of their parents. Nemacheilidae (and Cobitidae) ignore their eggs and young, like most loaches do.



2 keys for breeding Dragon Loaches: pebbly substrate and a series of cool water changes

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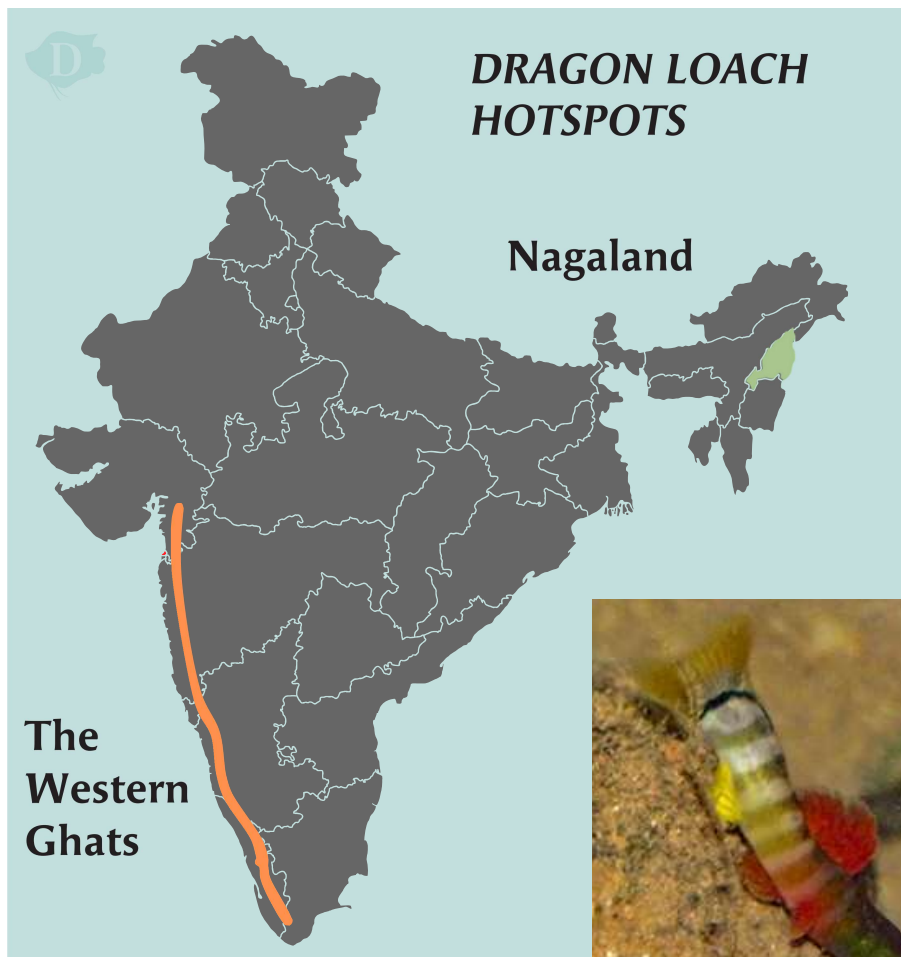


Dragon Loaches of India

India is home to the largest diversity of *Schistura* (and *Aborichthys*) species in the world, with most sporting outrageous garb. Highly revered by the locals, some of the loaches are now protected due to their extremely limited distributions. For instance, *Schistura hiranyakeshi* is found only in a single temple's courtyard pool (and several meters downstream from its drain).

The monks guard the little “golden red” dragon loaches with their lives, only allowing bathing in the pool during holidays. Two beautiful documentaries covering the *S. hiranyakeshi*, the temple and monks may be viewed here:

With two main diversity hotspots: the Western Ghats and the Arunachal Pradesh/Nagaland, India has countless, tiny water dragons to offer. Here are some of our favorite vicious fishes!



BELOW: Schistura hiranyakeshi viewed from above in the courtyard of the Amboli Temple. The loaches are plentiful in the pool and not shy at all, actively sparring centimeters away from prying eyes. Like most diurnal loach lineages: the Dragon Loach Subfamily are highly social and require the company of others for their long-term wellbeing in the home aquarium.





Schistura balteata is smartly named the “Sumo Loach,” owing to the three black belts around their waists.



Schistura beavani from central India is almost identical in pattern to *Micronemacheilus (Yunnanilus) cruciatus*.



Two sexually mature male *Schistura hiranyakeshi* inside the Amboli Temple Pool. Sparring for dominance, the water dragons amplify hues of crimson, neon yellow, electric blue and green. Sparkly blue eyes are a hallmark of the “Pygmy Schistura Lineage,” endemic to the Western Ghats. Fish in this sub-sub-grouping grow no more than 3.5cm.



Aborichthys sp. “AR01” often arrive as contaminants with *A. elongatus* and *A. sp. “AR02”* from India. The Wet Spot and Aqua Imports often have these three species for sale.



Aborichthys sp. “AR02” from India. Usually arrives stateside mixed with *A. elongatus* and *A. sp. “AR01.”*



RIGHT: *Schistura kodaguensis* a cousin to *S. hiranyakeshi* and sports the same blue eyes of the Western Ghats populations of dragon loaches. A pygmy species.



BELOW: *Schistura mahnerti* is endemic to midland India.



BELOW: *Schistura spilota*: a pinky-length dragon loach from the horsetail-laden grassland creeks of central India.



Conclusion

Americans are somewhat behind in developing specialist hobbyists on the loach front, and that mainly has to do with the livestock we've been able to import over the last century: African and South American imports have been the backbone of our US aquarium hobby and industry, with Asian fish consistently arriving, at last—after 100 years—in the late 2010's. Only to be halted again by the pandemic and then reopening again in 2022. Asian imports, namely from: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Borneo, Brunei, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam will yield these new “products” for our hobby and industry.

With the re-opening of Asia, the sky is the limit for our American aquarists and importers: we sit at a crossroads of all peoples and all lands here in our homeland. We can import from North, South, East and West. It all takes the same time to reach us, depending on which coast you're found (or not). At the end of this article is an Appendix with modern common names for most of the Schisturidae. Hopefully unlocking this information for the greater hobby and industry will allow the fish make their way into our collections, and hopefully: establishment in North America. Importers should always be actively diversifying the countries they contact: a fisherman may be sitting on an aquatic gold mine... perhaps guarded by water dragons.



**APPENDIX:
COMMON NAMES OF
SCHISTURIDAE LOACHES**

Aborichthys “Squirrel Loaches”
Acanthocobitis “Horned Dragon Loaches”
Afronemacheilus “African Dragon Loaches”
Homatula “Chinese Longtail Dragon Loaches”
Kapuasia “Borneo Dragon Loaches”
Malihkaia “Razor-Fin Dragon Loaches”
Mesonoemacheilus “Zodiac Dragon Loaches”
Mustura “Burmese Dragon Loaches”
Nemachilichthys “Snout-Faced Dragon Loaches”
Neonoemacheilus “Banded Dragon Loaches”
Paracanthocobitis “Zipper Loaches”
Paracobitis “Newt-Tailed Loaches”
Paraschistura “Anatolian Serpent Loaches”
Protonemacheilus “Bulldog Loaches”
Pteronemacheilus “Dwarf Dragon Loaches”
Rhyacoschistura “Siamese Dragon Loaches”
Schistura “Indo-Chinese Dragon Loaches”
Sectoria “Dragon Fire Loaches”
Tuberoschistura “Ferret Loaches”

Samuel Joseph Fernald is a lifelong aquarium hobbyist from the Acadian Maine with an interest in Atheriniformes, Beloniformes, Gastromyzontidae, and Procatpopodini. He operates Hillstream Kingdom LLC import/export with partners in China. Sam also keeps Mastacembelidae eels as his “pets.”



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