African Rift Lake Cichlids

Care Sheet

Poor Man’s Saltwater Fish
There are hundreds of cichlid species that are native to Africa, however, the term “African Cichlids” is typically used to describe cichlid fish found in Lakes Tanganyika, Malawi and Victoria, in East Africa’s Great Rift Valley. Most Rift Lake cichlid species are endemic to one specific lake, however they have been introduced to many parts of the world, including the southern United States. Their colors rival those of marine fish but being easier to keep and usually less expensive, they are sometimes described as “poor man’s saltwater fish”.

Natural Habitat
Rift Lake cichlids occupy virtually every niche known to freshwater fish. They can be found in open water, boulder fields, sand flats and weed beds. A number of species from Lake Tanganyika even occupy and breed in empty snail shells and are referred to as shell-dwellers. It is important to know the natural habitat of each species you intend to buy when designing a Rift Lake cichlid aquarium layout.

Water Requirements
The water in the African Rift Lakes has a pH between 8.0 and 9.0, and alkalinity from 10° to 25° dKH (180 ppm to 450 ppm). Temperatures range from 74° to 80° F. If the aquarium is kept in a room below 74° F, use an Aqueon® aquarium heater to increase the temperature. The vast majority of Rift Lake cichlids sold today are commercially raised and tolerate a wide range of water parameters. Use Kent Marine® Cichlid Buffer and Cichlid Chemistry to maintain proper water chemistry parameters. Some hobbyists use crushed coral gravel to help maintain proper pH and alkalinity as well. Maintain good filtration and do a 10% water exchange every two weeks or 25% once a month using an Aqueon® Aquarium Water Changer or Siphon Vacuum Gravel Cleaner. Don’t forget to treat tap water with Aqueon® Water Conditioner before refilling your aquarium!

Housing
Because most Rift Lake cichlids tend to grow larger and males become territorial, an aquarium of at least 55 gallons is recommended. Aquariums with wider footprints are better than tall, narrow tanks because they offer more bottom area for fish to occupy. Dwarf species from Lake Tanganyika can be kept as communities in 30 to 50 gallon aquarium, or in species tanks of 15 to 20 gallons. The aquarium should be well decorated with rocks and other objects to create caves, grottos and overhangs. Use caution when decorating with driftwood, as some types may cause a drop in pH and alkalinity. Many Rift Lake cichlids love to dig and will move gravel and sand around the aquarium.

Behavior/Compatibility
Rift Lake cichlids are territorial and males in particular can be aggressive towards each other. Crowding them a little often reduces aggression. Mixing cichlids from other parts of the world with Rift Lake cichlids is not recommended, as they may require different water chemistry and they “speak different languages”, meaning they will try to communicate in ways the RLC’s do not understand, often resulting in harm to one or both fish. When building a Rift Lake cichlid community, start with juvenile fish and introduce less aggressive species first. When introducing new purchases, add a few more rocks and rearrange existing décor to create “new” territories. Avoid adding more than one male of the same species, especially if females are present. If you want to try adding non-cichlid fish to your RLC aquarium, select hardy, fast moving species like giant danios, tinfoil barbs, redtail, rainbow, and black sharks, or Synodontis catfish. New purchases should be at least the same size as the largest or most aggressive fish in the aquarium. Always consult an aquarium expert before buying any new fish for your aquarium.

Feeding
While many Rift Lake cichlids are omnivores and should be fed a variety of foods, Lake Malawi mbuna cichlids are largely herbivorous, feeding on algae mats and small shrimp that live amongst the algae. They do best on Aqueon® Spirulina Flakes, Algae Rounds, Cichlid Pellets and Shrimp Pellets. Haplochromis, Copidochromis, Nimbochromis and related species, as well as dwarf Tanganyikan cichlids are carnivores and will thrive on Aqueon® Cichlid Pellets, Shrimp Pellets, Tropical Flakes and Tropical Granules. Some vegetable matter should also be included in their diet. Avoid fatty foods like beef heart and bloodworms, as these may cause digestive concerns for your Rift Lake cichlids. For best results, rotate your fishes’ diet daily and feed only what they can consume in 2 to 3 minutes, once or twice a day.

Breeding Level - Easy
Rift Lake cichlids can be prolific breeders and incidental spawning in home aquariums is not uncommon. All cichlids practice some sort of parental care, and many species of RLC’s are mouthbrooders, where the female incubates the eggs in a special pouch in her throat until they hatch and are able to fend for themselves. A separate breeding tank should be set up if you want to intentionally spawn a particular species of Rift Lake cichlid.