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Betta Fish (*Betta splendens*) Pet Care (*Siamese fighting fish*)

ORIGIN/FREE-RANGING HABITAT

- Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam
- Wild populations have been introduced to Dominican Republic, Brazil, Columbia, Malaysia and Singapore
- Typically found in standing or slow-moving water of flood plains, canals, rice paddies, drainage ditches and rivers.
- Most bettas found in the pet trade are imported from several Asian countries where they are farmed.

SUITABILITY AS PETS

- Life span is 2-3 (avg), up to 5 years
- Bettas make excellent pets and can be housed in small aquaria, making them suitable for small spaces such as offices, dorm rooms and apartments.
- Most bettas are 7-10 months old when purchased at a pet store.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- The species is sexually dimorphic, with males exhibiting long, flowing colorful fins and tails.
- Most bettas sold in the pet trade are males.
- Healthy bettas are available in many colors.
- Several tail types have developed through selective breeding, including halfmoon, delta, super delta, veiltail and crowntail.

BEHAVIOR

- Male bettas will display or “flare” when another male betta (and occasionally a female) is present.
- The opercula (gill plates, which cover and protect the gills) are flared wide open, exposing a membrane inside the opercula, the colors intensify and the fins are extended, making the fish appear larger and more threatening.
- The fish will occasionally exhibit this behavior when the owner appears. This reaction can also be induced with the use of a mirror. When the male sees the “other” male, he will typically display.
- Repeated induction of flaring or displaying may cause stress in the fish.
- Bettas are usually found at the top of the water column.
- Males will produce bubble nests by mixing air with a mucoid fluid in their buccal cavity.
- The nest is protected by the male after spawning.
- The presence of a nest is usually associated with a healthy betta.

CAPTIVE HOUSING

- Aquaria: 1-2 gallons of water is sufficient, although bettas can be housed with other community species.
- Males must be housed individually, as they will fight.
- Water quality issues may arise when they are kept in small bowls.
- The ideal pH is 7.0 with a range of 6.8-7.5.

ENVIRONMENTAL TEMPERATURE/HUMIDITY

- Preferred temperature is 75-86°F (24-30°C).
- Temperature fluctuations can be stressful and may lead to disease.
- A small wattage heater can be used to maintain a constant water temperature.

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ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

- Tank decorations may serve as hiding places.
- Silk or live plants that will not cause trauma to the long fins and tails should be used.

DIET

- Bettas are carnivorous and eat insect larvae, crustaceans, small fish and zooplankton in their native habitats.
- Several good quality commercial betta diets are available in flaked, freeze-dried, gel, frozen and pelleted forms.

MOST COMMON DISORDERS

- Mycobacterial infections
- Traumatic injuries from fin and tail nipping of conspecifics (when 2 males are housed together) and tank mates in a community tank
- Exophthalmia
- "Dropsy" or renal insufficiency/failure secondary to bacterial or mycobacterial disease
- Coelomic cavity swelling

ZOONOTIC POTENTIAL

- Bettas have a high incidence of mycobacterial infections.
- Other zoonoses not specific to bettas include bacterial pathogens that may gain entry through existing open wounds or punctures obtained during handling of fish.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Maintenance of excellent water quality cannot be overemphasized, particularly if the betta is kept in a small volume of water.

Written by Helen Roberts January 1, 2011 (published) References and Further Reading

1. Lowry T, Smith SA: Aquatic zoonoses associated with food, bait, ornamental, and tropical fish. J Am Vet Med Assoc 231:876-880, 2007.
2. Riehl R, Baensch H: Aquarium Atlas 6th ed. Germany, Mergus, 1996.
3. Stoskopf M (ed): Fish Medicine. Philadelphia, WB Saunders Co, 1993

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