

Oscar

Astronotus ocellatus

(*Astronotus* – marked with star on back;
ocellatus - spotted with little eyes)

Order: Perciformes

Family: Cichlidae

Description: Coloration is usually very dark, olive-brown to deep blue-black with pale yellow or orange markings. The base of the caudal fin has a large spot or ocellus bordered with red. Fin coloration varies, usually they are very dark, and occasionally they have ocelli (eye-like colored spots). Eyes are red.

Special Features:

- **Eye Spot** - The eyespot on the tail is a common feature among Oscars. The spot is believed to provide a diversion to misdirect the attack of a potential predator toward the tail.
- **Growth** – Oscars grow very rapidly in a short period of time, often reaching lengths of up to 14 inches.

Range and Habitat: Over its native range this species is found in the Amazon, Orinoco and La Plata River systems in South America. Due to temperature limitations, their range in Florida is as far north as Tampa Bay. High densities of Oscars are associated with extensive marsh-type and modified habitats (e.g. Everglades).

Reproduction: Oscars are sexually mature once they reach a length of approximately 5 inches. Fish pair off and often stay together to breed several times. Females lay up to 2000 eggs, which hatch in just a few days. In Florida, spawning occurs from June to October.

Notes:

- **Introduction** - This South American cichlid has been established in Florida waters since the late 1950s when it was first released from a fish farm and spread by anglers who released them in new sites.
- **Limitations** – Oscars do not tolerate cold temperatures.
- **Feeding Habits** - Oscars are mainly carnivorous, but they are known to eat plant matter as well. The main components of their diet include fish and insects, with other items such as reptiles taken opportunistically.
- **Interest to Fisheries** – Oscars are frequently taken by sport fishermen, and they are presently one of the most popular sport fish in southern Florida. In the early 1980s, there was an unexplained increase in numbers, especially in the water conservation areas of the Everglades. With this increase, Oscars grew in popularity as a sport fish. In 1991-1992 the number of Oscars harvested was 53,286.
- **Potential Impacts** - The impact of this species on native fishes is unclear. There is no concrete evidence of displacement of native fishes by Oscars. However, this species is renowned for its aggressiveness. It may have a significant impact on native fishes through direct predation and competition for breeding areas.