

GEORGIA AQUARIUM ANIMAL FACT SHEET

Red Piranha *Pygocentrus nattereri*

Range/Habitat

- The red piranha is found widely in South America in basins of the Amazon, Paraguay-Parana, and Essequibo Rivers. It is also found in coastal rivers of northeastern Brazil.
- The red piranha is typically found in creeks and interconnected ponds. It prefers areas with dense vegetation.

Physical Characteristics

- Male and female red piranhas are alike externally, with body height about one and a half times body length. The average length of an adult is six to eight inches (15 – 20 cm), although they can grow up to 12 inches (30.5 cm).
- Its stocky body has a reddish belly (it is sometimes called a *red-bellied piranha*), though overall coloration varies depending on age and location.
- Other coloration includes sides that are often pale brown to slightly olive, and backs that are bluish gray to brownish.
- Its powerful jaws house triangular, interlocking, sharp teeth.

Diet/Feeding

- The red piranha feeds communally, with groups of 20-30 individuals waiting in vegetation to ambush their prey. The prey is attacked in a feeding frenzy, further induced by the presence of blood in the water.
- This highly predaceous carnivore also scavenges for food and consumes insects, snails, worms, plants and fins of other fishes.
- It can feed continuously and maintain a voracious bite by replacing teeth on alternate sides of the jaw.
- The red piranha, in turn, is fed upon by crocodilians, fish-eating birds, large mammals (including jaguars), as well as by large *pimelodid* catfishes.

Conservation Status

- The red piranha is not listed on the IUCN.

Additional Information

- The piranha exhibits a “lurking, then dashing” sequence of behaviors during the day.
- Feeding times vary by age and size: adults forage mainly at dusk and dawn; medium-sized individuals are most active at dawn, late afternoon, and night; while smaller fishes feed during the day.
- A hierarchical structure often exists in small schools.

- Although this is an aquarium fish, some states in the U.S. do not permit red piranha, fearing hobbyists may release them into the wild where they could multiply and feed upon indigenous fishes.
- Although it is not as aggressive as once believed, red piranha can inflict serious bites; but they are unlikely to attack humans unless blood is present in the water.
- People living near rivers commonly catch and eat red piranha; large numbers are also caught for bait for large catfishes.
- After an elaborate courtship display involving swimming in circles, females deposit layers of eggs on plants in the water, and then the male fertilizes them. The male guards and fans the egg masses until they hatch in 9-10 days. The success of annual reproduction varies depending on the degree to which the savanna is flooded.

Sources

Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Volume 4: Fishes 1; Pg.346.