



Flare Buddies, Friend or Foe?

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It's no secret that a Betta will flare at another male or even his own reflection when given the chance. This behavior is not only common it is completely natural. This reaction is hardwired into them from birth. Males are highly territorial and when their space is threatened by another male they instinctually spread their gill covers wide and flare out their fins in an attempt to look larger and more threatening. After all, they are called Fighting Fish for a reason. Likely, this fighting instinct is set in place because the males are the protectors of the young. When selecting a female, it is the strongest and most aggressive male that will win in a spar against another male. This stronger male will then have the chance to produce the strongest young. This is natural selection. Not only do male Bettas tend the nest but also they are the ones who ward off potential predators like other males.

After speaking with some new aquarists and even some old breeders I have discovered a phenomena known as "Flare Buddies". Flare Buddies are two or more male Bettas kept close together in either separate bowls or a divided tank for the purpose of enticing them to flare at each other. Many aquarists believe their fish benefit from this exposure. Some have even gone so far as to tell me that their Bettas have gone into a state of depression after their Flare Buddy was removed. I would like to make clear that the term "Flare Buddy" is a gross misnomer. A male Betta wants to share a space with another male no more then he wants to share it with the family cat.

First, I should say that Flare Buddies do not benefit your fish; in fact the constant exposure to another male may actually be causing harm. I equate being forced to constantly view a competing male to having a burglar poised outside your house day and night. At first you would be ready and waiting but over time you would grow tired and stressed. Soon your body would be putting all its energy into the imminent threat outside and not into protecting your immune system and mental health. Eventually your body would suffer and you would be open to illness and disease. I believe this is very similar for Bettas. As long as they are constantly defending their territory they cannot focus on living and thriving.

Remember, Bettas are instinctual creatures and don't have the same capacity for friendship that humans have. Because they interact so openly with their keepers, greeting them at the glass and wiggling their tails, it is easy to confuse their behavior with love or friendship. In reality, they know to equate their humans with feeding and don't have an ability to feel complex emotions. There is no evidence that supports Bettas have the ability to feel sadness or depression either. More likely, Bettas appear to be depressed after their Flare Buddies have been removed because they are physically and mentally exhausted from defending their homes. It would

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not be unusual for them to become lethargic or even contract stress-induced illnesses like parasitic, fungal or bacterial infections.

It is true that Bettas would naturally come across other males in the wild. These interactions would be sporadic and reproducing these limited interactions in a domestic setting can be safe if done properly. First, never force sick or listless Bettas to flare at other males. When their immune systems have been compromised they should be focusing on getting better, not on fighting other bettas. Only healthy Bettas should be allowed to flare at other males and this interaction should be limited to about 10 – 15 minute intervals. If you don't have another male to place near your Betta, you can show him his reflection for a few minutes in a mirror or other reflective surface. You might even notice your Betta flaring at himself in his reflection in the aquarium glass. This is all fine for an already healthy Betta. Male Bettas should never, under any circumstances, be placed inside aquariums with other males without a divider and allowing males to fight for sport or any other reason is considered dangerous and inhumane.

If you keep your Bettas in a divided tank or in adjacent aquariums keep a variety of plants or other décor in the tank to break up sight lines. Keep plants along the divider as well. This will give the Betta the chance to flare when they like or to hide when they aren't feeling up to the challenge.

When keeping all fish, including Bettas, it is up to us aquarists to try and recreate their natural environment as best we can. This not only includes monitoring water temperature, hardness and pH but also attempting to recreate the natural interactions that may occur. By understanding the effects of Flare Buddies and how to use them properly you can effectively add mental enrichment and stimulation to your Betta's life.