OCELLARIS CLOWNFISH

A practical care guide for a healthy marine aquarium



15-page illustrated guide | Aquarium setup, water quality, feeding, tankmates, health and long-term planning

For Amphiprion ocellaris - the common or false percula clownfish

1. Meet the Ocellaris Clownfish

Ocellaris clownfish are small, active marine fish with orange bodies, three white bars and narrow black edging. They are often called false percula clownfish. A captive-bred fish is usually the most responsible and practical choice for a home aquarium.

Good match for: a keeper ready to learn marine water testing and budgeting for reliable equipment. Not a good match for: an uncycled tank or a no-maintenance setup.

• Adult length is commonly around 3-4 inches (7-10 cm); plan for the adult, not the juvenile sold at the shop.

• They can live for many years when water quality, diet and routine care are consistent. Treat the purchase as a long-term commitment, not a short-lived decoration.

• They are omnivores. A bonded pair often does well, but two fish are not automatically compatible; size, behavior and a safe way to separate them matter.

• A sea anemone is not required. Many captive clownfish thrive without one.

• Saltwater aquariums need measured salinity, stable temperature, biological filtration and routine testing. A bowl or improvised small container is not suitable.

2. Plan the Marine Aquarium First

The aquarium should be running, cycled and stable before the fish arrives. A larger water volume is generally easier to keep stable than a very small nano tank. OATA gives at least 60 L (about 16 US gal) for a pair of smaller clownfish; many keepers choose 20-30 gallons for more stability and room.

If adding corals or anemones later, check their lighting, flow, chemistry and compatibility needs before buying them.

• Use a sturdy, level stand rated for the filled aquarium. Keep it away from direct sunlight, heating vents and busy doorways.

• Provide a secure lid or mesh cover: startled clownfish can jump. Leave room for cables and safe drip loops.

• Use dependable biological filtration and water movement with well-oxygenated water. A protein skimmer can help export waste but does not replace water changes or testing.

• Add stable, aquarium-safe live rock or inert rockwork for shelter. Secure stacked rocks against tipping; leave open swimming space.

• Use an appropriately sized heater and a separate thermometer. Consider backup plans for power or equipment failure.

3. Saltwater Chemistry and Testing

Consistency matters more than chasing a perfect-looking number. Use a calibrated refractometer or reliable marine hydrometer for salinity. Mix saltwater with purified water according to the salt mix directions, then verify salinity and temperature before use.

Do not correct pH or salinity abruptly. First confirm the reading with a second test and consult an experienced marine aquarist or aquatic veterinarian.

• A common reef-style target is specific gravity around 1.024-1.026 at the instrument calibration temperature; use one stable target and avoid sudden swings.

• Keep temperature stable in the typical tropical marine range, about 24-27 C (75-81 F), unless the system plan calls for a specific target.

• Test ammonia and nitrite; both should be undetectable in a mature aquarium. Track nitrate and pH and maintain alkalinity consistently, especially in reef systems.

• Check salinity, temperature and equipment daily; test other water values on a routine schedule and whenever fish behave unusually.

• Never add untreated tap water or pure freshwater replacement without considering whether it is for evaporation top-off or a measured water change. Evaporation removes water, not salt.

4. Cycling and First Stocking

Cycling establishes bacteria that process fish waste. It takes time and testing; a tank that looks clear is not necessarily cycled. Fishless cycling is the safer way to prepare a new aquarium.

Do not use a fish to cycle a new tank. It can suffer from toxic ammonia and nitrite while the filter matures.

• Run the filter and circulation continuously. Add a measured ammonia source for fishless cycling and monitor ammonia and nitrite with a suitable test kit.

• Add fish only after the biofilter can process the test ammonia and tests show ammonia and nitrite returning to zero. Do not rely on an arbitrary number of days.

• Buy fish from a clean, well-maintained system. Look for intact fins, clear eyes, steady swimming, normal breathing and active interest in food. Avoid a tank with dead or visibly sick fish.

• Quarantine new fish in a separate, cycled marine tank when possible. Use separate nets and equipment to reduce disease transfer.

• Acclimate according to shipping conditions and the fish supplier's guidance. Avoid adding store water to the display aquarium. Keep lights dim initially and observe.

5. Feeding: Simple, Varied and Measured

Clownfish are omnivorous and usually accept prepared foods. Offer a marine-specific, nutritionally complete pellet or flake as a staple, then rotate appropriate frozen foods for variety.



• Useful choices include quality marine pellets, marine flakes, mysis shrimp, enriched brine shrimp and finely chopped seafood formulated for aquarium fish.

• Feed small portions once or twice daily, adjusted to the fish and the system; offer only what is eaten promptly. Remove uneaten food to limit nutrient buildup.

• Use food small enough to swallow. Observe each fish so a dominant partner is not taking every meal.

• Thaw frozen food in a small cup of aquarium water and discard leftovers. Do not pour large amounts of thaw water into the tank.

• Avoid relying on one food, feeding large amounts to encourage breeding, or using human leftovers. A host anemone is not a food source.

6. Behavior, Pairing and Social Life

Clownfish form social hierarchies. In a pair, the larger fish is typically the female and the smaller fish the male; the species can change sex as part of its natural social system. This does not make every two-fish combination safe.

Separate immediately if a fish is being bitten, cannot reach food, is pinned at the surface, or shows escalating injuries.

• A compatible pair may share a territory and display courtship or cleaning behaviors. Occasional brief chasing can occur; persistent attacks, torn fins or one fish being trapped require intervention.

• The safest home plan is often one fish or one compatible pair. Adding several clownfish to a small home aquarium can lead to escalating aggression as they mature.

• Provide more than one sheltered area and a clear visual break. Have a divider or separate cycled tank available if the fish cannot coexist.

• Do not use size alone as proof of sex or pairing compatibility. Ask the seller how long the pair has been housed together and whether both feed well.

• A clownfish may host a coral, pump, corner or bare area. This unusual choice is not automatically a health problem if the fish otherwise behaves normally.

7. Do They Need a Sea Anemone?

No. Clownfish and anemones have a famous natural relationship, but a home clownfish does not need an anemone to stay healthy. Many captive-bred individuals never host one.

Beginner-friendly default: keep the clownfish in a stable fish-only or reef aquarium without an anemone.

• Anemones are demanding invertebrates. They require mature, stable water, appropriate light, water flow and careful placement away from pumps and overflows.

• A healthy clownfish can use a coral or rock as a preferred resting area. Do not force the fish into an anemone or move an anemone repeatedly to make hosting happen.

• A clownfish may not pair with the anemone species it would use in nature. Compatibility varies; a matching host is never guaranteed.

• Anemones can move, sting neighboring animals and be damaged by pumps. Add guards and plan the aquascape before introducing one.

• Do not buy an anemone as a beginner shortcut or treat it as a decorative accessory. Learn its species-specific care first.

8. Tankmates and Reef Compatibility

Choose tankmates for compatible adult size, temperament, diet and water needs. Add animals gradually, quarantine them and have a plan to separate incompatible fish.

Compatibility charts are starting points, not guarantees. Behavior in the actual aquarium decides whether a pairing works.

• Small peaceful reef fish may work in a suitably sized, mature aquarium. Clownfish can become territorial around their chosen nesting area, especially as a pair matures.

• Avoid large predators, aggressive damselfish, fish that harass clownfish, and crowded combinations. A fish that fits into another fish's mouth can be eaten.

• Ocellaris clownfish are commonly considered reef-compatible, but individual fish may nip at some corals or defend an area. Observe new combinations closely.

• Do not assume that all clownfish species can share a tank. Some species are larger or more aggressive than Ocellaris.

• Plan the total bioload. Every new animal needs space, oxygen, filtration capacity and feeding access.

9. Daily, Weekly and Monthly Care

Short, predictable checks prevent many emergencies. Keep a log of temperature, salinity, tests, water changes and behavior so trends are visible before they become crises.

A partial, prepared water change is routine maintenance. It is not a fish bath; do not net or handle the clownfish for ordinary cleaning.

• Daily: check temperature, salinity trend, heater, filter and pumps; watch breathing, swimming, appetite and the fish's body condition.

• At feeding: offer measured portions, confirm both fish get food and remove leftovers. Check that pumps have guards and intakes are clear.

• Weekly: test key water values, clean viewing glass, remove detritus and inspect equipment. Change water according to test results, stocking and system routine.

• For a water change: prepare new saltwater in a clean container, match temperature and salinity, and avoid sudden chemistry changes. Never use soap on aquarium equipment.

• Monthly: inspect hoses, impellers, lights, backup equipment and test kit expiration dates. Clean or replace filter media only as directed, preserving biological filtration.

10. Recognize Health Changes Early

Fish illness can look like water-quality stress. Test water before assuming a specific disease, and contact a veterinarian experienced with aquatic animals when symptoms persist or worsen.

Routine vaccination is not generally part of pet clownfish care. Prevention focuses on stable water, nutrition, quarantine and sanitation.

• Warning signs: refusal to eat, rapid or labored breathing, clamped fins, rubbing against objects, unusual hiding, loss of balance, spots, fuzzy growths, sores or sudden color change.

• Check temperature, salinity, ammonia, nitrite, nitrate and equipment function. Confirm test results with another kit or experienced marine shop if possible.

• Record when signs began, how many fish are affected, recent purchases, water tests, foods and any chemicals or medications used. This history helps diagnosis.

• Do not add random antibiotics, copper, freshwater dips, salt or home remedies to the display tank. Some treatments harm invertebrates and biological filtration.

• Seek urgent veterinary advice for severe breathing problems, open wounds, rapid deterioration, or multiple fish becoming ill.

11. Anemone and Coral Safety, Equipment Safety

A marine aquarium has living equipment dependencies: a stopped pump, heater failure or power outage can change temperature and oxygen quickly. Plan before an emergency.



• Use drip loops and a ground-fault protected outlet. Keep electrical plugs above the floor and protect cords from salt spray.

• Use guards over pump intakes and overflow openings, especially when keeping anemones. Check guards after cleaning.

• Know how to restore circulation and oxygen if power fails. Keep a battery air pump or other backup plan appropriate to the aquarium.

• Do not place the tank where direct sun can rapidly heat it. Avoid drafts and large day-night temperature swings.

• Keep a clean food-safe mixing container, measuring tools, spare salt mix and a calibrated thermometer on hand. Never use containers that held cleaners.

12. Breeding and Young Fish

A bonded pair may lay eggs on a cleaned surface and guard them. Breeding is not required for good pet care and can increase workload substantially.

If you do not intend to breed, a single fish is a valid choice and avoids fry-management responsibilities.

• Before breeding, plan for egg care, hatchery equipment, rotifers or other appropriately sized first foods, frequent water-quality work and responsible homes for juveniles.

• Do not attempt to raise fry in the display aquarium without understanding the food and water needs of each stage. Most community tankmates will eat eggs or larvae.

• Avoid buying a fish solely because a seller promises a breeding pair. Ask about the pair's history, feeding, prior spawns and health.

• Never release unwanted fish, eggs or aquarium water into local waterways. Contact an aquarium club, rescue group or retailer for responsible rehoming options.

• Breeding is a separate project; do not let it compromise the adult fish's welfare or the stability of the display tank.

13. Costs, Travel and a First-Month Plan

Prices vary by region, tank size, equipment quality and whether the aquarium is fish-only or a reef. Build the system budget before purchasing livestock.

A fish veterinarian may not be available in every area. Identify a nearby aquatic veterinarian before an emergency; ask about examination and after-hours fees.

• Budget for aquarium and stand, marine salt, purified water access, heater, thermometer, filter or sump, circulation pumps, lighting, test kits, refractometer, lid, rockwork and backup supplies.

• As a broad U.S. planning estimate, a simple 20-30 gallon marine setup can require several hundred dollars to well over $1,000 before livestock; a reef system with corals and anemones costs more. Monthly salt, test supplies, food and electricity also add up.

• During the first week, finish cycling and verify stable temperature and salinity. Add the fish only after tests support it; spend the next weeks observing feeding and behavior.

• When away, arrange a knowledgeable person to check temperature, pumps and fish daily. Pre-portion food and leave written instructions; avoid automatic feeders unless tested in advance.

• Do not overfeed before travel. Do not make a major livestock or equipment change just before leaving.

14. Quick Checklist and Further Reading

Before purchase: confirm the aquarium is cycled; temperature and salinity are stable; equipment is running; a quarantine and emergency plan exists; and the long-term cost fits your budget.

Recommended reading supplied for this guide: The Complete Clownfish Handbook by Arden Wythe; Clownfish as Pet by Charles D. Lott; The Amazing World of Clownfish by Karen Penrose; The Nature Kid's Guide to Clownfish by David Anderson. This guide does not reproduce text from those books.

• Daily: observe, check equipment and temperature, feed modestly, remove leftovers.

• Weekly: test water, inspect pumps and heater, clean glass, perform a prepared water change as needed.

• Remember: anemones are optional; do not overstock; quarantine new arrivals; never release aquarium animals.

• This is an original educational guide and is not a substitute for diagnosis or treatment by an aquatic veterinarian. Care values can vary by source and system; confirm them for your livestock and setup.

Sources used for care review

OATA, “How to look after clown fish” - https://ornamentalfish.org/what-we-do/advice-information/care-sheets/caresheets-marine-fish/how-to-look-after-clown-fish/

Merck Veterinary Manual, “Routine Health Care of Fish” - https://www.merckvetmanual.com/all-other-pets/fish/routine-health-care-of-fish

Merck Veterinary Manual, “Management of Aquarium Fish” - https://www.merckvetmanual.com/exotic-and-laboratory-animals/aquarium-fish/management-of-aquarium-fish

PetMD, “Clownfish Care Sheet” - https://www.petmd.com/fish/clownfish-care-sheet

Generated photographs are illustrative. Always verify species, livestock health and aquarium requirements with qualified aquatic professionals.