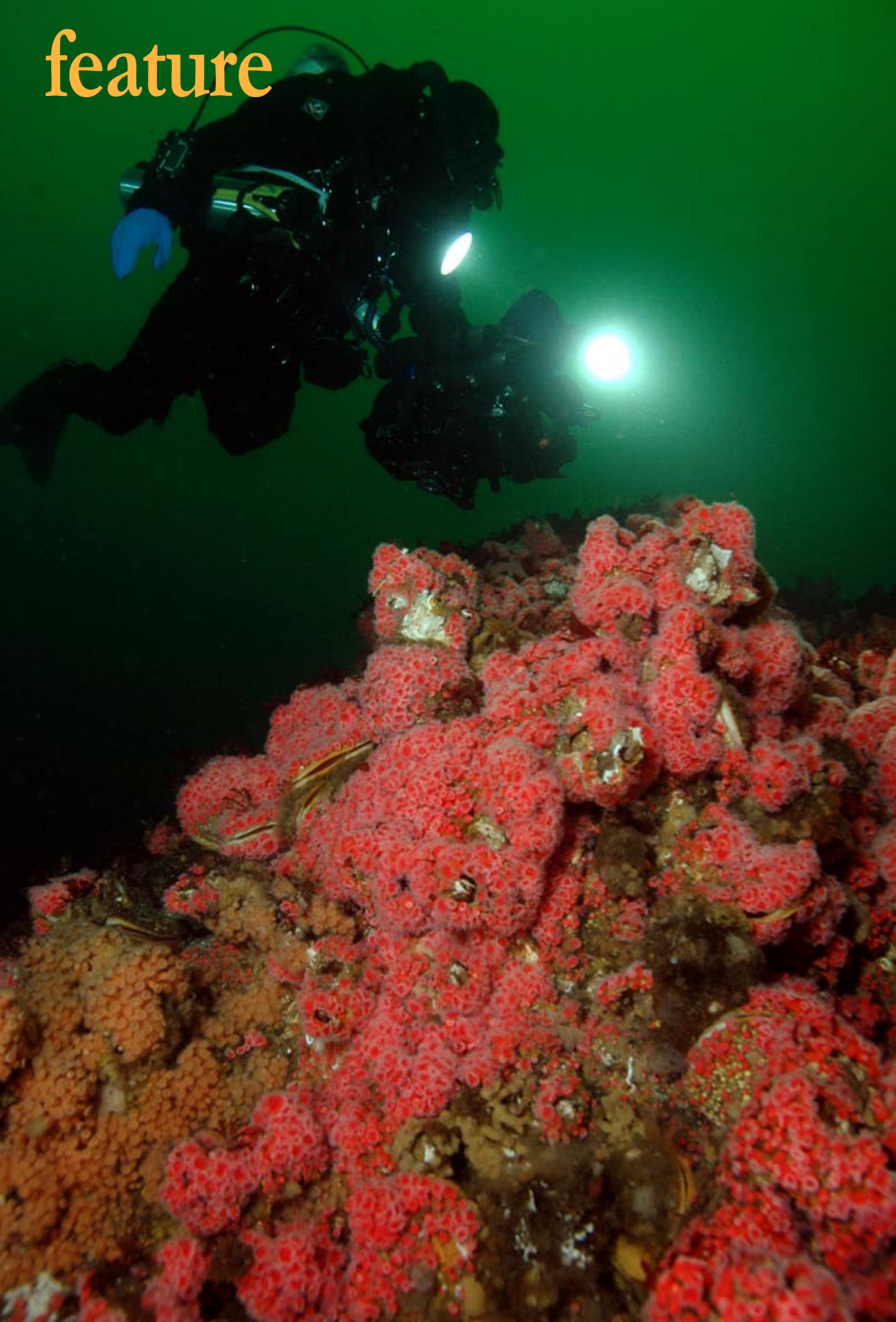


# British Columbia

Text and photos by Barb Roy

*Critter Connection*





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Diver shooting video of luscious, coral-covered reef, Nootka Sound; BC ferry passes Snake Island, Nanaimo; Diver with yellow fins kayaking in Barkley Sound

**British Columbia (BC), Canada is known for having some of the most colourful temperate water diving in the world. This holds true for excellent critter sightings as well, found throughout the varied coastal regions. Underwater photographers often enjoy the challenge of photographing the illusive giant Pacific octopus or getting all wrapped up with a friendly two-meter-long wolf eel! For the visiting extended-range technical divers, the natural shipwrecks and deep walls are usually covered in a swathe of intriguing marine critters.**

To get a better understanding of what BC has to offer, let's take a closer look at each region. Keep in mind however; most of the underwater life you will encounter can also be found at multiple locations.

### Howe Sound

Bordering Mainland Vancouver and the Coastal Mountain Range, Howe Sound is a deep fiord fed by cool upwelling nutrient-rich water. Like most locations along the coast, seasons are mild, the wildlife plentiful and diving can be done year round. For those needing to wet their appetite for outdoor adventure, Howe Sound is a great place to start.

Shore diving can be done at Whytecliff Park and Porteau Cove where divers might find wolf eels, octopus, huge cabezon and lingcod. Orange and white swimming anemones, small crabs, hydroids and frosted nudibranchs are also plentiful. Porteau Cove has several small boats in the park, scuttled to enhance the terrain.

For half and full day boat charters, dive boats meet groups at Sewell's Marina in Horseshoe Bay. Howe Sound is full of pinnacles, islands and islets,



some marked with mooring buoys to designate the dive sites. Below the emerald water, divers might find orange sea pens, small sculpins and brittle stars at the Bird Islet site. Cowan



Large yellow-eye rockfish, Nanaimo

BC Critters

Because of the depth and relatively mild currents, Agamemnon Channel is a favourite among technical divers. Personally, I find the increased size of the gorgonians impressive and always try to bring along a Trimix system when visiting this area, just for the gorgonians!

Skookumchuck Rapids is another breathtaking dive with a multi-coloured collection of white, orange, green and pink anemones. Clusters of orange and purple ochre sea stars plaster themselves on large boulders scattered about the terrain in the shallows. In deeper water, the entire ocean floor is covered in red, green, yellow and orange anemones and sponges. Although diving is done at slack (when the water stops to change direction) current in the Skook (as locals call it) can reach up to an impressive 30km per hour!

The wreck of the *HMCS Chaudiere*, scuttled in 1992 by the Artificial Reef

Point is good for zoanthid anemones, hairy-spined crabs and beautiful red crimson anemones. Under any of the mooring buoys you can usually see rockfish, wolf-eels and the occasional Puget Sound king crab. The 366-foot (111-meter) retired Canadian Navy ship *HMCS Annapolis* is the latest addition to BC's collection of artificial reefs, scuttled in October of 2012.

high as a diver. Watch for small orange sharp-nose crabs and rockfish hiding within the cloud sponge openings. At this site, I have photographed many different small crabs, orange peel nudibranchs, juvenile yellow-eye rockfish, sea cucumbers, cup corals, abalone and so much more.

**Lower Sunshine Coast** (Sechelt/Egmont)

Getting to the Sunshine Coast requires a ferry ride across Howe Sound from Departure Bay to Langdale. (See [www.bcferrys.com](http://www.bcferrys.com)). After a short drive to Sechelt and then to Egmont, divers wanting a weekend getaway can meet a dive operator here for an excellent selection of advanced dives.

Beneath the Power Lines, in Agamemnon Channel, is a deep wall full of life starting upon descent. Immense clusters of yellow and white cloud sponges are dispersed all along the wall, as it gently cascades to depths beyond 200ft (61m). Around 90ft (27m), huge red gorgonian sea fans majestically stand as



Diver (above) at Dodd Narrows, Nanaimo; Diver inspects one of the many artificial reefs of BC (right)





is located at the old mill in Powell River, along a breakwater of ghost ships. The shallow wreckage of the Malahat's remnants is scattered about the bottom but chocked full of large and small fish. Entry is done from shore on a sandy beach next to the breakwater. The wreck can be found by skirting around the large boulders and heading straight out from shore, moving towards the mill in about 30-80ft (9-24m) of water.

For a unique boat dive, all divers usually enjoy the site of the MV

inhabiting the side of the vessel hull. The forward gun barrels, pointing straight down, now host a small growth of yellow cloud sponge about midway down.

**Upper Sunshine Coast**

(Powel River/Lund)  
After another ferry ride from Earl's Cove to Saltery Bay across Jervis Inlet, you will find the friendly community of Powell River. Near Saltery Bay is Mermaid Cove where a three-meter-high bronze mermaid welcomes all underwater. Campsites, wash-room facilities and changing rooms are available in the park.

This easy shore-entry dive is suitable for all skill levels, complete with a wheelchair ramp and a place to unload gear. High tide usually brings in clear water for viewing the mermaid, created by Simon Morris before being placed at 60ft (20m). Be sure to check out the statue's base for a resident octopus. Not far from the mermaid is the wooden hull of a small boat, where small gobies and lingcod like to hang out. Next to the wreck is the start of a wall with very large boot sponges. Again, watch for rockfish peering out the sponge openings.

Just up the road is a place called Octopus Hole, another easy shore dive, where small octopus hide in rocky dens. The terrain is favourable to crabs, which are always on the cephalopod's menu. Orange and brown burrowing sea cucumbers, swimming nudibranchs and tiny sculpins call this place home.

Another interesting shore dive



Tiger rockfish, Union Bay

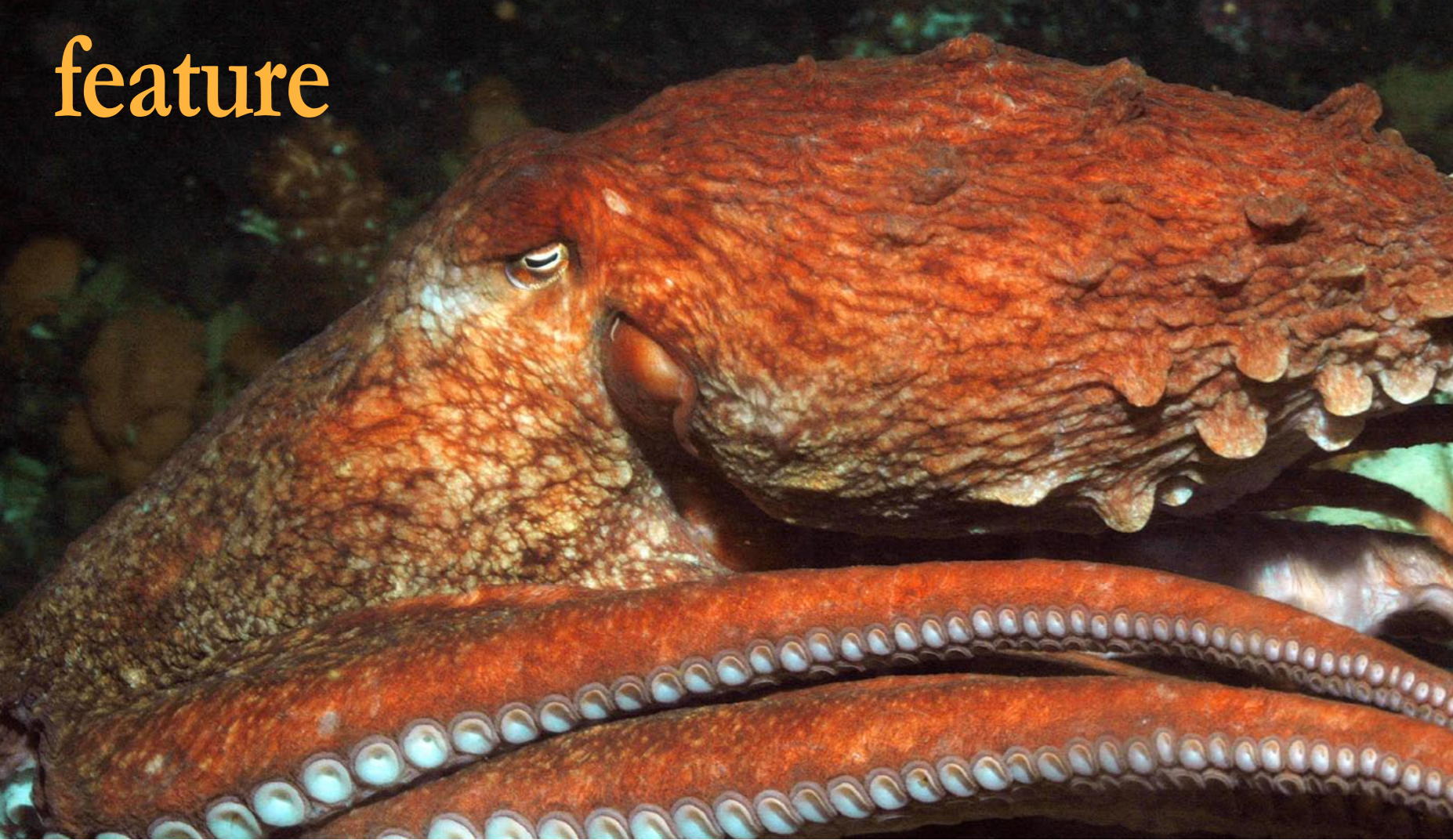


Lingcod (above); Diver (far left) at Saskatchewan, Nanaimo

Society of British Columbia (ARSBC), lies on its port side in 60-145ft (20-44m) of water in Sechart Inlet. Visibility is best between September and April,

sometimes yielding up to 100ft (30m)! The wreck wears a cloak of glass tunicates on the railing and deck structures with white and orange plumose anemones





Giant Pacific octopus, Rock of Life, Port Hardy (above)

anemones can be found here. This is one of those dives where technical divers can explore the deep wreck, and the naturalists can check out the island's multitude of critters in the shallows.

### Northern Coastal British Columbia

(Beyond Port Hardy)

Liveaboard dive vessels are your best bet for exploring BC's vast coastal waterways, departing from Port Hardy or Prince Rupert. Wreck diving is one of the main activities for divers in this area, but the sites are almost always covered with so much life, it's

hard to tell they actually sailed on the ocean above.

The charm of seclusion is another reason why divers venture this far north. Waking up in a tranquil calm cove with a humpback whale surfacing nearby

mingled with the sounds of eagles fishing for their breakfast of salmon is well worth the experience.

A favourite wreck is the *Transpac*, sitting vertically against a wall with its bow in 90ft (27m) and the stern at 285ft (87m). Even though visibility can be 60-100ft (18-30m) here, lights and extended-range gear are advisable. Upon ascent, however, there is a nice wall to the right, which offers a multitude of invertebrate life. On one of my favorite dives here, we were lucky enough to spot a very young, pink Alaskan king crab.

On the wrecks of the *Ohio*, *James Drummond* and the *Drumrock*, I photographed giant clusters of yellow and white cloud sponge, tall white plumose anemones, bright orange yelloweye rockfish, lingcod in shades of blue and grey and numerous anemones of all sizes.



Diver (above) at Seven Tree, Port Hardy; Diver and affectionate wolf eel, Port Hardy (left)



*Gulfstream*, sinking in 1947 at Dinner Rock. This advanced wreck dive is in 125-155ft (38-47m) of water. Although the island's wall is steep, a host of abalone, lingcod, rockfish, cup corals and huge white and orange plumose





## Northern Vancouver Island

Most dive operators pick up their groups in Port Hardy or Port McNeil for multi-day and week-long excursions. One of the most popular sites in the area is Browning Wall, stretching from the surface down to over 250ft. This almost vertical wall is crowded with pink and white soft corals, long tan finger sponges, nudibranchs, moss-head and decorated warbonnets, along with beautiful red Irish lords.

Watch for small to medium size octopus out hunting on the wall. With so much life at this site, it's hard to focus on just one thing, but try to look down the wall and behind you for the hovering rockfish. Quite often the abundance is astounding.

A thick forest of kelp wraps around many of the islands where huge black rockfish float suspended beneath the canopy. I am always in awe looking up to the surface from depth. In the shallows around the reefs, look for thousands of small, colorful brooding anemones residing on the strands of kelp where they attach to the rocks. Many will have tiny buds on them to promote the next generation.

For those with a good photo eye, look close on soft coral branches for tiny yellow sea spiders. Large numbers will sometimes cover the entire branch. The reason for this unusual symbiosis is still unknown to biologists, but some believe the spiders are feeding on the polyps.

Other excellent boat dives

include Barry Islet for small pink and white gorgonian sea fans, many with miniature basket stars clinging to them.



The Swell liveaboard boat in northern BC

## BC Critters

The wreck of the *Themis* is over 100 years old providing home to box crabs, sponges and wolf eels, around Crocker Rock, Seven Tree, Dillon Rock, Nakwakto Rapids and Hunt Rock are all worth the journey to find wolf eels, octopus, and red-lipped gooseneck barnacles (at Nakwakto).

### Central Vancouver Island

(Campbell River/Hornby Island) Heading south from Port Hardy is the town of Campbell River. The body of water between the town and Quadra Island is called Discovery Passage, containing several first-rate boat and shore dives. The wreck of the *Columbia* and the May Island ferry always seem to have perch, rockfish, lingcod, and painted greenlings on them. Giant purple tubeworms grow to an impressive size at the Copper Cliff dive site. Tubeworms can also be found on the *Columbia*. Whiskey Point has a seemingly endless



Rainbow shrimp, Port Hardy (above); View from the Swell, Port Hardy (top left)

carpet of strawberry anemones, sponges, large crabs, and generally, a resident wolf eel. Marine life seems to be plentiful at all of the

current-dependant sites, yielding additional kelp greenlings, nudibranchs, brittle stars, juvenile crabs and trumpet sponge. On one of



Harbor lions (left) are found all over BC; Location of British Columbia on world map (right) and satellite map of BC; Basket star on soft coral (inset lower left)



rock scallops and barnacles. Rose stars, octopuses, extra large painted anemones, sea cucumbers and orange sea pens also flourish.

Nootka Sound is accessible from Campbell River by heading west to Gold River then down a logging road to the township of Tahsis. When not diving, kayaking, fishing and hiking are all popular.

Barkley Sound is home to excellent reefs, pinnacles, wrecks, current-swept sites and the Broken Group Islands. On the outer edge of the Sound, debris from the *Vanlene* shipwreck is scattered in both shallow and deep water, hosting a selection of nudibranchs, bryozoans, crabs, rockfish, anemones, abalone and more.

There are several other sites where a sixgill shark might be sighted between July and September, so keep your eyes open. When photographing these large, slow-moving sharks, be patient and plan to go deep if needed. Some of my best shots have been around 90ft (27m)

on cloudy days. There was once a time when sixgill sharks were sighted regularly at Hornby Island, in Nootka Sound and in Barkley Sound. Now, they are only randomly seen.

Barkley Sound is north of Nanaimo and south of Ucluelet, with access from Port Alberni. Another way in is down a gravel logging road to Bamfield.

### Nanaimo Area

There are two ferry terminals in Nanaimo from mainland Vancouver, making this an easy place to spend a day or weekend. Snake Island is a short boat ride from Departure Bay where divers can find grunt sculpins, wolf eels, harbor seals and a waterfall of white anemones on the northern side of the island.

On the other side of Snake Island, two more ships were scuttled by the ARSBC—the *HMCS Saskatchewan* and the *HMCS Cape Breton*. Resembling a fish nursery, hundreds of small fish hatch here every spring. The *Saskatchewan's* upper structure is covered with white anemones giving it a textured appearance when looking up from the deck at 60ft (18m). It's not uncommon to see immense lingcod resting on the deck or look inside a hatch and see a yellow cloud sponge beginning to grow. Be sure to ask the dive charter operator where to find the huge resident rockfish fish, because it's bright orange

beginning to collapse, so divers should always remain on the outer parts of the ship. This is a great rockfish location with older, large residents and beautiful thick cloud sponge masses. Quillback, cop-

per and black rockfish can also

be found here. Most of the wreck is covered with white plumose anemones of all sizes giving it an eerie appearance. A fun seasonal dive is done with sea lions around Hornby Island between November and April. Divers sit on the bottom in about 20ft (6m) next to a small island and wait for dozens of friendly, curious sea lions to come over and play. Be sure to keep your hands close to your body, because their play can be quite exhilarating!

### West Coast of Vancouver Island

(Nootka Sound/Barkley Sound) When exploring Nootka Sound, don't forget your camera or video because the colours are not only vivid, they are spectacular. Mozingo Point is within minutes of Tahsis where red gorgonian sea fans, yellow cloud sponges and Puget Sound king crabs can all be found on one dive.

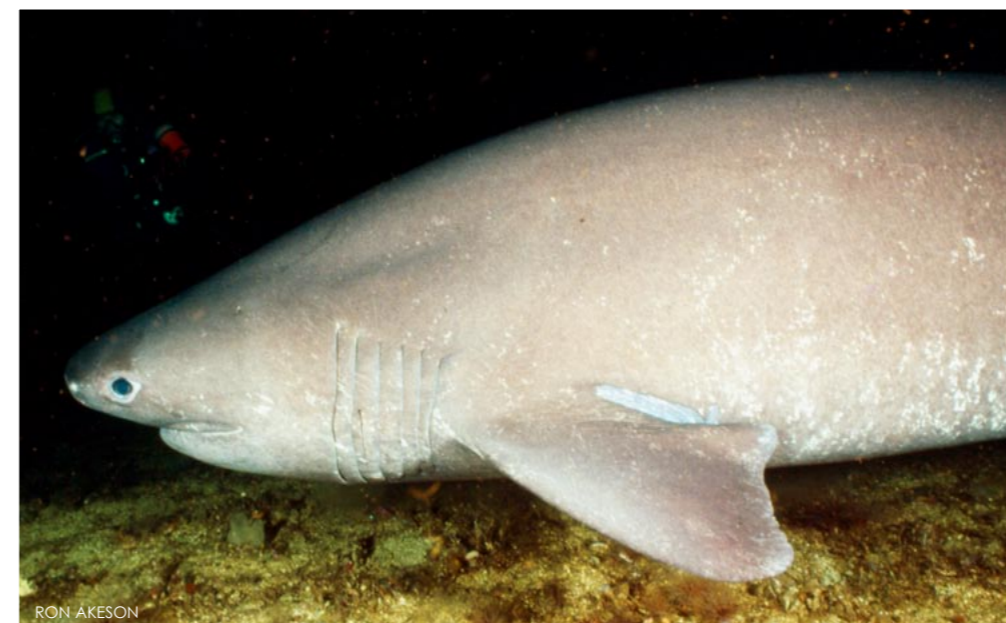
At another site not far away, red strawberry anemones and yellow zoanthids carpet the ocean floor, even covering giant



my dives at the Columbia, I photographed two huge octopuses on the bottom, next to the ship.

The *Capilano* wreck and Mitlenatch Island are two more critter-rich dive locations accessed from Campbell River, Powell River or Courtenay. Immense sea lions and fat harbor seals like to lounge on the beaches at Mitlenach.

The 120-foot (36-meter) SS *Capilano* sits upright in 145ft (44m) of water. The hull and prop may look intact, but the structure is



Sixgill shark





## BC Critters

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Anemones at Dodd Narrows; Lingcod at Campbell River; Red-lipped gooseneck barnacles; Mosshead warbonnet; Frosted nudibranch, *Dirona albolineata*

### Afterthoughts

No matter where you begin your dive holiday, BC will provide a fun relaxing experi-

ence for the whole family. During peak summer months book your ferry travel ([www.bcferries.com](http://www.bcferries.com)) and activities early. Dive charter and store contacts can be found at [www.diveindustrybc.com](http://www.diveindustrybc.com). Gear is available for hire in most communities. Keep in mind, most of the dive operators do not allow spearfishing or taking anything from the ocean habitat except for photos. ■

nes, encrusting sponges and kelp cling to the hull.

### Victoria Area

Located at the southern end of Vancouver Island, Victoria's strong nutrient-rich currents support an assortment of large and small marine residents. Race Rocks is a breathtaking boat dive located about three nautical miles from Pedder Bay in the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Here, tons of life reside, much like in the north. Pink and white clusters of soft coral, finger sponge and colorful nudibranchs share an underwater rocky terrain with lavender coralline algae and overlapping leaves of ground-covering kelp.

Victoria is also known for its wonderful bottle and shore dives, including Ogden Point breakwater where octopus and wolf eels are often seen. Several reef balls have been placed along the concrete wall, attracting even more critters.

### Sidney and Saanich Inlet

Near Sidney the *HMCS Mackenzie*, the

*GB Church* and Arbutus Island are all close easy boat dives. However, at times the *Mackenzie* can have current on it, so be prepared. Huge clusters of cloud sponges are located in the calm waters of Saanich Inlet along with Puget Sound king crabs, plumose anemones, nudibranchs and scallops. Saanich Inlet also has several shore diving sites and great kayaking opportunities.

Graham's Wall is a great current-dependant site in Haro Strait near Domville Island, stretching down to 90ft (27m). Close-up and macro photography is awesome here, with plenty of nudibranchs, blood stars, white tunicates, orange social tunicates, cup corals, decorator crabs, scallops and lacy bryozoan.

wreck of the 190-foot (58-meter) long dual paddle-wheel steamer *Del Norte*, sinking in 1868. Not much of the wreck remains except the ship's two paddle-wheel bases with protruding spokes and a couple of boiler stacks. Chunks of coal are everywhere.

Another easy dive is the 737 jet air-frame body near the town of Chemainus. The plane sits on a stand in 90ft (27m) of water with the main body at 70ft (21m). Currently over 100 marine life species have been identified at the site by author and biologist, Andy Lamb. Andy and his wife run Cedar Beach Lodge on Thetis Island, catering to divers.

Porlier Pass, located between Valdes and Galiano Islands are home to wolf eels, basket stars, huge lingcod, cabezon and rockfish. There are several wall diving sites and the wreck of the *Point Grey*. Sinking at Virago Rock, the *Point Grey* is a 32-meter-long steel tugboat sitting upside down in 10-15m of water. Fish love to hide in the structure and will peer out at passing divers. Colonies of anemo-



appearance will be worth the trip!

For an exciting adrenalin dive, Nanaimo has two drift dives—Dodd Narrows and Gabriola Pass. If currents permit, divers will be treated to a magic carpet ride over a terrain of anemones, sea stars and giant barnacles. Both sites remind me of public aquarium habitats, complete with swaying kelp fronds.

### Chemainus and Porlier Pass

Porlier Pass, Trincomali Channel and Stuart Channel offer divers something different at each location. One of my favorites was a dive on the historical

