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Hopkins rose nud-branch (*Okenia rosacea*), Laguna Beach, California, USA

Text and photos
by Mike Bartick

Dragons that swim and fish with wings and bizarre color patterns, and slugs made of strings? No, these are not fantasy movie creatures, but Mother Nature at her best.

Some of our planet's most interesting creatures live below the waves, with gaudy and interesting appearances that seem like they are straight out of a creative, fictional Hollywood movie. However, it is Mother Nature that seems to be the master of creating non-fictional subjects that survive in our planet's most hostile environments—against all odds. Whether in open ocean, on sandy seabeds, soft corals or small coral heads, each species has evolved in some special way that enables them to eat, hunt and proliferate. Don't be fooled by their whimsical appearances either, because one thing is for sure, these zany-looking critters are truly masters of their immediate domain.



Crazy Critters

— *And Where to Find Them*

My obsession with critters seemed to officially hatch during one of my first check-out dives in the frigid waters off the coastline of the US state of California. Living

near some of the greatest macro spots in Southern California, I was lucky to dive as often as I wanted. As I began to explore and learn about the hidden treasure trove

of macro fauna that existed there, my obsession became insatiable. I had no idea that it would forge an unforeseen curve in my life ahead and eventually take me to

one amazing destination after another, each packed with its own unique and mysterious critter finds. Can learning about marine life help a photographer find sub-

jects? This is a question that I get asked a lot. The short answer is: YES! Of course, it does. It is not enough to swim about looking. If you want to find a subject, learn-





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Melibe colemani
nudibranch, Anilao,
Philippines



ing about it first is an important step that is often not stressed enough.

Indeed, locating a suitable subject can be as challenging as the photography itself. Then, once the subject is found, I like to take a moment to figure out the best way to shoot it in its proper habitat. This can present yet another challenge where patience becomes a practiced virtue.

One of my main goals when visiting an area is to seek out the subjects that personify it the most, per its location. Facebook has been

a valuable tool for grassroots style research; at a more local level, I have used it to make contact with divers in the area I am planning to visit.

Here are some things to note, with regards to some specific species:

Hopkin's rose nudibranch. When I first found this species of nudibranch, *Okenia rosacea* (previous page), they seemed hard to come by. Over time, they have populated the area and can now



Panda goby (*Paragobiodon lacunicolus*), Anilao, Philippines

be found up and down the California coastline. Appearing like a perfect mimic to a small anemone, these bright pink slugs can go unnoticed and are easily overlooked. Inhabiting in-shore rocky reef structures around the coastline, these lovely delicate-looking gems seem to love the surge. In fact, while shooting them, I found myself being bent into positions that would make a yoga master blush. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 1 Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobe, Retra snoot.

Panda goby. These elusive gobies inhabit a specific type of coral known as Acropora, which is vital in locating them. Not all the smaller Acropora will have this particular bearded goby, though, as there are several types in this family. They share a symbiotic relationship with the coral and live out their entire lives within the small coral heads, keeping them free of invasive and harmful algae

growth. They are opportunistic feeders and wait for morsels of food to drift by. Occasionally, they can also be seen on a small nest of eggs within the said coral heads. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 2 Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobes.

Melibe colemani nudibranch. One of the most coveted slugs among slug lovers is the *Melibe colemani*. At one time, it was found exclusively in Komodo Park, Indonesia, but can now be found in other environs such as this one found in Anilao in the Philippines. Many subjects seem to move about, populating wherever the food supply will support them, either by boat bilge blow-off or water current. Appearing as a ball of twine, they remain nearly invisible when on their host, which is a specific type of Xenia coral. It feeds on small shrimp and whatever else it can catch. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 60mm lens, 1 INON Z-240 strobe, Retra snoot.

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Leafy seadragon (*Phycodurus eques*), South Australia (right)



Weedy scorpionfish. With the scientific name, *Rhinopias frondosa*, these scorpionfish are of the *Rhinopias* family and are what I like to call a “high impact critter”, as they have remained at the top of the macro shooters’ hit list for many a moon. A scorpionfish by description, it commands its domain with a seemingly lazy attitude but is very capable in aptitude. Lumbering along the bottom, it relies on camouflage, clumsy body movements and lightning fast speeds to strike and devour its prey. Its camouflage also makes it nearly imperceptible to divers and guides, and are oftentimes found by accident. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 1 INON Z-240 strobe, 1 Kraken 1000 dive light for backlighting.



Weedy scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*), Anilao, Philippines



Tasselled anglerfish (*Rhycherus filamentosus*), South Australia

Leafy seadragon. The leafy seadragon is straight out of a Dr-Suess-meets-Mother-Nature cookbook. A member of the *Syngnathidae* family, it shares the same family lines as the pipefish. Closely resembling the algae in which it hunts, it is found exclusively on the southern coast of Australia. It has slow, hypnotic movements, which allow this master of disguise to hunt and survive. A prized subject for collectors, these subjects are protected in South Australia, yet their numbers are steadily declining. Specs: Nikon D300s camera, Tokén 10-17mm lens, Zen port, 2 Sea&Sea YS-D1 strobes.

Tasselled anglerfish. Tasselled and angry, these guys certainly have attitude. Somehow Mother Nature jumped the tracks again with this one, seeming to have combined a puffer fish with a hairy frogfish. Aggressively mimicking its surroundings and using its built-in fishing tackle to attract and stimulate their prey, the tassy depends on its strike speed and gape—or gulping strike tactics—to survive. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 60mm lens, 1 Sea&Sea YS-D1, Reef net snoot.

Banggai cardinalfish. No article on crazy critters would be complete without paying

homage to Lembeh, its critters and guides. I was eager to photograph a Banggai with eggs when my guide told me that he found something even better! It took me several dives to get a second chance to photograph this very special occurrence. In this photograph, the young fry have actually hatched and are residing in the mouth of the parent, presumably a male. The fish was well hidden among spine urchins and tucked under plate coral just a few inches above the bottom. After waiting for what seemed like hours, the fish turned towards me and I was able to snap off a couple of images. Luckily, this image captured the





Pugheaded pipefish (*Bulbonaricus brauni*), Romblin, Philippines



moment. Specs: Nikon D300 camera, 105mm lens, 2 Sea&Sea YS-250 Pro strobes.

Pugheaded pipefish. Romblon has recently come onto the macro scene in the Philippines as a must-see destination, with a variety of unique subjects unto itself. It is not only one of the first places to find the *Melibe colemani* nudibranch reliably but other subjects as well, like the special pugheaded pipefish, which lives exclusively in *Galaxae* corals. It is small enough to be shot with a diopter but

difficult at best to photograph, as it tends to wrap itself tightly around the small coral cups. Taking a lower angle and waiting is key to capturing any image of this fish. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 2 Sea&Sea YS-D1 strobes.

Gulf signal blenny. The Sea of Cortez is not normally recognized as an underwater macro photography destination, being highly regarded for whales and larger animals. That is, unless you are looking for macro. Blennies

abound in the Sea of Cortez and can be found inhabiting rocks, stones, reefs and even the sand flats. There are also numerous nudibranchs to be found there. Hunting signal blennies can be a bit tricky. Moving slowly and keeping a close watch on the substrate ahead will help to locate them, as they are easily mistaken for twigs or even another type of fish. However, once they become active, there is no difficulty in identifying them. Their frantic up-and-down motions and flaring of their dorsal fins are unmistakable behaviors and have often frozen me in my place. Shooting them can be quite tricky as they are unpredictable at best. Specs: Nikon



Punk blenny (*Acanthemblemaria* sp.), Sea of Cortez, Mexico

Gulf signal blenny (*Emblemaria hypacanthus*), Sea of Cortez, or Gulf of California, Mexico



D300s camera, 105mm lens, 2 Sea&Sea YS-250 Pro strobes.

Punk blenny. It is impossible to get enough of this special blenny, which has earned its rightful place in the macro hall of fame for those who hunt them. So far, they have only been found at a few dive sites in the northern portion of the Sea of Cortez, which has most divers watching for sea lions. This particular subject (pictured) was hiding in a small alcove and was as small as a child's pinky finger. Timing is everything, as punker blennies love to bob in and out of their little holes, constructed between sponge and stone. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, Nauticam



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Cyerce sp
nudibranch,
Romblon,
Philippines

Psychedelic
frogfish
(*Histiophryne
psychedelica*)
Ambon,
Indonesia



Black hairy frogfish, (*Antennarius striatus*), in the Philippines



super macro converter (SMC) diopter, 1 INON Z-240 strobe, Retra snoot.

Psychedelic frogfish. It took me four trips to Ambon in South Papua to finally see this animal. Relatively new in discovery and description, the psychedelic frogfish create a huge stir in the macro photography community whenever they turn up. Hard to find and photograph at best, it is speculated that this species is a deeper dwelling frogfish of the *Histiophryne* variety. This class of frogfish lacks the formidable lures their brethren have, and brood their eggs in clutches attached near the tail of the female. Not much is known of their behavior,

unfortunately, as observing them can be quite difficult. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 1 Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobe, Retra snoot, INON LF-800N for backlighting.

Cyerce sp. nudibranch. Transparent, with flecks of colored pigment in its cerata, the cyerce nudibranch is a very special slug. I used a combination of lighting and snooting to bring out the colors of the slug from behind. The cyerce nudibranchs move with erratic start-stop body motions, which cause the cerata to flop over their cute facial features. Each time the lens locks in the focus, it decides to move on. "Grrrr," is a word I use a lot when shooting these deli-

cate creatures. Specs: Nikon D7100 camera, 105mm lens, 1 Sea&Sea YS-D2 strobe, Retra snoot, INON LF-800N for backlighting.

Okay, enough talk. Get out there, have an adventure and find some crazy critters of your own. □

Mike Bartick is a widely published underwater photographer and dive writer based in Anilao, Philippines. A small animal expert, he leads groups of photographers into Asia's underwater realm to seek out that special critter. For more information, visit: Saltwaterphoto.com.



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First Place,
Compact Camera,
Lens Beyond
Ocean 2016:
Clemence Swee,
Malaysia



Call for Entries and Sponsors: Lens Beyond Ocean International Photo Competition 2017

This year, a new category, "Free Diving," has been added to the roster of competition categories, which include Macro, Wide-Angle, Portfolio, Compact Camera, Creative, 3min Video and Young Talent.

Now in its seventh year, the annual international underwater photography competition, Lens Beyond Ocean, is accepting entries from 1 January 2017. Winners in each category will be chosen by an international panel of judges, with the winning photographs and videos to be displayed at the Malaysia International Dive Expo in Kuala Lumpur, May 12-14. **Deadline for submissions is April 15.**

Prizes

Since the competition's humble be-

ginning in 2011, it has grown each year, with over 500 underwater photographers from around the world participating for a chance to win fantastic prizes, including travel packages to some of the best dive spots in Asia as well as top-of-the-line dive gear and camera equipment.

One winner will be selected in each of the eight categories. Other images selected by the panel of judges will be awarded honorable mention as "Memorable Pictures." Winning videos will be showcased on the big screen on the main stage at MIDE.

New this year in the Portfolio category: The first place winner will be interviewed by the editor of X-Ray Mag!

New developments

Every year new aspects are incorporated into the competition to entice, encourage and motivate more underwater photographers and videographers around the world to capture in images the nature and won-

der of the underwater world. Through the years, with the exhibition open to the public, imagery by these artists have created greater awareness of the fragile beauty of the underwater realm among divers and non-divers alike.

The Young Talent category was added for young photographers, 10 to 18 years of age, to showcase their images. The aim of this category is to encourage youths to go diving, learn about marine environments and understand and appreciate the underwater world.

Call for sponsors

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For more information, please visit: Lensbeyondocean.com



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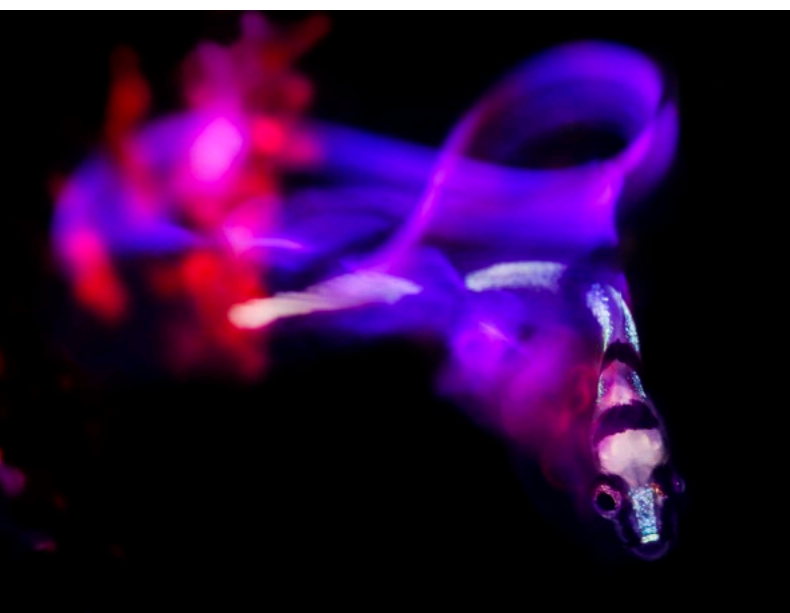
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First Place, Creative, 2016: Mohamed Abdulla, UAE





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Cinebags

The Square Grouper is a camera bag by Cinebags, which is specially designed for use on dive boats and to carry assembled underwater housing on location. Its waterproof construction in a heavy-duty tarpaulin fabric with saltwater resistant zippers means the bag can also function as your personal rinse tank. Its collapsible design makes it fit easily in your dive luggage. The storage pouches can hold accessories such as water bottles, sun screen, keys, spare o-rings or dome port covers. Cinebagsunderwater.com



Trio

The Trio from Spanish manufacturer Saga Dive is an assembly of three different interchangeable wet

diopeters. The Trio has two groups of lenses inside, one with +5 diopters and the other with +10. These two groups can be moved independently, so you can get four levels of magnification. The two levers make it easy to change lenses even while looking through the viewfinder. With the the two levers in the upper position, you can use your lens normally, even focusing to infinity without any vignetting. By pushing the first lever, we get one +5 diopter, with the second, one +10; and with the two levers in the lower position, we use the two groups of lenses and we get a +15 diopter lens. The trio is designed to be used with macro lenses such as the Canon 100mm or the Nikon 105mm but will also work with some 60mm or 180mm lenses.

Sagadive.com



360 Rig for GoPro

Another approach to filming 360-degree videos is to put six GoPros in a housing, and that is exactly what the Kolor Abyss Underwater 360 Rig is for. Made in Switzerland, out of anodized aluminum alloy, the Kolor Abyss has mineral glass lenses designed specifically to record videos without any distortion. The seven legs protect the domes from damage. The rig fits GoPro Hero 3, Hero 3+ and Hero 4. However, we have not been able to verify whether it will also fit the Hero 5. It is depth-rated to 150m (497ft) and will set you back (as of January 2017) US\$ 5,450 or € 4,457. It comes delivered with a waterproof Pelican case. Kolor.com



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KeyMission 360

Three-hundred-sixty-degree imaging seems to be the new fad. Nikon has the Nikon KeyMission 360 4K Action Camera, which is waterproof to 30m (100ft) without a housing. The new camera is capable of capturing spherical video in UHD 4K at 24p and stills in a 29 megapixel resolution. Reviews have been less than rosy; Both images and video as well software is reported to be subpar and it does not do a great job in low light. The stitching of images is also said to produce black lines. That said, we have not tested the camera ourselves at this juncture but aim to do so.



NikonUSA.com