

Northern California

— *A Dive off the American Wild West Coast*

Text and photos by Brent Durand





A wave surges past a wash rock in Northern California (above); Large fish-eating anemone, or *Urticina piscivora* (top right and previous page)

Warm rinse water slogged in the jug as my car hugged a sharp turn on California's Pacific Coast Highway. I looked left at the mighty Pacific Ocean, the cliffs tumbling to the sea dotted by rugged pinnacles, stretching farther up the coast than the jam band solo currently playing out of the car speakers. Deep blue, favorable conditions all week, minimal swell, no-wind forecast—only unpredictable visibility could affect the diving today.

The parking lot was empty as we unloaded and set up our gear on a downed redwood tree trunk. Today would be a wetsuit dive, since my dive buddy and I would be doing a lot of swimming. The cool steel 117 (15L) tanks were filled to the max. *Ziiiiip.*

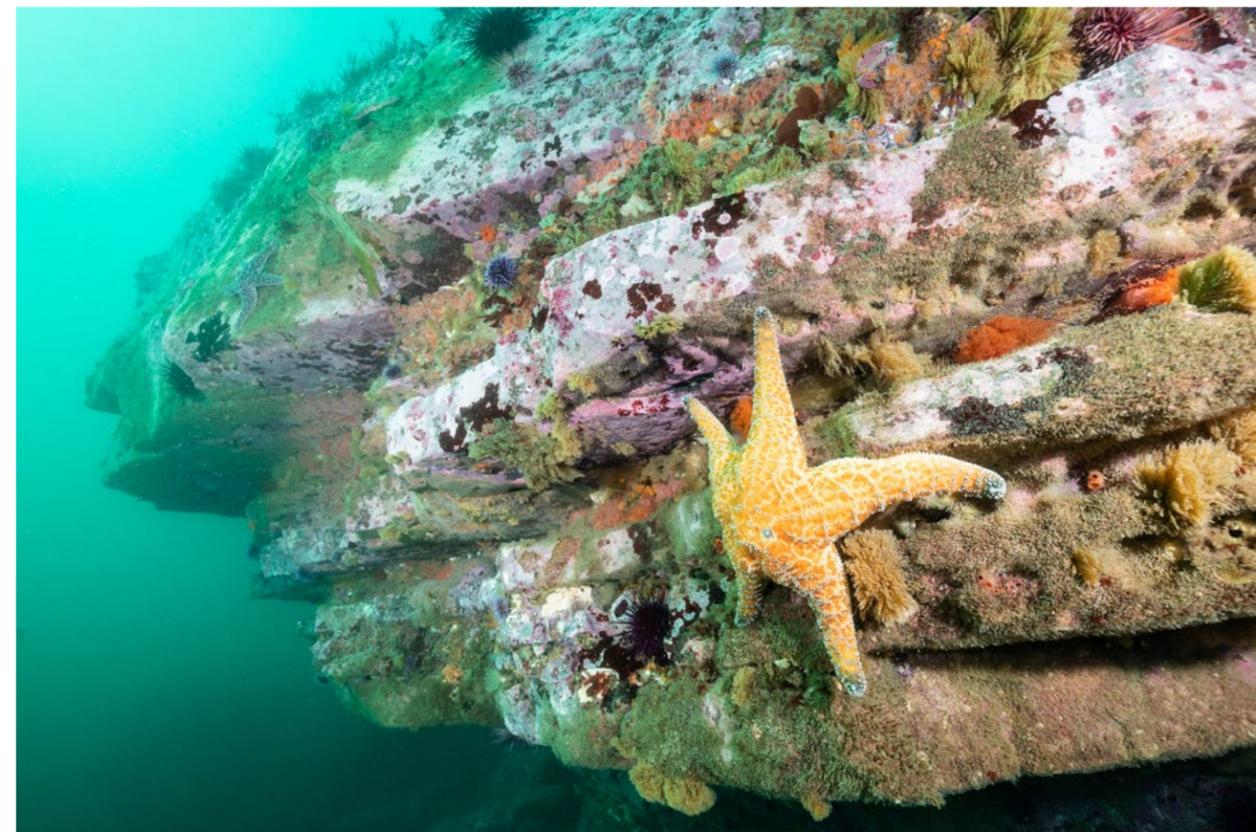
Snap. Clip. Clip. Zzzzzzz. Hoooooff.
"OK. Let's do it."

Soon, the soothing clasp of the sea compressed my legs as we walked over slippery rocks and rainbow leaf red seaweed (*Mazzaella splendens*) in the shallows. We kicked out towards a rock pinnacle in the center of the cove, our starting point for navigation, noting how

we could see the bottom in 20ft (6m) of water. *This would be epic!*

We descended into a playground of rocks and boulders, mirroring the wild coastline above. The eerie lack of kelp strangely felt normal—sad, indeed, but reflective of the human condition. I unclipped my camera and carefully unfolded the strobe arms, listening to the capacitors charge up as I turned each knob.

A shadow blinked through the sunlight. Is today the day I see "the Landlord"? I glanced up. Nope, no great white shark, just a jellyfish—of the Pacific sea nettle variety (*Chrysaora fuscescens*).



An ochre sea star (*Pisaster ochraceus*) clings to the rock reef.

Marine life

We started swimming west-southwest. Around here, some folks still believe one should never share exact coordinates—so take that for what it's worth. Most of the boulders were dotted with purple

sea urchins. Rockfish stared blankly from crevices. Chitons and topsnails were everywhere. Crabs scurried about. A kelp greenling swam by at a distance, curious but shy. Scallops peered out from under rough ledges. Each abalone made me



Several curious fish species aggregate around the interesting divers (top right).

smile. We kept swimming.

Gradually, we swam deeper. The shallow period surge left as the landscape dramatically changed, evidence I could only imagine of violent tectonic plate shifts. Massive rocks the size of houses tilted out of the earth as diagonal slabs, creating deep cracks, swim-throughs and mini-caves before dropping into 25ft (7.6m) walls, only to repeat and repeat as we navigated this rock city.

Rugged underwater landscape

The inside of each crack and the outside of each wall was covered in cup corals and strawberry anemones. At these depths, I could only imagine the force of winter swell funneling thick nutrient-rich water through these channels like a washing machine.

We kept swimming. The ambient light was much darker now. I noticed a metridium anemone (also known as plumose). A heavyweight green-mottled cabezon perched on a ledge,

and I paused to slowly approach. It darted off just as I put my finger on the shutter, all fins extended. I could not imagine a more realistic dinosaur.

Swimming again. A group of three metridium grew on a corner of a slab wall. We were getting closer. My light tracked over vibrant orange and red corynactis (strawberry or jewel anemone), then past another group of four metridium anemones. We swam over the edge of the slab and the sight before me made me giggle through the regulator.

Precipice

The rock dropped off dramatically into dark blue-green blurriness, which was breathtaking—but it glowed too. It glowed bright white. But wait, the white was many whites. It was hundreds of metridium anemones blanketing the upper half of the wall, extending well beyond visibility!

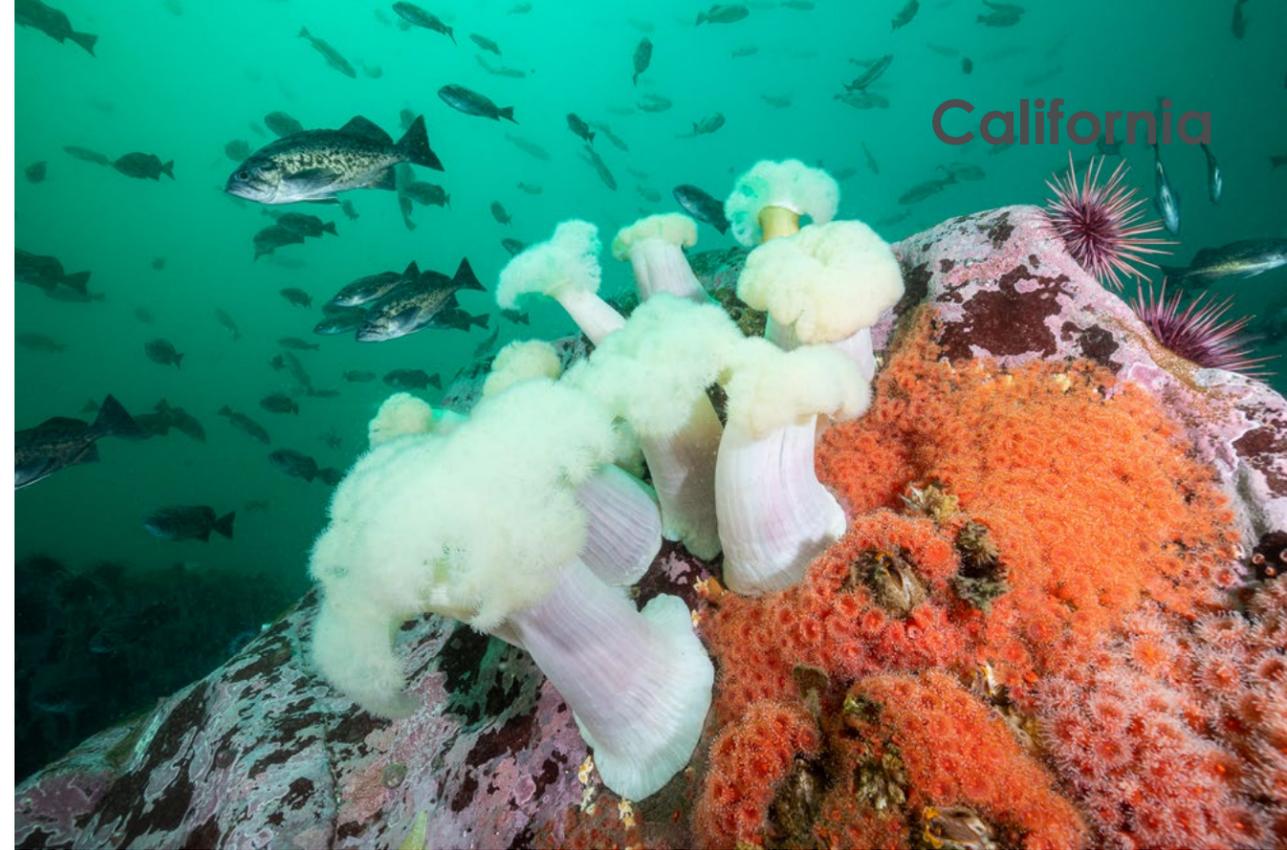
I snapped a few photographs, enthralled with the combination of

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A classic Northern California shallow reef scene with sea urchins, starfish and kelp (above); Ambient light illuminates an area with a series of large rock slabs (top left).



Metridium anemone and corynactis grow on a rock while blue rockfish swim overhead (above); The impressive wall densely colonized by metridium or plumose anemone, cup coral and corynactis or strawberry anemone (left and below)

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such rough landscape and delicate beauty. We had found it. That old diver with the piercing eyes had been right. He had given us the wrong directions, but we kept spending dive days searching and finally kicked into this incredible place with the method he had inspired—true exploration.

We were "all good vibes" on the surface swim back into the cove. A red-tailed hawk danced in an updraft off the cliff—perhaps a tip of the hat from Mother Nature? Soon enough, we were back in the parking lot, and I was pouring the jug of warm water over my head, already thinking about planning next week's dive. ■

An avid diver for over 20 years, Durand is a widely published underwater photographer and dive writer who has served as editor-in-chief of the Underwater Photography Guide and imaging expert at Scuba Diving Magazine and Sport Diver. With a reputation for insightful-yet-simple reviews and tutorial articles, he has written for most of the top dive publications. Helping hundreds of divers "take their photography to the next level," Durand has led underwater photography workshops in California, the Bahamas, Indonesia, Mexico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. For more information, visit: tutorials.brentdurand.com.

