

Turning into Voyeurs!

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Pictures© Shaun Tierney

It wasn't quite what we'd intended - to sit and watch others indulge in that which should really be kept private, but it's precisely what we did. It was 6pm on Kapalai Island and we were attending a peep show of a very special nature. Every night, just after sunset, you can slide beneath the jetty and see droves of tiny mandarin fish creating babies.

Beauty in miniature

We've been to many famous muck-diving sites and always hoped to see these intensely pretty little fish. And although we have often had a glimpse of them, actually capturing them on film has been much harder than almost any other subject we've come across. Shyness is an integral part of their nature. Mandarin fish keep very much to themselves, living in stable colonies amongst the cracks and crevices in coral rubble. There's plenty of hiding space and food is easy to come by.

But even if you know all that, spotting these members of the dragonet family is still pretty difficult. Until you put a light on them, they are just grey flitting shadows and only their latin name, *Synchiropus splendidus*, hints at their extravagant skin colouring. As adults they are rarely more than five centimetres long and when they do come out to play, they are only in the open for the time it takes the sun's fading rays to give way to complete darkness. All this adds up to the fact that finding them is nigh on impossible, so going to a place where there are known colonies ups your chances. And what helps even more is having a divemaster who has perfected a technique for introducing them to photographers.

It's all in the knack

Northern Borneo is mostly known for the magnificent walls and schooling pelagics off



Sipadan Island. Following hot on her heels, is neighbouring muck heaven Mabul. Nearby Kapalai is just a sand spit of an island, but one that's gaining it's own reputation for rare and unusual marine treats.

We leapt into the water from their dive jetty, and our divemaster led us just a few metres downwards, then signalled for us to stop. We could just make out the crew's shadowy feet cooling in the water above our heads. Our eyes adjusted as we sat patiently waiting for the light to fall to precisely the right level. Once it did, more than a dozen mandarins emerged from their lairs and started their evening courtship ritual. The tiny fish were dashing around, greeting their friends and pecking at the tiny crustaceans they feed on.

When he judged the time was right, divemaster Dodong turned on his Q40 torch but wrapped his hand tightly over the lens. Only a tiny bit of light leaked between his fingers as he followed the vague movements.

We'd glimpse two little shadows approaching each other, a larger male and a smaller female. Sometimes, she would back away but if she



All photos taken with a Nikon F90X, Sea & Sea housing, 60mm macro and 105 macro lenses. Fuji Provia to improve F stop. F16, aperture priority. Twin Ikelite 50 strobes.

fancied her suitor, the pair would rise upwards through the water until they were about 18 inches or more above the reef. Dodong would quickly spread his fingers and flash the torch beam onto them.

First roll down

We watched this process a few times, and saw how the system worked. With Shaun sitting between us, Dodong and I would make eye contact, watch a courting couple, then follow them up in the water column, hoping desperately that both Shaun and the camera focused on the lovers before our intrusive beams scared them off.

Twenty two minutes, 36 frames and a lot of mandarin kisses later, we exited the water grinning from ear to ear. Weid had as much fun as those little guys seemed to! Well, almost. As we

wandered back to our cabin, Shaun told me he had seen something floating in the water, the shutter would drop back down while I was still peering through the viewfinder and I could see a puff of white. Do you think that's eggs?

Only the best

A couple of nights later we headed back down to repeat the dive with the 105 lens. Knowing the system, we took a more leisurely pace and watched the interactions between the group. The girls were picky - not just any male would do. Several fish would be happily feeding when a larger male would make his first approach. Sometimes a pair would rise upwards only a few inches but the suitor would be rejected with a quick kiss and the female returned to her dinner.

Occasionally two males would appear to fight

over a favoured lady, a younger, less experienced male trying to muscle in on the action. But each female seemed to know when the man of her dreams had arrived, and accepting his proposition, the pair would swim up through the water with the lady resting on her lover's pelvic fin. After maybe five seconds, and at the height of their swim, they would pause for a brief moment, then disappear at the speed of light.

Hard evidence

As we followed the progress of courtship and mating between these tiny critters, Shaun noted again the blur of white left behind when they dipped back down to safety. However, it wasn't till our return home that we saw the proof. The cloud of white had indeed been mingled eggs and sperm.

We learnt that mandarin fish are the smallest of all marine species to spawn into open water. Like other spawners, they produce millions of eggs, but their parental duties are over once they're deposited into the water. The eggs drop down into the cracks of the coral and are left to grow into larvae. By projecting our images up, we even found a few frames with egg trails slipping from the female body. Not only had we become willing voyeurs, we'd witnessed the birth of a new generation of these exotic reef dwellers.

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