My Shots

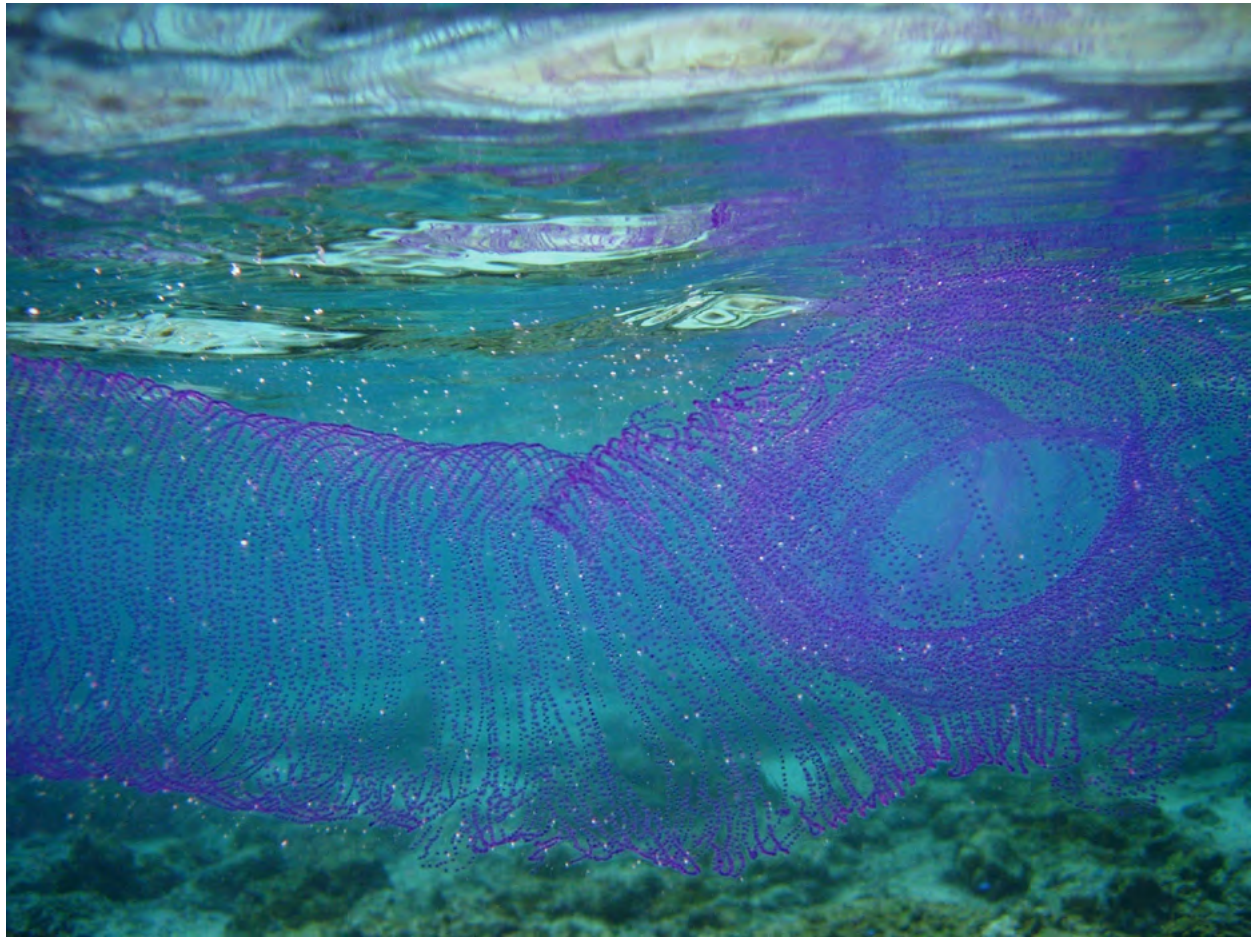
by John Huisman

A mystery, finally solved.

UwP issue 115 included an article and image in the 'Parting Shot' segment (#3) by Richard Howes, the image showing a strange spiral creature that was observed while diving off the island of Tongatapu in Tonga. It was suggested that the creature was a pyrosome, which is a free-floating colonial tunicate that can reach a remarkable size of up to 18 metres long. Richard's image jolted my memory of having seen and photographed the same species, this leading to some lengthy detective work to try and establish what it was I had encountered.

In February 2006, I was participating in a marine biology survey of Scott Reef, over 300 km off the coast of north-west Western Australia on the edge of the continental shelf. Scott Reef is massive reef system comprising two separate atolls, the horseshoe shaped South Reef and the slightly smaller, circular North Reef. Combined, the two reefs and their lagoons cover an area of approximately 250 km2; these are certainly significant structures!

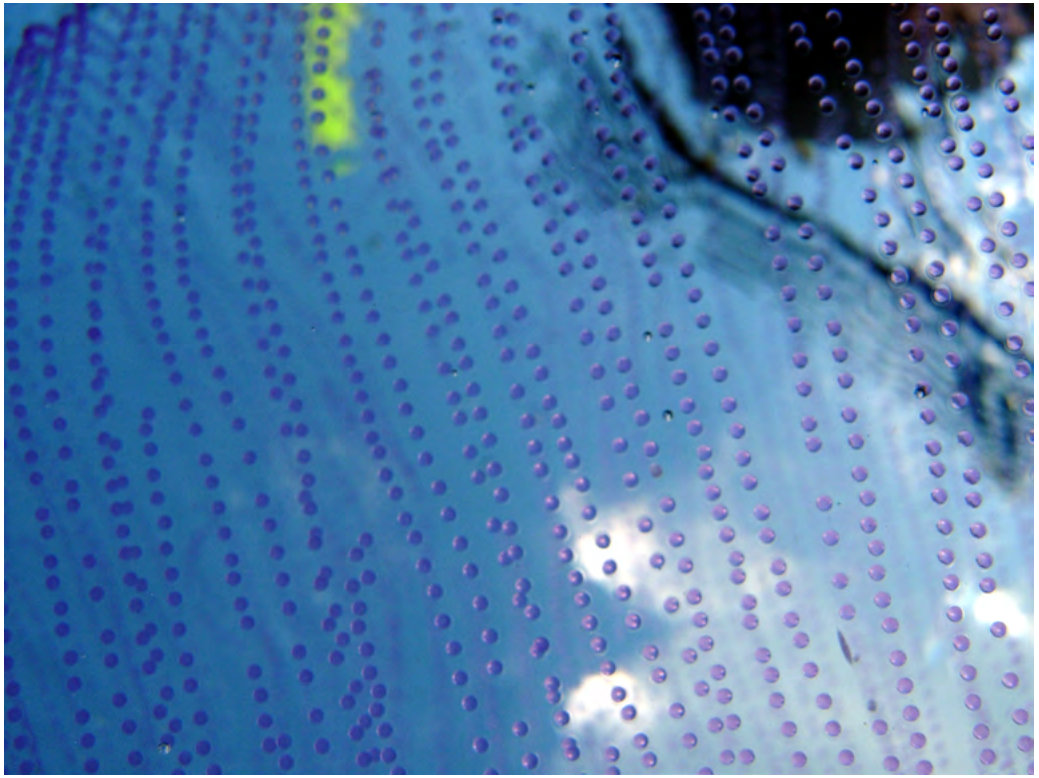
Towards late afternoon I was snorkelling at high tide on the reef flat, in about 2-3 metre depth water, when I noticed an unusual spiral organism, something I had never seen before, floating just beneath the surface. Curiosity suitably aroused, I approached it slowly, taking photos on my small point'n'shoot Nikon Coolpix 4600, my first digital camera having just graduated from a Nikonos V. Close viewing didn't help me identify this strange creature, which bore a striking resemblance to a 'slinky', the children's toy that many readers will be familiar with. It was about 2 metres long, composed of a long strand, coiled into a spiral of about 15 cm diameter. I took several general shots, and then also some macro images of the structure of the strands.



Nikon Coolpix 4600 in a Nikon housing. Exposure details not recorded.

Thinking that what I was seeing was so distinctive that someone will know what it is, I headed back to the boat, sure that my strange creature will be easily identified. Back on board I showed people my images, to a universal response of 'no idea'. The macro shots showed that the strands were clear (probably mucilage) and contained thousands of spherical bodies, which I guessed might be eggs. But what might have laid them? It must surely have been something large to produce an egg mass of this size. What I did not do is to take a small sample. Being a marine biologist, I might have been able to use DNA forensics to try and identify what I had just seen, but you can't do that from a photograph so it was not an option.

Like Richard, I sought an answer on the internet. Pyrosomes did seem to be an option, but the structure was totally wrong.



I posted the images to various sites and was offered some suggestions, but eventually these also settled on eggs of an unknown source. My searching did reveal other images of the same spiralled egg mass, some with suggestions that it was a stinger to be avoided (it is not).

Seeing Richard's image in the recent UwP brought it all back and reinvigorated my search. To my surprise, this time I hit on the answer. They are the eggs of the Diamondback squid (Thysanoteuthis rhombus), a large squid that can grow up to one metre in length and 24 kg total body weight. These squid are found worldwide in tropical and subtropical seas. They have a unique social organisation (for squid), living throughout their life cycle in couples of similar sizes. Encountering their eggs is a rare event. One of the articles I read noted that only a couple of dozen such egg masses had been recorded worldwide. So, mystery finally solved, and Richard and I can count ourselves amongst the select few that have seen these things in the wild.

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