Close Encounter

by Gerald Legg

As far as diving is concerned Covid 19 has made this year the worst one for me but at least I saw my first common stingray, (Dasyatis pastinaca). Fortunately, my daughter lives at Birdham on the Selsey Peninsula, West Sussex so she is only a short drive to the shores, either on the SE or SW. The Life-boat station used to be our popular bimbling site but that has now gone, however the sublittoral along the SE shore is rich in life and makes easy diving provided you are aware of boat traffic and the potentially fast tides and take the necessary precautions.

During most of our dives off Sussex we record what we see as part of the on-going Seasearch Surveys (see http://www.seasearch.org.uk/ and specifically Sussex: https://sussexwildlifetrust.org.uk/what-we-do/living-seas/sussex-seasearch). Voluntary divers are trained to record and submit data that is incorporated into a national system and used in marine planning etc.

At the time I only had my GoPro Hero 5 with me and not my full Olympus photographic rig. We were lazily drifting with the tide a hundred or so metres off the east beach. The seabed along this part of the coast is shallow and gently sloping consisting of small boulders, cobbles, areas of pebbles and other sediments with outcrops of bedrock (fossiliferous clay: Selsey Formation of the Bracklesham Group) and man-made structures.

Tide swept, it supports a rich and diverse growth of algae that provide refugia for many species of fish and invertebrate. By the early summer the mermaids' tresses, Chorda filum, form long tangling strands reaching several metres in length (quite annoying for divers!).

As I waited for my daughter to take some images, I noticed a blue-grey flat object that I thought was a piece of junk plastic so slowly finned over to clean it up. It came to life, flapped and swam off into the gloom. I was in a quandary, do I follow it or delay and get my daughter's attention so she could see it, in the event I was able to do both so she had a glimpse and I was able to track it for a few seconds. What I did not immediately notice was the absence of a tail which suggests that it may have been caught and mutilated or perhaps something had taken a bite.

Tailless, common stingray (Dasyatis pastinaca) disturbed while resting among a rich growth of mixed seaweeds at a depth of four metres off Selsey Bill, West Sussex, UK. GoPro Hero 5, frame grab from video. Video resolution 1080p, 120 frames per second, narrow screen setting, screen resolution 1920x1080, aspect ratio 16:9, auto ISO.

The UK only has scattered records for this benthic fish around British waters (see: https://www.marlin.ac.uk/species/detail/2326). Parts of the Sussex coast are ideal for stingrays, (sandy and muddy sea-beds are its preferred habitats) and they occur more commonly than people realise, even close to some of the popular beaches, but they are still regarded as rare, and 'near threatened by the IUCN.

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Close Encounter 2

by David Fleetham

I was making my way over the sand channel in Molokini Marine Preserve when I spotted this bridled or masked triggerfish, Sufflamen fraenatum. It was fussing about in the sand and on closer inspection I saw the marlin spike auger, Terebra maculata, was the focus of its attention.

The shell was around four inches long and it was unclear to me what the triggerfish planned to do. A second later it became obvious. It blew the sand away from the open end of the shell and then grabbed the pointy end in its mouth while swimming backwards.

As the shell emerged it quickly grabbed the animal and pulled a long spaghetti like strand which it quickly slurped down like, well, spaghetti. I snapped a few more shots and then checked on my air and looked around for Maui Dive Shops boat which was luckily right above me.

Molokini is unique in that the marine life there encounters divers over and over every day of the year. I don't think the triggerfish would have continued its attack were it not so used to bubble blowing humans.

Bridled triggerfish can have a white ring just forward of their tail. This was not present when I first arrived and then flashed on when the action began. Marlin spike augers live under the surface during the day but a seasoned dive guide can detect the trail of disturbed sand, follow it to where it ends and dig out the animal. I'm not sure if this is what happened in this case. The auger was already quite visible when I arrived but it is worth noting that many animals select the sand for protection so any uncovered living shells should go back below the sand for their protection.

Shot this with a Canon 5D mark IV and a Sigma 70mm f/2.8 EX DG ART Auto Focus Macro Lens, f/14, 1/60sec, ISO160, in an Ikelite dry-lock housing behind two 42mm extensions and Ikelites DL Compact 8 inch Dome Port with twin Ikelite 161 strobes set on TTL.

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