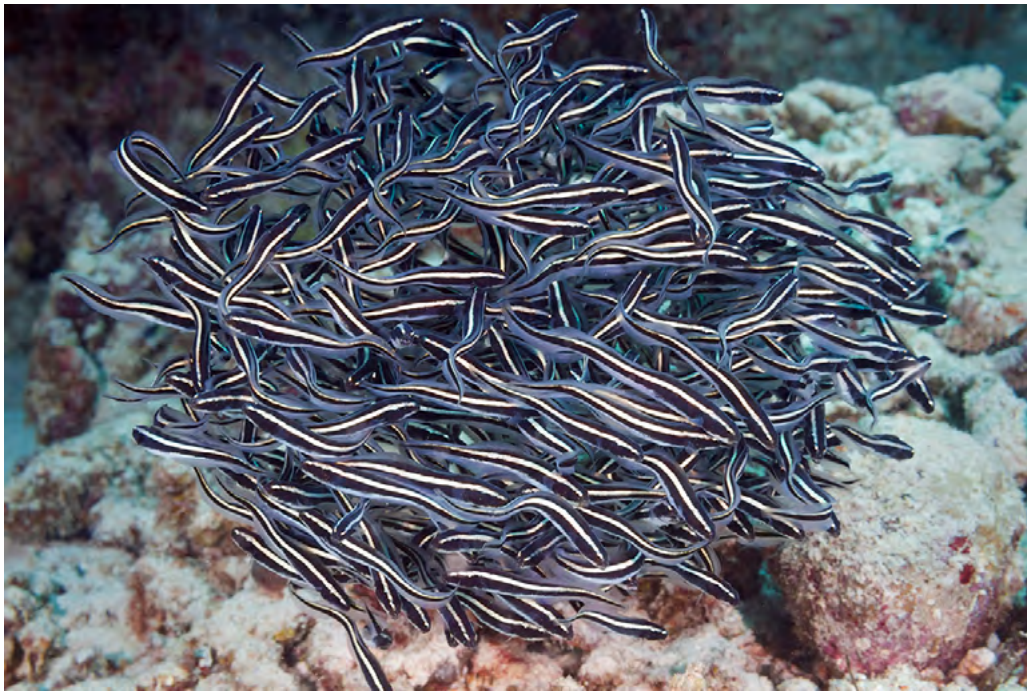




Convict Blennies. Canon 7D mk II / Tamron 90 macro at 1/100 sec., f/18, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes in manual mode set at half power.

the largest species of dartfish, growing to lengths of up to 6 inches. Divers who venture into middle depths of 6 to 15 meters can look for the fire dartfish (*Nemateleotris magnifica*), which are often found in pairs, and sport a distinctive flame-like coloration from the mid-section to the tail. Deeper still are the decorated dartfish (*Nemateleotris decora*) which favor the sand-covered shelves and gullies on reef slopes at depths from 15 to 30 meters.

Convict Labor

The name convict blenny (*Pholidichthys leucotaenia*) may not seem like a suitable title for this small fish, but these bottom dwellers are quite engineering when it comes to building a burrow. You are most likely to encounter juveniles of this species, as they form schools numbering into the hundreds to swarm the reefs feeding on algae. These youngsters might be mistaken for striped catfish, as they mimic the markings of this highly toxic species in order to fool



Bluestreak cleaner wrasses: shot with Nikon D850 / Nikon 105mm macro at 1/250 sec., f/16, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Retra Prime strobes in manual mode set at 50.

would-be predators. Adults are far more reclusive, spending most of their day peering from the mouth of the tunnels they excavate in the sand – hence the engineering reference. If you do happen to see an adult emerge, you'll understand the convict appellation, as mature fish take on eel-like profiles with distinctive white stripes on a black background, much like classic prison apparel.

The Cleaning Con

The upper expanses of Wakatobi's House Reef are covered in cleaning stations where cleaner wrasse dance and dart about to attract customers. There's a built-in degree of trust involved when a reef predator pauses with jaws agape, allowing a phalanx of small fish and shrimp to swarm over its body and into the mouth to remove parasites, dead skin, and troubling infections. But there is one devious denizen of the reefs that exploits the ethos of the cleaning



Crocodilefish. Canon 7D mk II / Canon 60 macro at 1/100 sec., f/32, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes in manual mode set at half power.

station. The blue-striped fangblenny (*Plagiotremus rhinorhynchus*) mimics the appearance and behavior of a juvenile bluesreak cleaner wrasse. But instead of picking parasites, this fang blenny takes a bite of flesh. This fish's namesake fangs can dispense a pain-numbing venom containing morphine-like opioids that keep the victim from feeling the nip.

Luxurious Lashes

There's a stealthy hunter living on the reefs of Wakatobi, but most

divers will swim right past this fish without noticing its presence. Like their namesake reptile, the crocodilefish is an ambush predator that spends most of its time lying motionless on a reef outcropping, waiting patiently for a meal to swim within range of a well-timed lunge. These fish are masters of camouflage and can adapt their body's coloration and patterning to match their surroundings.

Crocodilefish also overcome one of the more common giveaways that plague stealth hunters — the eyes. To



Palette surgeonfish: shot with Canon 7D mk II / Canon 60 macro at 1/160 sec., f/14, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes in manual mode set at half power.

conceal their keen-orbed countenance, these fish grow long, lash-like growths known as lappets. The irregular, lacy shapes of these lappet growths help to break up the dark, reflective contours of the eyes, which might otherwise alert potential prey to this predator's presence.

A Star Is Born

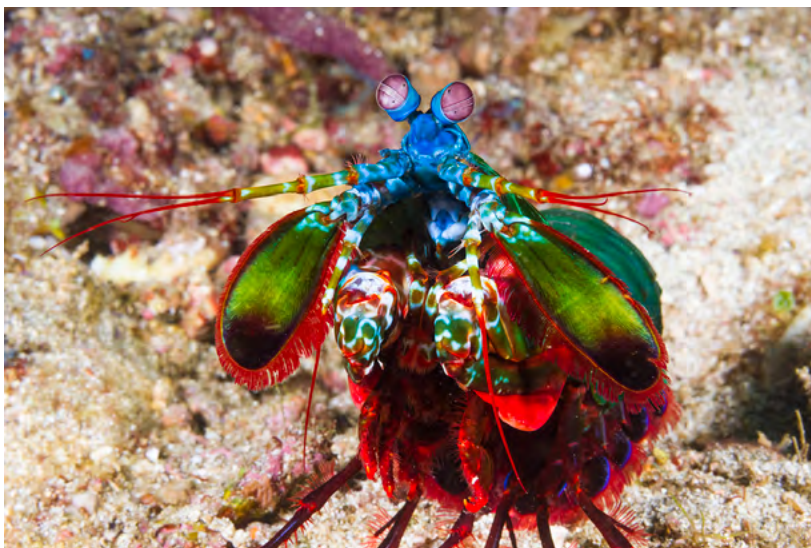
Hollywood made a star out of a small bright-blue fish named Dory. You can find her real-world counterpart on Wakatobi's House

Reef, though you might be as confused as the cartoon character when it comes to names. Palette surgeonfish (*Paracanthurus hepatus*), doctorfish, regal blue tang, flagtail surgeonfish, and letter-six fish are just a few of the nearly dozen common names that this fish is known by. By any name, there's no mistaking the distinctive indigo and navy-blue color pattern sported by adults of the species. Equally iconic as its coloration is this surgeonfish's pointed, snout-like nose, small mouth, and dainty teeth. This diminutive

dental work is used to dislodge small bits of algae from corals and rocks, giving Dory's real-life relatives an important role in keeping corals free from algal overgrowth.

Claws of Fury

Their alien-like visage and iridescent stalk-set eyes make mantis shrimp a macro photo favorite. Most famous is the colorful peacock mantis, which can strike its prey with hammer blows that pack a punch equivalent to a 22-caliber bullet. But these lethal smashers aren't the only stomatopods prowling the House Reef. There's another member of the mantis clan that attacks with equal ferocity, and it's a slasher. Rather than smash open hard-shelled prey, the spearing mantis shrimp impales fish and other soft-bodied creatures with a lightning-fast deployment of its barb-tipped appendages.



Peacock Mantis Shrimp. Canon 7D mk II / Canon 60 macro at 1/180 sec., f/19, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes in manual mode set at half power.

Hiding In Plain Sight

The *O. cyanea* – big blue octopus – is also known as the day octopus for its diurnal behavior. And while exposing its soft and unprotected flesh to the light of day might seem a risky practice, this octopus has a plan: you can't eat what you can't see. While most all have a talent for visual deception, the day octopus is particularly adept at camouflage, able to change both the color and texture of its skin in short order in

a near-perfect match of its surroundings. This ability serves both to foil would-be predators and to conceal the octopus from its own victims. Observers have recorded day octopuses changing their appearance more than 100 times over the course of a few hours.



Day Octopus. Canon 7D mk II / Tokina 10-17 fisheye at 1/125 sec., f/8, ISO 200. Lighting: dual Sea & Sea YS-250 strobes in manual mode set at half power.



Nikon D850/ Nikonos 13mm fisheye at 1/250 sec., f/11, ISO 400. Lighting: dual Retra Prime strobes in manual mode set at 25.

Really Don't Bite

Though often seen on some dive sites at Wakatobi, one of the most lethal hunters in the water isn't actually a reef dweller. Banded sea kraits are actually air-breathing reptiles that live ashore and make breath-holding hunts among the corals and seagrass beds. A sea krait can remain underwater for up to a half hour, when is plenty of time to locate prey and administer a lethally paralyzing bite.

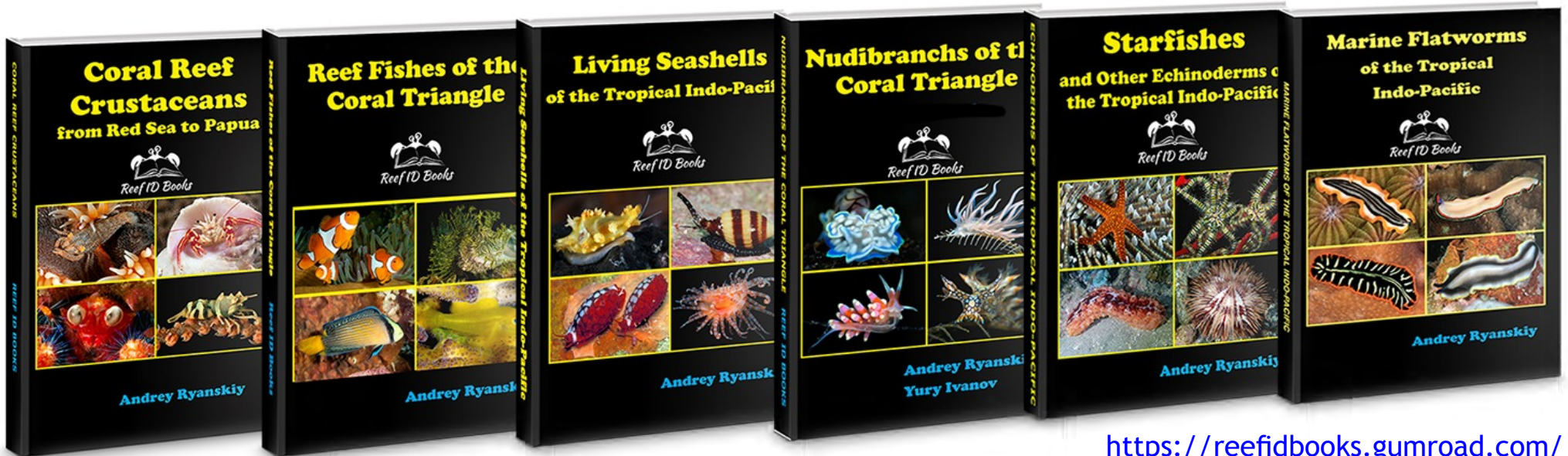
The venom of a sea krait is ten times more powerful than a cobra's, but divers have little to fear. These snakes aren't aggressive — though it would be extremely unwise to poke a finger too close in a threatening manner. Wakatobi is also home to an imposter. Banded snake eels display

the same distinct white-and-black bands of the sea krait, counting on this visual misdirection to fool would-be predators. A closer look reveals subtle differences, as the krait's body is more rounded, and it has a small, blunted head.

This is just a small sampling of what can be found on Wakatobi's House Reef. And as many underwater photographers who have experienced this menagerie of marine life can attest, it is truly deserving on its title as World's Best Shore Dive.

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