

Polyamorous Mandarins

by Diggy Desai

As a young kid, I recollect how small little kaleidoscopes were sold outside the Gateway of India. Little colourful broken pieces of glass bangles would twist and dance into formations. A complete wonder & treat to the eyes.

Now imagine my surprise when a tiny little fish reminded me of similar colours. The mandarin fish (dragonet family) *Synchiropus splendidus* is one of the most colourful denizens of the ocean.

Mandarin was a name given after the colourful robes worn by bureaucrats during the Chinese imperial period. These bohemian-coloured fish put on a very special 20-minute show each evening for diving spectators. I have titled the show “Polyamorous” which you will realize fits in aptly as you read further. And what a fine show it is!

Chances are you may completely miss the climax if not extremely attentive. No worries though, as the show repeats every evening at the same time, with no extra charges.

The mating rituals of these dragonets are a pleasure to watch and have their own peculiar patterns. Polyamorous is defined as “sexual

sharing among two or more females and two or more males” The actors though, are very difficult to spot in the hard corals they hide in during the day.

Showtime is when they boldly reveal their amorous activities right in the open. Mating usually occurs within 20 minutes of sunset when the females gather and wait till a male comes by. The females that mate may not do so again for a few days.

And as far as males go, size matters. Larger males are preferred by females. Spawning takes place between males and females weekly throughout the year. And each day different dragonets fill in (the encyclopaedia of life).

During spawning, close to 200 eggs can be released in the water to combine with the sperm of the male fish. The parents, being complete show persons, do not involve themselves in caring for the eggs, the large number being a buffer against complete loss.

Incubation is about 12 hours for each egg and mortality rates are high as they are consumed by other fish. But a few do survive and continue the mating ritual and tradition. The show



A female mandarin fish patiently waits for the right male at dusk. All underwater images were shot with a Canon 1DXmk3 and 100 mm Macro lens

must go on as they say.

Due to a secret mucous secretion on their bodies that repel predators, these fish don't have much to worry about. Their bright fluorescent colours may also help in signalling off predators (Savdovy et al 2005) BUT photographing these elusive and secretive fish is a completely different ball game. Many, including me, have come home disappointed with nothing to show on camera.

There is a reason for this and hopefully the next few tips will help you get stunning images of these elusive fish and their amorous

activities.

1) Very finicky during the day they prefer to hide within debris or hard coral

2) They usually come out in the open for fleeting seconds every evening at twilight or just as the sun sets for their Polyamorous activities.

3) Bright white focus lights are something they shy away from.

4) The best moment to capture these fish on an image is when they mate. They do this every evening. Problem is this mating episode does not last too long.

After a few failed attempts I finally

(Left) Entire harem of females is being guarded by a male.

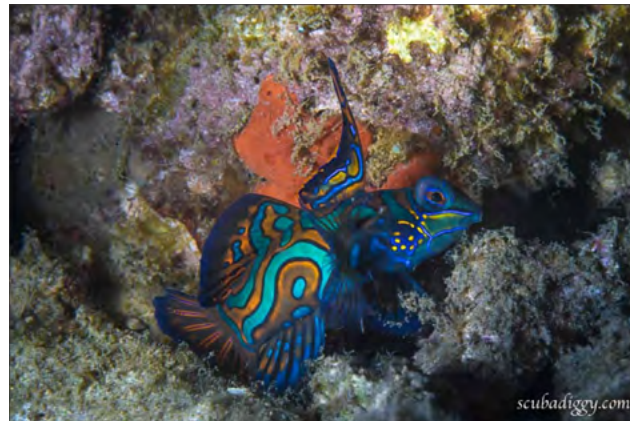
(Bottom left) The crucial moment is the male flashing his dorsal fin. Just after that, mating proceeds.

(Right) Mating.

found that some steps do help in getting these elusive fish on camera.

Day 1)

- If you have a couple of days diving then step number one is to just go observe them for the first evening.
- Once you find a mandarin don't lose sight of it. If a female it will be waiting for a male and if a male, he will be moving to find females. So trick is stay with the mandarin.
- As they are averse to bright white focus lights, get used to using red lights. Adjust your eyes to observe them with these lights. They don't quite mind basking in crimson.
- If you observe carefully, you will find that the male (usually larger) will start moving its dorsal fin up and down once he finds a female.
- This is that crucial moment. Once he starts moving this fin the next moment is when they both move up and out of the corals to mate.
- The next feeling you will get is damn, why did I not take images and just observe. But trust me the observation method helps tremendously with more chances of success the next evening. I know after having failed miserably the first evening.

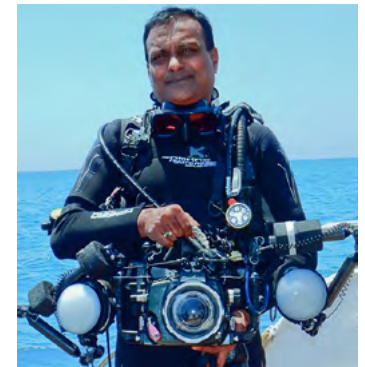


Day 2)

- Now that you understand how this works make sure you know your camera and can operate the same blindly.
- If using a compact like a TG 6 or similar, a single external flash is of great help along with a focus light with red mode.
- If using a mirrorless, the same principals as above apply but make sure you have a fast macro lens.



- For Mandarins I have found longer focal lengths more helpful as you get more distance from your subject.
- Also allot a separate focus button at the back of your housing rather than trying to half press the shutter button for focus. Please remember that unless you are lucky the mandarins won't allow you a peep into their amorous activity. Timing is of essence here.
- DSLR user all the above applies.
- Not that one may have much choice but try and be at a place where there is just water in the background and not coral. This will allow a black background. In my case I had no such luck. Try and use the highest shutter speed your camera allows with a strobe and use a larger aperture to highlight the mandarins and blur the background.
- As you may be stationary in one place for a long duration make sure of an appropriate wetsuit thickness to avoid feeling cold.



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