

Drive-In Diving South Florida's Urban Nudis

by Gabriel Jensen

South Florida is known for its glitzy nightlife, endless condos, engineered canals, and sordid history- but it should also be known as a world-class dive destination for Sea slug enthusiasts.

Stretching between Jupiter in the North all the way to the world-famous South Beach, The South Florida metropolitan area is bordered by the nutrient-rich Everglades to the West and the 3rd largest reef tract in the world to the East. Well known to local divers, much of the region's best wildlife can be found in the urban canals and under roadway bridges. There are endless viral videos of sharks, dolphins, crocodiles, manatees, and goliath groupers taken from dazzled passersby as they jog across bridges or peek into canals, but sea slugs seem to get lost in the cast of underwater characters.

Having taken a particular interest in Nudibranchs, I was delighted to find that nearly every interesting genus of sea slug prized by photographers in the Eastern Pacific was represented by at least one similar species in Florida.

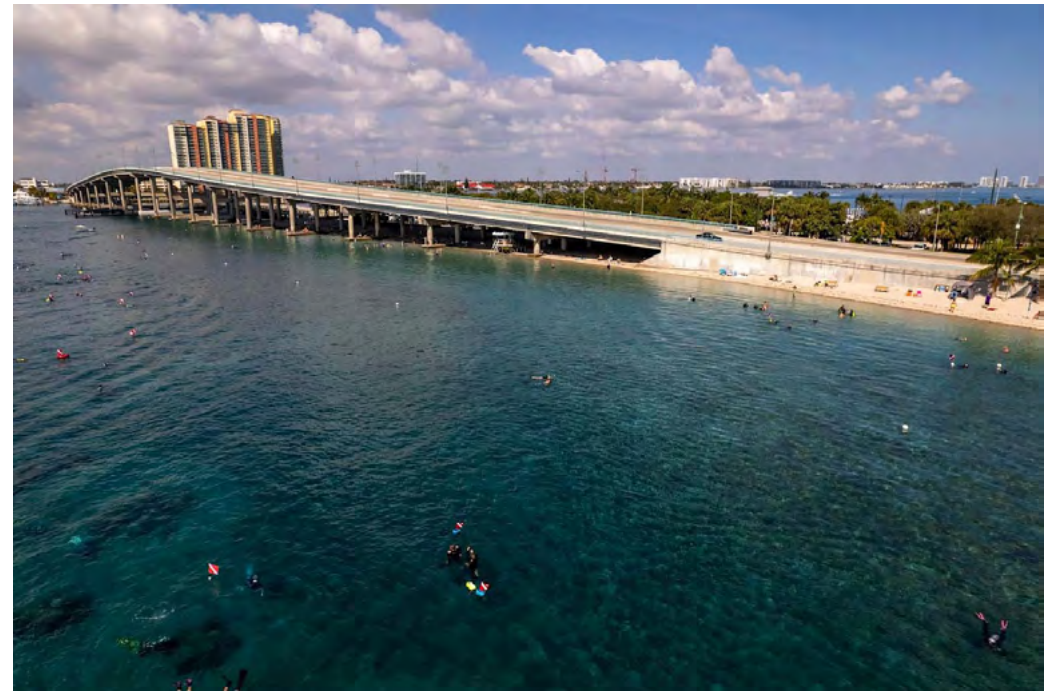
Now on a quest to save on my cross-pacific airfare, please join me while we look at the incredible variety of sea slugs thriving just a stone's throw away from the busy roadside.

Under the Bridges and in the canals:

The most famous and extensively covered dive site in North America is the Blue Heron Bridge.

While it is widely regarded as the most accessible place in the region to find sea slugs, there are other bridges that capture most of the same magic and, more importantly, have varying levels of salinity - a key ingredient for finding a variety of sea slugs. Swimming slowly, I've discovered that each habitat has its own smorgasbord of slugs.

Cratena peregrina is a common sighting at all high salinity shore based locations, and they prefer coming out at night. This Nudibranch will flare its nematocyst lined cerata at you if you shine your light for too long. Photographed using Sony a6500, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro + Nauticam CMC-2, Backscatter MF-2 x2, F22 1/100s, ISO100, DMF mode.



Blue Heron Bridge - world class subjects and access





A Pair of Felimare juliae pose on the most productive sponge for spotting sea slugs, Dysidea etheria, common on shallow sections of the Florida reef tract. Photographed using Sony a6500, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro, Backscatter MF-2 x2, F22 1/160s, ISO100, DMF mode.



Felimida clenchi is a rubble dweller found under the bridges, in the canals, and off the beaches. Photographed using Sony a6500, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro + Nauticam CMC-2, Backscatter MF-2 x2, F11 1/100s, ISO100, DMF mode.

The Wide-Open Prairie:

I believe the prettiest sea slugs are the solar-powered cousins of nudibranchs, the sacoglossans. They thrive in the seagrass environments in the intracoastal saltwater 'lakes' that form inside the major inlets.

Lake Boca, Lake Worth Lagoon, Haulover, and upper Biscayne Bay via Rickenbacker Causeway have seagrass meadows; all great places to park your ride and suit up for a slug hunt in front of very confused party boats.

The Busy Beachside:

The Florida Reef Tract comes within 100 meters of dry land in some parts of Broward County, providing easy shore access to sunlit shallow reefs teeming with sea slugs. The only con is working to get the sand off before heading home.

All of these unique ecosystem must be approached with the same sense of responsibility and conservation as any other habitat.

Tips for finding Roadside Nudibranchs

1. Choose the Right Time: Opt for diving near the high or low slack tides to take advantage of calmer conditions. This is critical around bridges where tidal currents can be extreme. Tidal Information is freely available from various surf forecasting websites.

2. Memorize what they eat: This goes for finding nudis everywhere, but knowing what your target sea slug

eats means you have a better chance of tuning your focus and spotting them.

Paying special attention to the algae and sea sponge sections of ID books like Caribbean Reef Life by Micky Charteris can give you the edge when looking for these tiny treasures.

3. Bring extra magnification: While there are a few jumbo hotdog size nudibranchs in the region, you'll find there are many, many more beautiful and colorful pinto bean or grain of rice size slugs on each dive.

Take advantage of these plentiful



Coryphella Verta is a hydroid dweller common under local bridges, imaged here using a shimmer background. Photographed using Sony A7RIII, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro + Nauticam SMC-1, INON z330 x2, F18 1/100s, ISO100, DMF mode.

tiny subjects by bringing some extra help for your long macro lens in the form of a wet magnification lens. I am a fan of the Nauticam CMC and SMC series of magnifiers because of their edge to edge corner sharpness.

4. Prepare for backscatter: Many of these environments suffer from excess nutrient runoff, so visibility can range from 50 feet+ to just past your



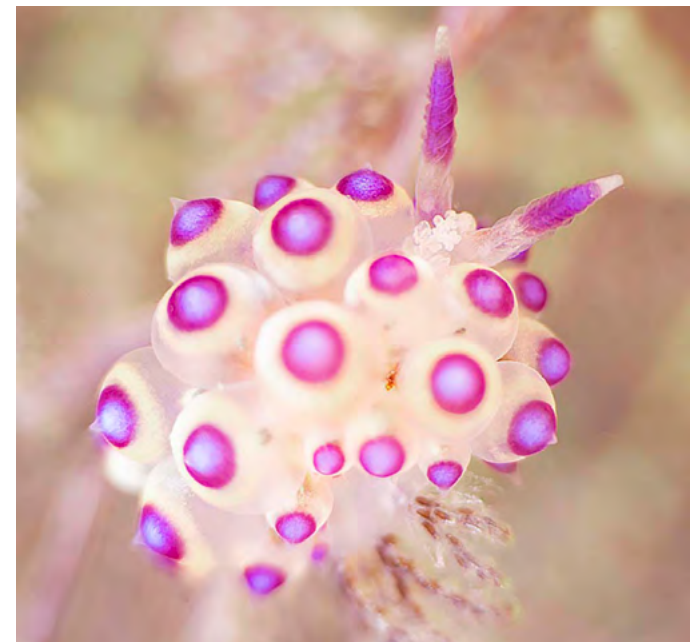
Plocamoperous Lucayensis exclusively lives on the purple feather bryozoans which tend to encrust submerged concrete structures. A common find in winter, they will hide during the day and come out at night. Double snooted image from behind and from on top. Photographed using Sony a6500, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro + Nauticam CMC-2, Backscatter MF-2 x2, F16 1/160s, ISO100, DMF mode.

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Bringing light control devices like snoots or artificial backgrounds can help you combat the backscatter and separate your subject from the muck. I use a Backscatter MF-2 due to their ease of use, and robust design for mucky environments.

5. Use a Dive Flag: These are some of the busiest waterways on the planet, full of jet skiers and pleasure boats ready to end your underwater imaging-making career. Using a flag lets them know to slow down- especially important since most of these dives are so shallow.

In conclusion, the roadside nudibranchs



Janolus cf flavoannulatus is an introduced species of nudibranch native to Southeast Asia, now a rare find at various Palm Beach County bridges, including the Blue Heron Bridge. 10mm Juvenile Photographed using Sony a6500, Nauticam Housing, Sony 90mm Macro + Nauticam CMC-2, INON z330 x2, F11 1/160s, ISO100, DMF mode.

of South Florida offer a unique and accessible opportunity for underwater photographers and marine enthusiasts to explore the ocean's wonders. By diving into these coastal waters, we not only witness the beauty of these creatures but also become stewards of their conservation. Let us celebrate the hidden treasures that lie just next to our ordinary roadsides.

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