

The Nudibranchs and flatworms of Ligpo Island

by Nonoy Tan

It is 10 o'clock in the evening, I have just completed my second night dive. Although it has been an exhausting day, I exit the shore with a usual smile of delight. Again, the waters of Ligpo Island have not disappointed me. Ligpo always presents me with something new to discover, and I always finish an entire roll of film during each dive.

Located 100 kilometers south of the Philippine capital of Metro Manila, Ligpo Island can be reached by a two-hour land travel and a 10-minute boat ride. With a tiny land area, the island can be circumnavigated in one dive.

Divers love Ligpo for its magnificent drop-offs. On its south and west sides, huge coral fans stretch out against the water current. One hundred feet below, divers encounter seasonal pelagics; Ligpo is a popular destination for wall and recreational deep diving.

Not known to many, however, it is also a haven for critters. The waters on the north and east sides of the island are shallow (from 10 to 40 feet). In this area lives a circus of small creatures that makes a muck diver like me ever happy. It is home to the ghostpipefish, blue-ring octopus, spearer mantis shrimp, orangutan crab, frogfish,

crocodile snake eel, flamboyant cuttlefish, seamoth, dragonet, squat lobsters, just to name a few. Among all the critters, however, the nudibranchs and flatworms are the superstars.

I have done several hundred dives during the last five years, but I am amazed at how Ligpo still gives me the thrill of discovering new shapes, patterns and colors of the nudibranchs. A dive is not complete without a nudibranch photo opportunity. Even at night, it is common to encounter the Spanish dancer with its commensal emperor shrimp, or a green flatworm emerging from a sea squirt. Sometimes, the evening reveals strange species of nudibranchs or flatworms that I haven't identified up to now. With such a large nudibranch population, Ligpo is one of the best places to observe these critters feeding, resting, laying eggs, competing, courting, and mating.

Although nudibranchs are hermaphrodites, they normally need a partner to mate successfully. By chemoreception, they are able to recognize a potential partner. When the pair meets, the process of courtship proceeds with body contact. At this point, the genitalia located at the right side of their necks are





Portrait of Nembrotha kubaryana. Nikon F100, Ikelite Housing, 105mm 2.8 AF lens, Ikelite Substrobes 200, RVP135, F18, 1/250, TTL



A pair of Nembrotha lineolata initiating to mate. Nikon F100, Ikelite Housing, 105mm 2.8 AF lens, Ikelite Substrobes 200, RVP135, F22, 1/250, TTL



The Spanish Dancer is host to a resident emperor shrimp. Nikon F100, Ikelite Housing, 105mm 2.8 AF lens, Ikelite Substrobes 200, RVP135, F22, 1/250, TTL

readily stretched out. The courtship process usually doesn't last long, and the act of copulation begins when the genitalia are engaged. I have seen a pair of *Nembrotha* that were so "hot" that they immediately began mating without any noticeable courtship ritual. Mating can go on for several hours.

On several occasions, I have observed a *Chromodoris* subsequently mating with at least two partners, especially when they are in a group of

three or more. Yes, orgies are common in Ligpo (I mean, the nudibranchs). On the other hand, I have also witnessed a pair of *Pteraeolidia ianthina* in an intensely aggressive courtship behavior - more like a rape attempt. Having sensed a potential mate, the aggressor chased the potential victim, who was obviously disinterested as it tried to push back the assailant using its anterior.

In an apparent show of



Hypselodoris bullocki. Nikon F100, Ikelite Housing, 105mm 2.8 AF lens, Ikelite Substrobes 200, RVP135, F22, 1/250, TTL

desperation, the attacker started to purse its mouth against the defender. The struggle persisted until they reached a ledge and fell separately. After observing what had happened, I felt that I had witnessed a crime.

Subsequent to receiving a reciprocal exchange of sperm, each individual will produce a “ribbon” of eggs that come in different patterns and colors, depending on the species. Then, the eggs are left to develop on their own as most adults proceed with their regular activities. However,

Pteraeolidia ianthina parents tend to stay with the eggs while other adults accompany them. Thus, wherever there is a brooding parent, then there must be more individuals in the vicinity. And since they prefer to stay in the same locations throughout the year, I am able to find them consistently.

The feeding preferences of nudibranchs are diverse. Some like to eat algae, sponges, ascidians, or even fish eggs! Sea squirts seem to be the favorite food of the *Nembrotha* as

they are often seen sucking within them in absolute pleasure. In another instance, a *Hypselodoris* was enjoying a buffet of fish eggs so plenty that it seemed like food paradise. In Ligo, I learned that each nudibranch species could be found near its particular food source.

The amount of time I spend with the nudibranchs provides me the opportunity to observe and learn more about their behavior and at the same time capture it on film. With a lot of available subjects getting these images is uncomplicated. All I need is a housed Nikon SLR with a 105mm or a 60mm lens, twin Ikelite substrobes 200s (especially useful at night because of its reliable built-in torch), Ultralight arms, and lots of Fuji Velvia film. Set at TTL, all I do is to concentrate on critter hunting and image composition.

Moreover, at the usual shallow depths of around 15 to 25 feet within an area of 500 square meters, I don't even have to care about decompression or about getting lost! Dives that last for two hours are the norm.

I have already taken a lot of photographs of marine life around Ligo Island and I continue to add images of freshly-seen nudibranchs

and flatworms. Managing the accumulating number of photographs is becoming a challenge, but with the delight that each good picture inspires in me - not to mention my occasional yell of enjoyment underwater - it is all worth it.

Ligo Island offers an inn where the bedrooms are just a few steps from the shore entry so I can go diving easily as well as get rested immediately after a full day of marathon dives. The inn's kitchen (food!) is similarly accessible. What more could I ask for?

Nonoy Tan
nonoytan@yahoo.com



Bali International Diving Professionals



Mola Mola © Robert Delfs

- * Dive Safaris
- * Packages
- * Liveboards

Real Photography

the only 5 star centre in
Bali offering IANTD
technical diving:

Western and Asian Directors

- * Mola Mola to macro
- * Special rates for readers
- * Nitrox/Trimix/Heliox

Tel: +62(0)361 270759

email:

info@bidp-balidiving.com

website:

bidp-balidiving.com

WORLD'S RICHEST REEFS

12 years
experience
in Raja Ampat,
the hot new area
for photography



PAPUA DIVING

RAJA AMPAT ISLANDS
WEST PAPUA INDONESIA

INFO@PAPUA-DIVING.COM

PAPUA-DIVING.COM

COOLPIX 5000 HOUSINGS FROM ONLY £499.00!

UK Germany aluminium housings
for less than a polycarbonate one.



Compact, sturdy and lightweight
with standard Nikonos V strobe
connector

OCEAN OPTICS

13 NORTHUMBERLAND AVENUE, LONDON WC2N 5AQ
TEL 00 (0)44 20 7930 8408 FAX 00 (0)44 20 7839 6148

E mail optics@oceanoptics.co.uk www.oceanoptics.co.uk