

Parting shots

Over Christmas and New Year I was diving at one of my favourite places, The Lembah Straits in Indonesia, which has frequently been the subject of articles in this and other magazines. Incidentally this area was completely unaffected by the Boxing Day tsunami. At the resort we only knew of it through the reports on satellite television and like everyone else were horrified as the estimated death toll grew day by day.

On one dive at the site known as Hairball Two I saw and photographed a succession of the normal subjects, a fingered dragonet, leaf scorpionfish, tiny cuttlefish, dragon sea moth etc without getting very excited about any of them. That was until I noticed a cloud of stirred up sand. As the cloud settled slightly I saw a flying gurnard (*Dactylopteria orientalis*) on its side, being held from below. As it struggled it was gradually being drawn into the sand. After a few minutes the gurnards struggles lessened as it tired, but it continued to be tugged from below so that it slowly sank deeper into the sand.

At this point I was joined by another pair of divers and by the guide who probed the sand around the gurnard. He didn't make contact with anything so the predator must have been directly below it. He indicated to us, asking if he should try to release the gurnard? We hesitated and exchanged glances, should we give the gurnard its freedom and deprive the hidden predator of its meal? I must admit I was in favour of letting nature take its course, but at the same time I wanted to see what was buried in the sand below the gurnard. By this time the head of the gurnard was below the sand.

Eventually we nodded yes, hoping to get a sight

of the hidden predator as the gurnard was released. The guide got hold of the free wing tip and slowly pulled the gurnard out of the sand, as he did so whatever was underneath released its hold without exposing itself so we didn't get even a glimpse, never mind a positive identification. After a short hesitation the gurnard swam off, the only visible sign of damage being a slightly ragged 'wing' tip.

In the boat after the dive we asked the guide what the predator might have been. He wasn't at all sure but suggested that it might have been some sort of snake eel. That would seem to match with the relatively small mouth judging from the damaged area of fin and the vertical orientation in the sand. So here's a question for the marine biologists (or any other knowledgeable person) reading this - was the predator likely to be a snake eel, or do you have some other suggestion, or will we never know?

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Nikon F90x in Subal housing with Nikor 60 mm lens. Inon Z22 ring flash in TTL. Fuji velvia 50. Aperture priority, probably F8, 1/60 second.



Do you have a nice shot with a short story behind it?

If so e mail me and yours could be the next "Parting shot".

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