

2005 Yap Critter hunt

by James Michael

Again this year, the “Great Yap Critter Hunt” expanded the impressive list of exotic and rarely seen marine life that exists on the reefs and dropoff walls of Yap Island. For a full month, divers followed creature and muck diving guru Larry Smith to the famous and not-so-famous sites to look for the odd, unusual and colorful creatures of the Western Pacific. He was accompanied by Manta Ray Bay Hotel owner Bill Acker, Yap’s diving pioneer. Acker is largely responsible for finding all of Yap’s unique dive sites. Together, this team found some great marine life deep and shallow.

Critter Hunt is in its second year and is the brainchild of Acker who reasoned that Yap’s proximity to the highly diverse marine areas like Papua New Guinea and the Philippines was a real plus. He asked Smith to visit Yap and help his staff identify habitat where the odd and colorful might reside. The result has broadened the horizons of Yap diving.

This year participants in the Critter Hunt were not only fish and invertebrate buffs but also photography enthusiasts. The pros who showed up included Micronesia’s Tim Rock and his lovely model, Kumiko Furukawa. The duo produced some stunning digital images. Former Cousteau team member Bill MacDonald and wife Suzie were in full-force from LA with their video gear to capture moving pictures of the event and a DVD. Fish expert Max Gibbs from Oxford dropped in as part of his continuous dive quest around the world. Max provided detailed and articulate explanations of



©Tim Rock

what was being found.

But it was Russell Stoddard from Guam, an avid amateur shooter armed with his housed Canon 20D, who, along with Smith, experienced the hottest observation and photo op of the entire month! At Rainbow Reef, the mandarinfish haven just minutes from the Yap Divers dock, they observed a magnificent specimen of a male mandarinfish. It danced with five females during a dusk courtship and eventually, in a time-span of no more than seven minutes, completed the mating dance and mated with four of the females!

Of the hundreds of mandarinfish dives Smith has led, he was duly impressed. “I have lead and participated in so many of these dives but this was the single most sensational observation I have ever had the pleasure to witness,” Smith exclaimed.

At one point, the male had three of the females rising with him in the water column, cheek-to-cheeks (or is it gills-to-gills?). This was one of numerous false starts only inches away from their masks and cameras.

McDonald was excited about the red spotted

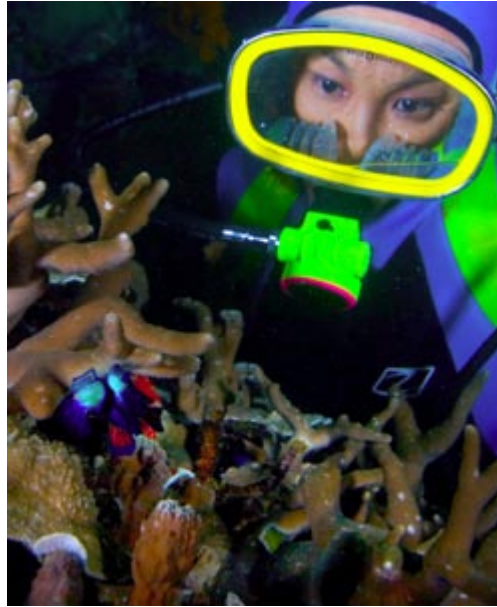


Canon 20D, Ikelite Housing, Canon 100mm Macro lens, Twin Ikelite DS125 strobes.

©Russ Stoddard

blennies. Not that common, they were found in more than one locale and made for colorful video. Along the tops of Yap’s walls and drop-offs, MacDonald filmed a variety of sizes of this “critter”. Many were conveniently located at safety stops. Mike Veitch, the talented & dedicated photo pro at Yap divers, also captured his first ever images of this colorful fish. This stunning little fish is particularly popular with the Japanese macro photographers.

Juveniles are out in force this time of year and there were many rarely observed wrasses. Smith’s favorite was the juvenile clown Coris. A difficult fish to photograph, they were seen no less than a half-dozen singularly foraging along the reefs at a depth of between 30 to 120 feet. Veitch effectively bounced some strobe off one of them at Macro II, a



©Tim Rock. Nikon D100 / L&M Titan / Inon Strobes

popular dive site in the main channel leading in to the Manta Ray Bay Hotel.

Rock's favorite find was also at Macro II with a new cleaning station found 90 foot down. This coral head was dubbed Magic Rock and is home to four kinds of shrimp including the brilliantly red hinge beak shrimp. They live in a hole with a resident moray. Other small creatures can be found in and around the area.

The big critters didn't disappoint either. Big white-tailed marble rays were seen at Gofnuw Channel, Aliko Reef and Macro II. The mantas were

cleaning in Gofnuw Channel on a regular basis and also making a pass or two in Miil Channel. And a great shark feed took place at Vertigo Reef. Led by owner Bill Acker, more than a dozen folks got to see up close and personal grey reef sharks devour a bait ball suspended above the reef. Blacktips, whitetips, rainbow runners and hungry snapper also showed up. A week earlier a hammerhead and silvertip also came for the show.

Searches for the pygmy seahorse H. denise turned up good habitat but no residents during the hunt. "But I

still think they're here", says Smith. He and Acker made some dedicated deep dives to find the tiny "plucked chicken" seahorse and hope to continue the search in 2006.

All in all it was a great celebration of Yap marine creatures great and small. This proved once again that Yap is the place - an extremely productive destination for the serious marine life observer and underwater photographer.

To see images of these, and many more of the results of this year's Critter Hunt, go to www.mantaray.com

On the web site, you will see photos by Mike Veitch, Tim Rock,

Max Gibbs, and Russell Stoddard. Bill and Susie Macdonald are producing a video summary of "The Great Critter Hunt ~ Yap 2005" that will be available at DEMA Las Vegas this year. If you would like a copy of the DVD, let Manta Ray Bay Hotel know. Check it out and you will agree that there is FAR more to Yap's diverse marine life than the truly magnificent mantas and sensational sharks.

James Michael

32^e FESTIVAL MONDIAL DE L'IMAGE SOUS-MARINE



Œuvre de Sutyagina Zhonya, 10 ans (Ukraine)



ANTIBES JUAN-LES-PINS

27 au 30 octobre 2005

PALAIS DES CONGRÈS

SOUS LE PATRONAGE DE JEAN LÉONETTI, DÉPUTÉ-MAIRE D'ANTIBES



Festival : 62, avenue des Pins du Cap - 06160 Antibes Juan-les-Pins, France. Tél +33 (0)4 93 61 45 45 - Fax +33 (0)4 93 67 34 93
info@underwater-festival.com - <http://www.underwater-festival.com>