

Parting shots

A late afternoon dive at Batu Kelebit on Bali's north-east coast, was intended to be an introduction to the dive site for a friend of mine who hadn't dived there before. The day was overcast and the late afternoon sun was not penetrating the deeper waters very well. We caught a brief glimpse of a grey reef shark cruising in open water, but decided it was too dark for photography. We headed back up the slope to spend more time in the brighter shallows.

There appeared to be an unusual amount of fish life swarming around the prominent coral heads that dominate the shallows. A turtle was poking around the hard corals and a black-tip reef shark cruised between us heading slowly off to deeper water.

Shallower still, we stumbled into a group of seven large cuttlefish, all congregating around a large patch of fire coral. Their presence seemed to have the smaller reef fish interested, as they were all much more active than normal, darting around the reef in a busy manner. It took a minute or so to realise that this was a cuttlefish mating aggregation.

One of the cuttlefish was being an exhibitionist, with tentacles spread wide; its whole body was a flashing display of black & white stripes.



Another of the large cuttlefish slowly approached the black and white 'flasher', and together they sped a short distance away from the others.

Hovering just above the reef, the courting pair began eyeing each other at close range then met head-on with arms flaying, in what was now a confused mass of black & white striped arms and bodies. I managed to approach close enough to get a photo. Close enough that is - not to frighten them off. Now feeling somewhat like an intruder, I got closer still as they simultaneously turned a soft shade of grey then locked together, head to head in their mating position.

I 'flashed' away with my camera and thirty seconds later it was all over. The larger female then made her way up the reef to a patch of fire coral and



Olympus C-5050Z, Olympus PT-015 Housing, 2x Inon Z220 strobes, Manual exposure f4.5 @ 1/125th, ISO 64.

began carefully depositing her eggs under the protective outer mantle of the coral branches. All the time watched over by one of the other large females.

We watched transfixed for over half an hour, as these creatures that I have always held in awe, continued courting, mating and laying their eggs around the reef, just as though we weren't even there - nature at its best!

Jeff Mullins

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Jeff and his wife Dawn are the authors of Reef Wreck & Critter a visual guide to the Tulamben area in Bali, they run guided dive tours from their property near Tulamben,

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

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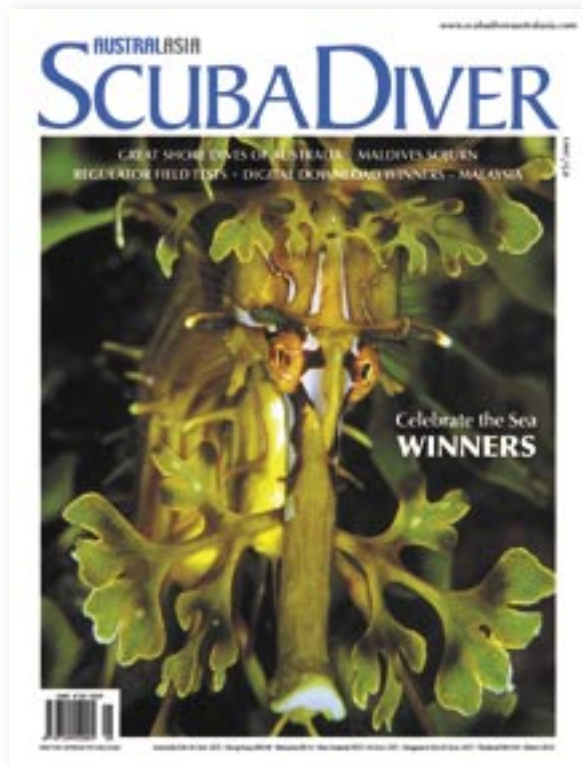


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