

Nelson Bay

by Klaus M. Stiefel

“Save yourself a ticket to Indonesia and drive up to Nelson Bay” my friend Al, usually not a man of undue hyperbole, said to me with conviction. A few weeks later I indeed make the trip up north, and three hours after leaving my Sydney city home I stand on the shores overlooking the famous Fly Point, one of the prime dive sites in Nelson Bay. Located just about two kilometers west of the heads separating Nelson Bay from the open Pacific Ocean, it faces north across the tranquil, shallow bay. Gum trees and ferns grow above the ochre-brown rocks. The coastal vegetation is noticeably close to the high watermark, an indication of very calm waters. Pelicans glide above me, and cockatoos screech from the trees behind the steps leading down to the dive site. It’s a nice place, even topside.

A short time later I slide into the ocean with my scuba gear on and my camera clipped to my harness. A healthy sea-grass meadow gives way to an underwater landscape dominated by large sponges, soft corals and tunicates. And these sessile invertebrates are inhabited by a diverse set of fishes, crabs, nudibranchs and flatworms. This is a macro photographer’s candy shop. I remember Al’s words as I snap shot after shot for the next 90 minutes. None of the dives in Nelson Bay are very deep (typically less than 15 m), which allows for prolonged dives – and believe me, you will want to stay underwater for a long time and look at all the fantastic marine life. What makes Nelson Bay such a beautiful dive site?

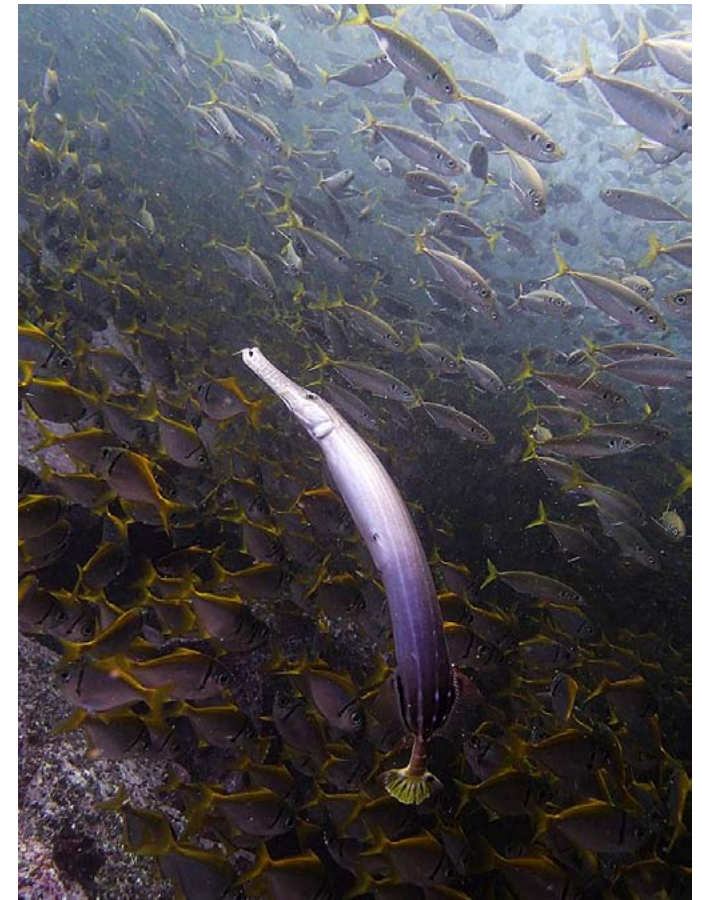
The currents on continental east coasts



Fly Point, Nelson Bay. Canon 5DII, Canon L 17-40 mm @ 17.0 mm, f/10.0, 1/50, ISO100

Trumpetfish doing a little dance in front of lots of bullseyes and yellowtail scad. The trumpetfish are among the more tropical inhabitants of the waters around Nelson Bay. Olympus TG-2, internal strobe, f/3.2, 5.1 mm, 1/125, ISO200

typically run from the tropics to the poles. Hence, the Australian east coast receives warmer waters from up north. The entrance of Nelson Bay is oriented especially well-fit to catch these tropical currents, and with them a smorgasbord of tropical marine animals and their larvae. They then thrive in the protected waters of the bay. A second factor contributing to the great Diving in Nelson Bay undoubtedly is the presence of a number of marine sanctuaries. These increase fish diversity, numbers and the sizes of individual fish, compared to areas where fishing takes place. I have never seen such



huge flatheads as in Nelson Bay, and some of the scorpionfish are seriously plus-sized as well.

Diving in an elongated bay with a narrow entrance also means that the underwater naturalist not only has to watch shrimps & nudibranchs, but also the tide tables: diving is only recommended around high tide, otherwise a swift drift inlands or out into the open ocean towards New Zealand is in the books.

But during the twice-daily periods when diving is possible, you will see supreme marine biodiversity: a large nudibranch fauna, with new



Phyllodesmium serratum, one of the many nudis in Nelson Bay. Canon 5DII, Canon 100 mm f2.8 macro lens, Hugyfot housing, 2 x Inon z-240 strobes, f/16.0, 1/200, ISO160

species to spot on many dives; bumblebee shrimp hiding in the invertebrate overgrowth; triplefins, gobies and pipefish populating the ground; and seahorses and cuttlefish hiding in-between sea-fans and finger-sponges. Besides sighting the more common spotted wobbegong sharks, you will be able to see banded wobbegongs resting in the sea-



Grey nurse shark. Lots of these around the offshore islands off Nelson Bay. Olympus TG-2, internal strobe, 4 mm, f8, 1/640, ISO200

grass. Sting rays and blind sharks complement the cartilaginous fish assembly.

At night, a different ensemble of marine animals comes out. Armies of decorator crabs populate the sponges. These curious crustaceans stick sponges and coral polyps to their bodies which camouflage them perfectly. If they don't move,



Pelican Reflection, Nelson Bay Marina. Canon 5DII, Canon L 17-40 mm @ 40 mm, pol filter, f/8.0, 1/100, ISO100

they are exceedingly hard to spot. I have never seen as many decorator crabs as in Nelson Bay, and the specimen there also decorate themselves especially exquisitely. Sleeping tiny leatherjackets, temperate ocean filefish, hold onto sea weed blades and tunicates with their mouths, a unique way of keeping them in place when surges and currents



Male ringscale triplefin. The female is colored drab brown. Very active little fish! Canon 5DII, Canon 100 mm f2.8 macro lens, Hugyfot housing, 2 x Inon z-240 strobes, f/16.0, 1/200, ISO160

threaten to move them out of their home range. Minute shrimps and crabs hide in anemones and sea-pens; conger and moray eels undulate over the sand. Finally, a good way distant from any urban center, light pollution is sparse in Nelson Bay and on a cloudless night you will see a fantastic sky full of stars upon resurfacing from your night dive.

And it's not just what kind of animals are there, but also what they do: I've seen some amazing marine animal behavior in Nelson

Bay: A humongous cuttlefish trying to catch a banded morwong; copulating nudibranchs; two male octopi attempting to mate with one female at the same time (!); and a male cardinal fish carrying a mouth overfull with ready-to-hatch eggs. I have seen cleaner shrimp working on the skin parasites of fish, and damselfish vigorously defending their home ranges against intruding fish twice their size. To me, observing and photographing the behavior of marine animals in their natural environment is



Wobbegong shark. These large sharks are great photo subjects, since they stoically rest on rocks and are unfazed by cautiously approaching divers. Olympus TG-2, internal strobe, f/7.1, 5.9 mm, 1/30, ISO200

an absolutely enthralling experience.

Add to that a few offshore islands (Broughton Island, Cabbage Tree Island) which can be reached from Nelson Bay by boat in about half an hour. The underwater landscape there is naturally different from the sheltered shore dive sites inside the bay: between rugged rock formations large fields of kelp sway in the surge. The current and surge can be considerable at these sites. Instead of a macro heaven, this is shark central. Grey nurse sharks calmly

swim around in circles, not afraid to come close to us divers. On the rocks, wobbegong sharks rest. These unusual sharks are nocturnal hunters, and chill during daytime. Some of them are up to 2 meters long, but due to their camouflaged skin patterns and coloration they are surprisingly easy to overlook. On a dive trip this April we had difficulties seeing the grey nurse sharks as well, but not because of bad visibility, rather due to the dense, very large schools of bullseyes and yellowtail scads.



Bumblebee shrimp hiding in a tunicate. This is another rather tropical inhabitant of Nelson Bay. Canon 5DII, Canon 100 mm f2.8 macro lens, Hugyfot housing, 2 x Inon z-240 strobes, f/16.0, 1/200, ISO160

The logistics of diving Nelson Bay are fairly easy, with three quality dive shops in town both renting tanks and equipment for shore dives and taking divers out on boats. A separate operation organizes dolphin-swims in the bay, which I haven't done yet, but of which I have heard good things from several friends. Accommodation is easy to find in several price classes, since the area is a popular holiday destination for city dwellers from Sydney and Newcastle. No one has to

stay hungry or thirsty after the dives either, with a number of restaurants and Aussie pubs in town.

The shores of New South Wales, the Australian state encompassing Sydney, are rich in scenic coastlines and great diving spots. To me, the underwater world in Nelson Bay is one of the highlights of this shoreline.

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