

The “Big 5” of Lembeh

By Colin Marshall

The African Big 5 are well known - Elephant, Lion, Buffalo, Leopard and Rhino. The term “Big 5” was coined long ago to refer to the animals most prized to hunt, due to the high degree of difficulty and danger in the hunting process. Things have changed since then. Today, the practice of being driven in an airconditioned 4x4 through the bush towards a GPS tagged trophy animal, to then shoot it from a safe distance with a high-powered, laser-sighted rifle (with an armed guide by your side in case things go wrong), is viewed with contempt by most. Happily, most shooting of the Big 5 today tends to be with cameras.

It is debatable whether the criteria “difficult to hunt” is applicable today, or whether the Big 5 should be adjusted to reflect some combination of “difficult to spot” and “difficult to photograph”.

Lembah in North Sulawesi in Indonesia needs little introduction – generally acknowledged as the world’s premier muck diving location. What could be the Big 5 there? Perhaps it should include both the “difficult to spot” and “difficult to photograph” criteria. The creatures selected should be not too common, but not too rare either. For example, I have only seen the tiny Hairy Shrimp once in Lembah; a lovely creature, but not a pragmatic choice for the Big 5 – too “difficult to spot”.

“Difficult to Photograph” is a worthy criteria, recognizing that some creatures are much more difficult to take a good image of than others.

Some could say that everything is “difficult to photograph” as even an immobile Stonefish is difficult to take an original image of. But some creatures do seem to be more difficult than others to simply get in focus, let alone worrying about lighting, composition and backscatter challenges!

Anyhow, my contenders for the Big 5 are as follows:

Ornate Ghost Pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*)



The standard portrait shot of the Ornate, with everything in focus, is hard enough. But this fish has plenty of potential, with a huge variety of colors and lacy patterns.

One could suggest all Ghost Pipefish (including Robust, Velvet, Halimeda) as a generic Big 5 contender. I don’t agree, mainly as I petulantly find the Robust Ghost Pipefish irritatingly boring. Often when diving in Lembah the guide has signaled me to abandon whatever I am engrossed in, to follow him seemingly endlessly to finally reach a.... Robust. These experiences have led me to now, prior to entering the water, agree with the guides

a special signal for a Robust (take out regulator and feign a large underwater yawn). I can then reciprocate with my special signal (resembles “V for victory”).

Thread Pipefish (*Kyonemichthys rumengani*)



This amazing creature (aka Lembah Sea Dragon) was only recently discovered and described. According to Allen & Erdmann (in the excellent “Reef Fishes of the East Indies”), it has also been seen in Flores and Milne Bay. Recognizing the amazing camouflage, it is perhaps much less rare than we think. It used to be seen easily at Nudi Retreat (along with Pontohi Pygmy Seahorses, on the same boulder, no less), but they have not been seen there for a while.

Due to its small size and constantly wriggling body, this is definitely a “difficult to photograph” fish.

Bobbitt Worm (*Eunice aphroditois*)



These alien-looking worms are named in honor of Lorena Bobbitt, the lady who cut off her husband's todger, allegedly in retaliation for domestic abuse.

I have only ever seen Bobbitts in one other location (Komodo National Park), but there is one site in Lembeh (Retak Larry) where Bobbitts are more or less guaranteed (at night).

I have never heard of anyone suffering a bite from those formidable jaws, but allegedly the spines down the side can damage nerves and cause (permanent) numbness. As for all creatures – treat with respect!

Tiger Shrimp (*Phyllognathia ceratophthalmus*)

These are my favourite shrimps on the planet. I particularly like that they are so fearless – one once came out from the protection of a coral bommie and walked purposefully towards me over the sand in an attempt to intimidate me – for a long way!

One could also add Harlequin, Saron or



Coleman Shrimps as contenders, but I don't feel that these are associated with Lembeh to the same extent as Tigers.

Pegasus Sea Moth (*Eurypegasis draconis*)



The impressive “wings” and long snout of this fish led it to be named after Pegasus, the divine Greek winged horse (whose father was Poseidon, the God of the Sea, appropriately).

These ground-hugging fish are fairly unusual and regularly seen in Lembeh. They are comical

to watch as they waddle around the sea floor, and infuriating to photograph as they continuously rotate away from cameras.

Mimic (*Thaumoctopus mimicus*) and Wonderpus Octopus (*Octopus photogenicus*)



Both are real contenders for the Lembeh hit-list. The Mimic, as the name suggests, can be seen imitating a variety of other creatures to avoid detection. However, I am not so sure that it is imitating others. To me, the Mimic is simply doing the underwater equivalent of break-dancing, to distract any potential threats – or prey – with its bizarre movements.

I prefer the Wonderpus over Mimics as it seems more colorful, active, and generally more abundant.

One could also include Hairy, Mototi, “V”, Long-arm, Night and Blue-ring Octopuses. These are relatively rare in Lembeh. It seems asking for trouble to add a potential killer like a Blue-ring in the Big 5, especially as its method of dispatching

people is so innocuous. An often painless bite, followed by paralysis, then suffocation as the lungs fail, despite being fully conscious and unable to communicate with anyone. Death within minutes. Nasty way to go.

Rhinopias Scorpionfish (Rhinopias sp)



These are often seen as a Holy Grail for many visitors to Lembeh, but are far from guaranteed.

A pair (often in different colors) will occasionally turn up, then after a few weeks

simply disappear, probably from being fed up with photographers shrieking and banging followed by intense blinding strobe action.

Pygmy Seahorse (Hippocampus sp.)

There are a number of different Pygmy Seahorses (the standard Bargibanti, the new-ish thin Pontohi and the bald Denise) found in Lembeh, often on the same dive site.

There are some (controversial) views that Bargibanti in particular suffer from excessive interaction with photographers (due to stress from touching & prodding, blinding strobe lights). Bargibanti on their coral fans aren't as mobile as Rhinopias. Furthermore, once photographers knock the fan the Bargibantis are on, the polyps contract and the seahorses are much easier to spot by predators. I have often witnessed wrasse attacks on Bargibantis (yes, likely signaled by my presence, and aided by my carelessness with the fan), and they are vicious assassins.

There are enough excellent images of Pygmies out there and perhaps the Big 5 should not include Pygmies for the noble reason of simply reducing Seahorse Stress. Maybe it's time to move the spotlight onto another creature and give the Pygmies a rest...

Flamboyant Cuttlefish (Metasepia pfefferi)

The Flamboyant is generally seen walking on the sea floor (rarely seen in the water column), and will display its amazing colors as a warning to predators and irritating photographers. And for good reason as the flesh of this cephalopod is poisonous, with a similar toxin to the Blue-ring.

I have often spent a large proportion of a dive



trailing a hunting Flamboyant. They seem quite oblivious to humans and continue on their search for prey, occasionally stopping and shooting out their laser-like tongue to catch an unsuspecting victim.

Cockatoo Flounder (Samaris cristatus)



This is a very unusual flatfish. I have never seen this anywhere except Lembeh.

Unlike more static fish, this creature is highly mobile, racing around the sea floor and regularly kicking out its white dorsal fin rays as a warning.

Hairy Frogfish (Antennarius striatus)



Lembeh is world-famous for the prevalence of Frogfish, of many different species. Frogfish are a more or less guaranteed sighting, even if “just” a Painted Frogfish.

But of all the Frogfish, the prize surely goes to the Hairy Frogfish. The range of “hair” length and variety of color seems infinite, making it an especially photogenic model.

Devil Scorpionfish (Inimicus didactylus)



Devil Scorpionfish (aka Spiny Devilfish) are common in Lembeh, often nearly entirely buried, waiting to ambush prey – or to insert sharp, highly painful spines into any unsuspecting feet walking about the sand. Beware - I have seen these fish buried in soft sand in knee-high water – always shuffle your feet when walking in sand!

It's hard to think of a more evil-looking fish. Even the Stonefish seems quite placid in comparison. But they probably have very sweet personalities below that ugly exterior...

Stargazer (Uranoscopus sp)

These monsters remind me of the gangster “Jabba the Hutt”, for anyone old enough to remember the original Star Wars movies.

Marbled Stargazer (*U. bicinctus*) burying itself in sand, showing its internal worm-like respiratory organs

Once buried, Stargazers provide the classic face shot, with the ferocious mouth and eyes



watching for any prey who happen to enter its domain.

The Top 5

After much deliberation, here are my Big 5 for Lembeh:

- 1.Hairy Frogfish – has to be on the list
- 2.Wonderpus Octopus – just beats the Mimic
- 3.Flamboyant Cuttlefish – another cephalopod, but Absolutely Fabulous!
- 4.Ornate Ghost Pipefish – wins the “difficult to photograph” prize
- 5.Tiger Shrimp – my favorite shrimp, and it's my article, so it's on the list!

However, I have to wonder whether a Big 5 list is yet another example of “dumbing down” on the planet – encouraging people to trivialize a potentially rich and meaningful experience into a superficial one.

Returning to the Africa analogy, there are many other animals which are much more exciting to see than the Big 5. A caracal, porcupine, armadillo or chameleon is highly memorable due to its rarity. Similarly underwater in Lembeh, there are so many

individual species that are very rare and beautiful (even just considering Nudibranches), and it would be a pity to miss something special due to being fixated on seeing the Big 5. This is where the guides come to the fore, as they are superb at finding unusual things (not least as they are probably quite bored with the Big 5!).

Back to Africa, there are expensive safari camps catering for people who demand “to see everything in a day”. The guides take them where the animals are known to be, either through GPS tagging or by sending out trackers beforehand with mobiles. To me, there is something romantic and special about simply going out and looking to see what you can find. And when you see something “ordinary”, being patient will often be rewarded with some amazing behavior or by something else emerging from the background.

One could take this approach in Lembeh and simply dive without a guide to see what one can find. I actually do this about half the time, often accidentally as I get separated from the guide due to being absorbed by some critter. Returning to the dive boat I hear about all the things I missed. But the pleasure I derive from occasionally spotting something special myself is immense and somehow adds to the magical experience of Lembeh. But I would

generally recommend having a guide - just let them know you want to see more than whatever is on your hit list.

In conclusion, I recommend a relaxed approach regarding hit lists when in Lembeh. At the end of the trip, look back and reflect on your Big 5. Compare lists with your partner and fellow divers. The key is to explore the environment and enjoy whatever is there, at that time. The variety is incredible in Lembeh and it is really rather silly to look for only 5 species!

Colin Marshall

The author has enjoyed about 500 dives in Lembeh. He continues to be amazed that on just about every dive, he still finds some creature that he has never photographed before. Furthermore, he feels the variety of Lembeh dive sites is unparalleled – in addition to the “standard” muck black sand sites, there are also amazing coral sites. All in all, his favorite place in the world to dive. He recommends the Black Sand Dive Retreat, especially as the house reef is unbelievable, with the possibility to swim to about 5 sites from the resort’s beach, including even the famous Hairball site. He can be contacted at colintrmarshall@yahoo.com and is happy to have his proposed Big 5 list challenged!

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