

New Zealand's Poor Knights

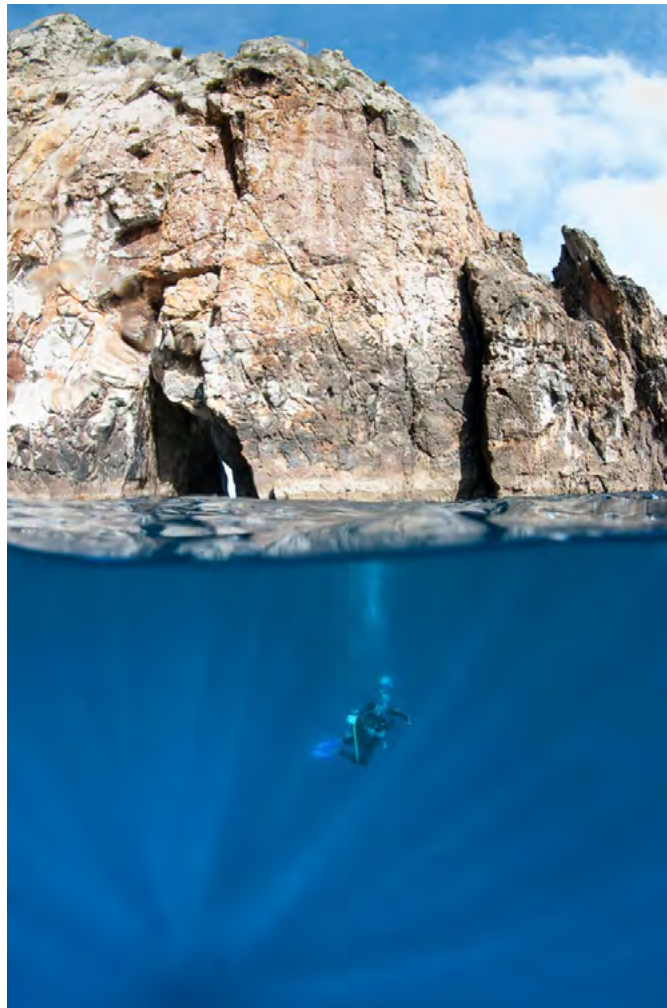
by Alex Stammers

At the bottom of the South Pacific lies a group of Islands that have been 4 million years in the making, they have resulted in the perfect dive site for underwater photographers and divers to explore and enjoy.

The Poor Knight Islands Marine Reserve lies 23 kilometers off the North Eastern coast of New Zealand. It has been a Marine Reserve since 1981 and fully protected since 1998. Diving pioneer Wade Doak, who spent years exploring these Islands and naming the dive sites, recently stated that there is now more fish life at the Knights than when he first started diving them in the 1960's and 70s.

He also quoted that you just don't dive the Poor Knights you dive in them. This becomes apparent as you approach the Islands. The high cliffs of volcanic rock descend vertically into the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean. Having been exposed to the open ocean over millennias, the constant battering and gentle sculpting from wave action, has carved out numerous caves, tunnels and archways throughout the islands, making the famous dive sites that the Knights are known for.

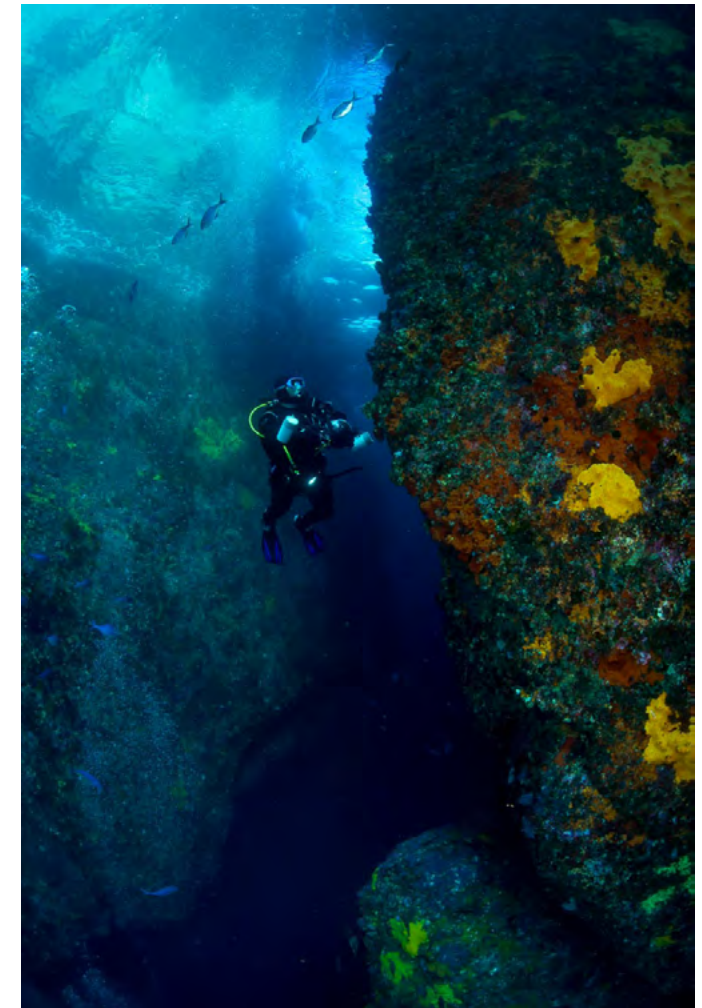
The Islands have been enjoyed by many famous underwater photographs and diving pioneers. David Doubilet and Brian Skerry have both dived these islands for National Geographic, and succeeded in taking away from them amazing, award winning images. In the 1980s Jacques-Yves



Diver surfacing from a dive at Northern Arch Poor Knights. . Nikon D200 Ikelite Housing Tokina 10-17mm at 10mm 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f11 1/60th sec ISO200

Cousteau dived and filmed the Knights and rated them one of his Top Ten dive sites in the world.

Being a fully protected Marine Reserve the main draw for divers is the marine life; fish by the thousands use the caves and archways to feed, rest and spawn. Blue and Pink Maomao inter mingle



Diver Photographing in Northern Arch Poor Knights. Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Sigma 15mm 2.8 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f10 1/100th sec ISO500

together forming large schools for protection from roaming predators, while Twin Spot Desmoiselles weave through them. Nooks and crevices that line the walls hide an array of Moray and Conger eels that snake their heads out to inspect the passing diver. Scorpion fish seem to be everywhere along



Crayfish/Spiny Lobster Northern Arch Poor Knights, Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Nikon 105mm VR 2.8 2x Inon S2000 f22 1/125th sec ISO200

Diver in Air Bubble Cave Poor Knights Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Sigma 15mm 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f11 1/50th sec ISO500

the walls, hiding amongst the sponges and seaweed.

Due to being swept and nurtured by the Pacific Ocean currents, the walls and sea floor are smothered in a rich colouring of sponge and invertebrate life easily matching some of the colorful coral reefs of nearby tropical destinations. This splash of colour allows for some beautiful background that make your macro subjects stand out.

Looking closely at the walls and reef reveals an array of life just waiting to be explored with a macro lens. Jewel anemones of pink and purples

cover the walls feeding on the current while Nudibranchs in an array of colours and shapes can be found feeding and mating. Triplefin hop around the reef. The Blue-Eyed Triplefin and their electric blue eyes candy-coloured red and white-striped bodies standing out from the rest. Shy Blennies poke their heads out from their home within and orange or yellow sponge making for a perfect framed subject to photograph. Shrimps, crabs and Spiny lobsters hide amongst the reef. Within the depths of caves and arches species usually found at deeper depths can be discovered.

In mid water and out into the blue, schools of Trevally and Kawahi group together to feed on the rich planktonic life. They intern, are hunted by large Yellow Tail Kingfish that power through the schools sending them scattering in panic. Kingfish are inquisitive and will often sweep in alone or in groups to inspect a diver. Large King fish can get over two meters in length.

If you're lucky, Bronze Whaler sharks can be seen regularly - sometimes alone or in groups. Other shark species pass through the islands; Mako, Blue sharks and Hammerheads are sometimes seen on



Three Large Yellow Tail Kingfish hunt Blue Mao mao in Tie Dye Arch Poor Knights. Nikon D200 Ikelite Housing Tokina 10-17mm at 14mm 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f6.3 1/80th sec ISO400

the more open ocean sites during the summer months.

With-in the Islands sheltered shallow dive sites, offer different topography with gardens of kelp forests and sand flats. These tend to be where the most approachable and friendly fish can be found. Sandager Wrasse and Pink Pig fish approach and follow divers around and are often interested in their reflections in the domeport of the camera.

Eagle rays and Stingrays are also found resting on the sand flats between the reefs and unlike the

rays on the coast tend to be more approachable.

Each Season brings with it something different to the Islands the summer months from December to April bring in clear warm blue water from the East Australian Current. The water temperature in Summer is usually around 19-21 degrees - this brings the pelagic visitors like Manta Rays, Sun Fish, Turtles, Marlin and Mako Sharks past the islands. It is also the season where the Large Southern Stingrays choose the archways to mate. Towards the end of



Blue Eye Triplefin Northern Arch Poor Knights, Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Nikon 105mm VR 2.8 2x Inon S2000 f22 1/160th sec ISO200

January large mature stingrays can be found hovering within the archways during the day, while they wait for dusk to begin their mating courtships.

Another summer visitor is the Starry Toad Puffer fish These pelagic fish usually only found in the open ocean unfortunately find their way swept in by the Easterly winds. Puffed up at the surface and clinging together in tight schools as the islands resident snapper population attack and devour them from below.

In the autumn and winter months the sea cools down to around 15-12

degrees. The cooler water reduces the plankton blooms and the visibility can sometimes be an outstanding 60 meters plus. The shorter days of winter bring lower sun angles that penetrate the archways giving a dappled light into the depths of caves and arches allowing for some creative photo opportunities.

It is around this time that Seals make their appearance arriving up from the south to hunt the local fish schools. Usually found swimming close to the islands at the surface or lounging on some rocky outcrops



Large Southern Stingray in Tie Dye Arch Poor Knights. Nikon D200 Ikelite Housing STokina 10-17mm at 10mm 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f8 1/125th sec ISO400

on several spots around the islands. These playful animals can show up when you least expect it, to literally swim circles around you.

Springtime is usually when the plankton blooms begin the islands exploded in a soup of life. Vast amounts of salps appear, feeding on the plankton making it feel like diving in jelly. However, with the lower vis this is when the macro life is at its most colorful. Nudibranchs pair up to mate laying their spiral egg cases. Jewel anemones spread out to feed on the current and reef fish population

feed relentlessly on the salps.

Several dive sites stand out amongst many that have become popular with underwater photographers.

Northern Arch at the top of the Islands is a narrow archway that cuts through an outcrop of the island only about 10 meters wide at the surface as it drops down to 40 meters to the bottom before sloping off to the depths. Its vertical walls are carpeted with an array of colorful sponge and anemones life that is swept by the current. Mating stingrays and



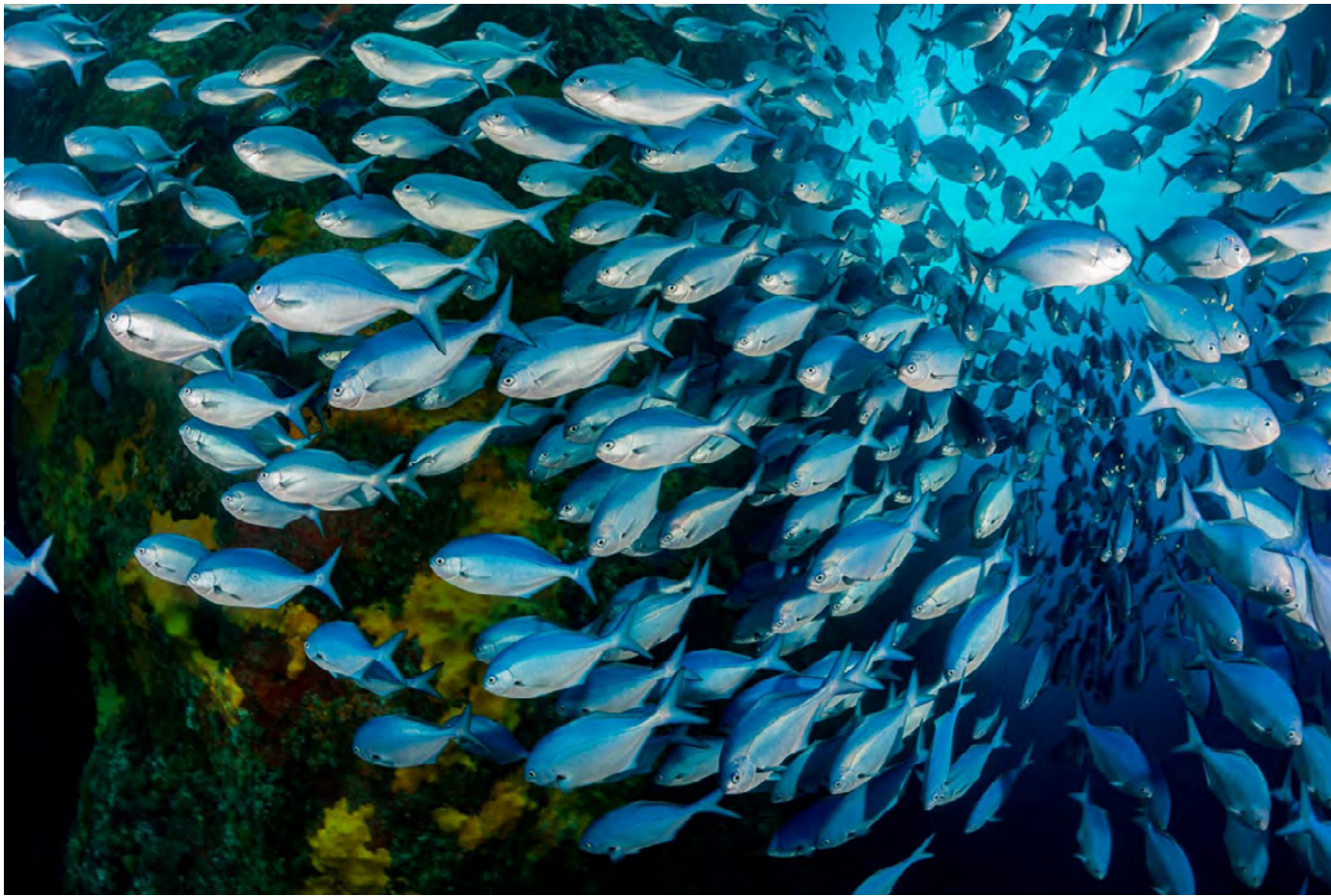
Clown Nudibranchs mating, Middle Arch Poor Knights. Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Nikon 105mm VR 2.8 2x Inon S2000 f22 1/100th sec ISO100

schooling fish shelter with the arch. The hardest part of photographing this site is deciding to go Wide angle or Macro as both will produce some great photographs.

Tie Dye arch is located at the pinnacles, it is a group of exposed rugged islands and rocks several kilometers south from the main Island group. An enormous archway with three enormous entranceways is invisible from the surface and only revealing its self as you descend. The Arch gets its name from the Tie Dye of colour of sponges and anemones

that covers the walls and bottom. Mating stingrays, large schools of fish huge kingfish and Bronze Whaler sharks make this an exciting site.

Blue Maomao Arch is famous for its schools of Blue Moamoa fish that hide in the shadows and line the wall from one end of the arch to the other. A natural window halfway through the arch allows light to stream in on the school making for great photographs. It's a shallow dive site so allows for plenty of bottom time. Very large football size scorpion fish lay on the bottom of the arch while in the kelp,



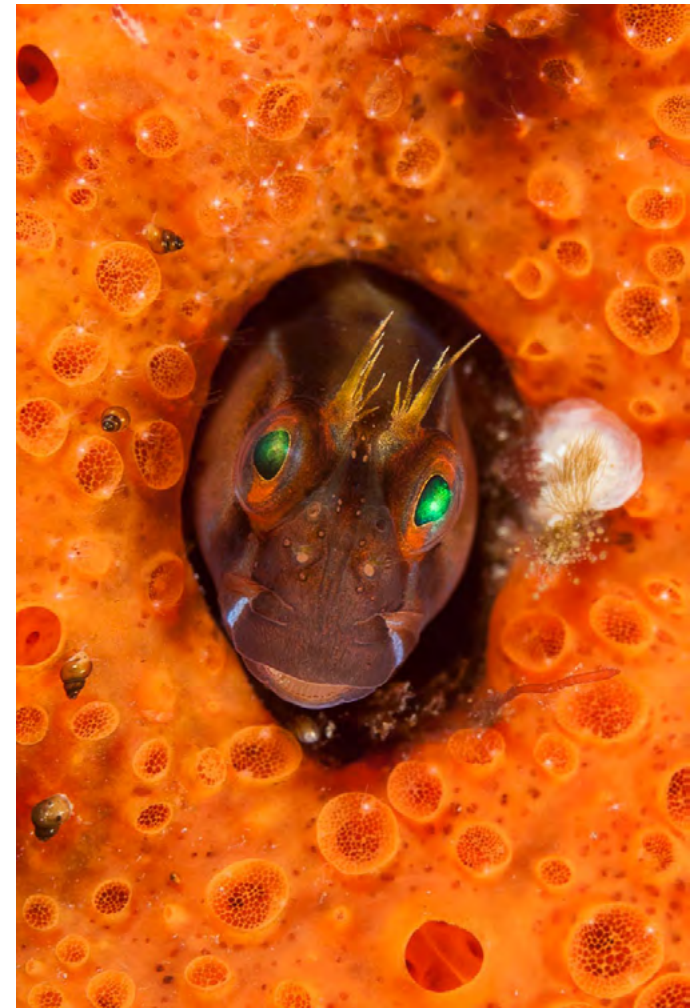
School of Blue Mao mao Middle Arch Poor Knights Nikon D800 Nauticam Housing Sigma 15mm 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f8 1/50th sec ISO500

outside the arch Eagle and String rays can be found resting.

Meditation Wall is a Macro Photographer's dream, named because divers looking for macro life just hover staring at the wall as if they are meditating! The wall is plastered in marine life; Nudibranchs abound and Blennies and Triplefins live and feed amongst the sponge life. This is also a shallow site located in an area called The Gardens where there is lots of friendly fish to photograph.

Visibility and condition can change by the season ask the local dive shop about conditions as I have taken a wide angle set up and found the water to be salp soup.

The archways are the most impressive to photograph look for the sun and which way the schools of fish are facing. The walls of the arch are usually coved in colour, so try and balance the lighting from your strobes to light this without blowing out the schooling fish.



Crested Blenny living in Orange Sponge, Nikon D200 Ikelite Housing Nikon 60mm D 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f16 1/60th sec ISO200

Dive sites like The Gardens, Meditation Wall, Blue Moamoa arch host an array of friendly fish like Sandagger wrasse Pink Pig Fish and Snapper they will come right up to the camera so you don't need to chase them.

Blue Moamoa fish have a deep blue colouring



Tambja Verconis Nudibranch North Arch Poor Knight, Nikon D200 Ikelite Housing Nikon 60mm D 2.8 2x Ikelite 125 strobes f16 1/80th sec ISO200

Adventures.

The Poor Knights is often overlooked by passing photographers heading to more tropical destination nearby. However, to the underwater photographer looking for a new destination and something completely unique to photograph, it is worth the time and effort to explore - you won't be disappointed!

lower the power of your strobes when photographing them as they can reflect light and blow out the colour.

Look around sponges for Blennies and Triplefins living within it makes a more pleasing back ground than the rock face.

There are plenty of Moray Eels around the Knights the Mosaic Moray is the most impressive with its toothy mouth and mottled patterned skin. Keep an eye out for the Grey Moray that is found out in the open or hiding above the seafloor in the Kelp fronds.

Stingrays are a very common sight at the Knights, and it's very rare to not see any on a dive. You will often find them resting on the bottom or swimming across the vast forests of kelp just use common sense when approaching.

Several operators run day trips and overnight live-aboards to the Poor Knights check out Dive Tutakaka, Yukon Charters and Ocean Blue

Alex Stammers



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White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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