

SEA DRAGONS

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL THING, YOUR FIRST TIME. MOST PEOPLE HAVE TO BE SHOWN, GUIDED AND GENTLY INTRODUCED TO HELP THEM FIND THEIR WAY. THE MAGICAL MOMENT WHEN YOU'RE SHOWN YOUR FIRST SEA DRAGON AND RECOGNISE IT AMONG THE WEEDS IS HARD TO DESCRIBE.

MALCOLM NOBBS AND JAMIE WATTS © 2013



subject tag line here

Everyone loves seahorses, but for beauty, for oddness, for the most incredible, ornate, exquisite art-form, not even seahorses compare with the sheer spectacle of their more charismatic cousins, the southern Australian sea dragons.

You really need to go with an experienced guide just to get your eye in. The seaweed beds around Tasmania and the southern Australian mainland are lush, thick and varied, and the sea dragons have evolved to blend in with them perfectly. The local flatheads or anglerfish will quickly devour any dragon making itself conspicuous. Many of us are familiar with how hard it can be to spot a scorpionfish or stonefish among corals or algae until you 'get your eye in' – sea dragons are much, much harder.

The most patient and flamboyant sculptor or artist, starting with a seahorse and with the task of making it at the same time garish, stylised, spectacular and invisible, could scarcely come up with such a design. The proud chest, the 'dog-leg' body shape that somehow manages utter elegance, the bright kaleidoscope of shades and colours that somehow manages to be a camouflage pattern – it's a visual and evolutionary overload.

The two sea dragon species both range around the southern end of Australia, the

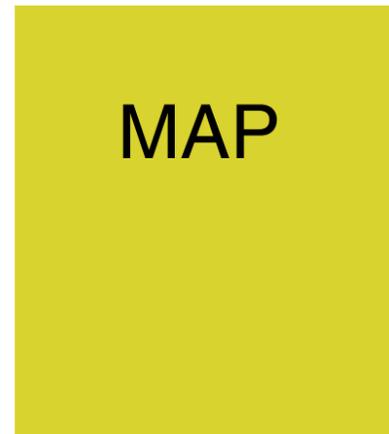
The leafy sea dragon *Phycodurus eques* is even more bizarre than the weedy sea dragon. The images here were taken under the Rapid Bay Jetty south of Adelaide



weedy sea dragon from Sydney around to Perth, the rarer leafy sea dragon somewhat more restricted in range. Both live around seaweed beds, feeding on the abundant mysids, lobster-krill and other small crustaceans found in these cool, rich waters. Around cities and heavily-used estuaries there are concerns that the dragons may be losing habitat, but they are fortunate in as much as their range includes large areas where there are low concentrations of people. The sea dragons are reasonably abundant, and live in relatively shallow depths, so the only real difficulty is spotting them. They tend to occupy loose, overlapping territories of about a hundred metres square, drifting slowly along the kelp edges between the rocks and the sand, slurping crustaceans and avoiding predators.

Both species grow quickly, can sometimes mature in their first year and can live at least 10 years. Both socialise toward the end of southern winter, court and mate at the start of the southern spring in October to November. The pinkish-orange eggs develop in individual pockets in the skin under the males' tails through the early summer, hatching inch-long juveniles in January and February.

The weedy sea dragon *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus* is the larger – up to about 45cm – and more



Opposite:
The weedy sea dragon
Phyllopteryx taeniolatus
Nicci up close with a weedy sea dragon
This page:
Under the famous Rapid Bay Jetty lies a perfect sea dragon habitat; it's wise to have a guide with you on your first dragon hunt to show you where to look for them!



abundant and colourful of the two. Reddish-pinks and oranges contrast with blacks and browns on the ornate 'paint-job', with chest stripes and paddle-like fins and appendages in iridescent blues and purples. It looks more like a Chinese dragon, an abstract design than a real animal.

Malcolm saw his first weedy sea dragon at a depth of about 15 metres off Sydney's famous Bondi Beach. Nestling inconspicuously in the seaweed, it slowly but deliberately drifted away. It passed over the open sandy seabed where it stood out, but then it was again almost invisible when it disappeared into thick seaweed.

The smaller leafy sea dragon *Phycodurus eques* is even more bizarre. The paddle-shaped leaflike appendages look excessively ornate, yet are the perfect match and yellow-brown hues to disappear amongst the fronds of the kelps they live amongst. Deeper-living sea dragons even match with their light regime – while shallow-living leafies are yellows, greens and browns the deeper-

living specimens can be vivid shades of red.

Malcolm travelled to Rapid Bay south of Adelaide to find the leafy sea dragon in these images. At nine metres under the local jetty, he got lucky. His first reaction was to simply wonder at the exotic appearance of the creature. Unlike the weedy it did not blend as easily into its habitat and had been surprisingly easy to spot. Like the weedy its immediate reaction was to slowly move away, albeit seemingly unconcerned.

The pipefish family to which the sea dragons belong has over 300 species, and can be found in all non-polar seas. They are famous for the 'male pregnancy' – unfertilised eggs are transferred to the males to be fertilised then incubated in pockets in the skin or a pouch. Two hundred of these species in this family are the small, straight, slender, unadorned pipefishes, and 20 more species are the similar-looking flagtail pipefishes. A further 75 or so species are the enigmatic seahorses, famous for their crooked body orientation, very

much like the knight chess piece, the prehensile tail.

The 13 species of pipehorses – the sub-family that includes the sea dragons – are somewhat intermediate between pipefishes and seahorses. The body orientation is dog-legged compared to pipefishes but straighter and not as vertical as seahorses, and the tail is prehensile, but not as tightly curled as in the seahorses. Males brood eggs under the trunk or tail rather than in a pouch. The two species of seadragon are large, heavy-chested and extremely ornately-appendaged offshoots of the pipehorse group.

More distant cousins to the pipefishes include several other families with similar-looking suction-snouts; the ghost pipefish, razorfish, trumpetfish, cornetfish and seamoth families.