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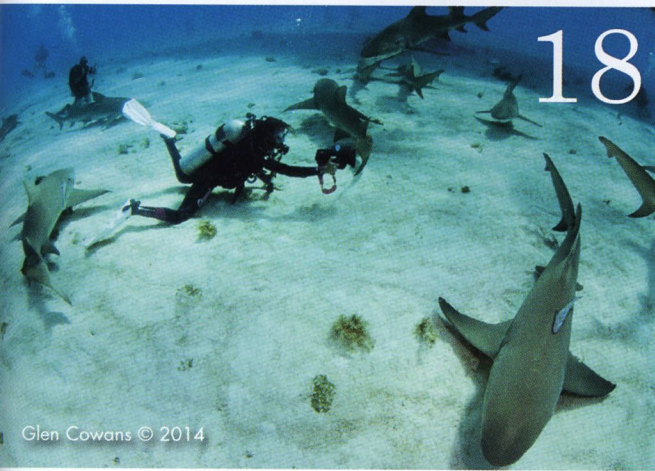
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WE KNEW THE SUN WAS SETTING BECAUSE WITH EACH PASSING MINUTE THE WATER WAS GETTING DARKER AND OUR LIGHTS MORE AND MORE NECESSARY FOR WELL OVER AN HOUR WE'D BEEN SITTING ALONGSIDE A SMALL PILE OF CORAL RUBBLE AT A PLACE CALLED PINTU COLADA IN LEMBEH STRAIT, RESTING VIRTUALLY MOTIONLESS ON THE BOTTOM. THE ANTICIPATION WAS BUILDING.

# NIGHT OF THE MANDARINS

MICHAEL SALVAREZZA | CHRISTOPHER P WEAVER © 2014

OUR QUARRY: THE ELUSIVE MANDARINFISH *SYNCIROPUS SPLENDIDUS*. OUR OBJECTIVE: PHOTOGRAPH THEIR FLEETING MATING DANCE.

**M**andarinfish are among nature's most beautiful creatures. Their extreme colouration is normally a mix of dark blue with orange and yellow wavy lines, resembling the gaudy colouring of the robes of Imperial Chinese officers, known as mandarins. However, hues of purple and green can also be seen on their bodies. The brightly coloured mandarin (or mandarin dragonet) shouldn't be confused with the brownish fish, also called the mandarin fish or Chinese perch. Divers are hard pressed to find a more beguiling fish, and

they travel to remote locations just to get a glimpse of these fascinating fish. Lembeh Strait in Indonesia is one of those places.

These fish are difficult to find during the day. Most successful mandarin fish dives occur at night, but in order to witness and possibly photograph the actual mating of these fish, divers must time their dives for dusk. And be aware: mandarin fish are extremely tentative and nervous. The slightest movement, even from breathing, can scare them away; many underwater photographers have come away from these dives with nothing more than frustrating photographs of the tail end of these fish as they dive into their burrows and crevices.

To find a mandarin fish, divers usually need to search through piles of coral rubble or in between branching corals, where the fish may be spotted hopping along the branches. They swim by rapidly pulsating their fins but more

commonly they seem to almost be creeping tentatively along the bottom. These fish usually inhabit fairly shallow water, with depths not exceeding 18m (60 feet).

As a predator, mandarin fish are cautious and picky eaters – they feed mostly on crustaceans and small invertebrates. The species is generally small, with most adult individuals measuring about 6cm (2.5 inches). Their body structure consists of four dorsal spines, eight dorsal soft rays, no anal spines and is scale-less. Although scale-less, Mandarin fish are protected from most parasitic skin diseases with the help of a mucous-coated slimy and smelly skin. It's not clear what eats mandarin fish, but their wacky colouring and bad tasting mucous-coated skin is believed to discourage potential predators.

With our eyes adjusting to the fading light of dusk, we suddenly began to spot a few of these elusive creatures. First one, then another, began to peek out from behind a pile of dead coral branches. Spotting the



© Eco-Photo Explorers

Late afternoon light on the Lembeh Strait



Mating mandarinfish *Synchiropus splendidus* with eggs

divers lying in wait, they immediately disappeared, only to reappear a few moments later. The urge to mate seemed to be overcoming their urge to hide!

We waited patiently. Our breathing was slow and rhythmic, our movements gentle and barely perceptible. The cameras were set, the strobes armed. Our job was to simply wait and be ready. Since it's best to observe Mandarinfish at dusk, we decided to set our camera focus lights (Light & Motion Sola Photo 600) to

the low 'red' setting, because the white light seemed to frighten them.

Mandarinfish mate only at dusk. Typically, three to five females will gather in a pile of rubble where males are known to visit. The males, for their part, will begin to display subtle courtship behaviours. After a careful and almost excruciatingly slow seduction, a female will decide to join a selected male, and the two will dart almost a metre off the bottom where they'll exchange egg and sperm before

Below left:  
Mandarinfish in all their gaudy glory!

Right:

- Mantis shrimp strikes a pose
- Tryon's risbecia (*Risbecia tryoni*)
- Fearsome face of a lizardfish



disappearing in a blink of an eye. This flash of nature's brilliance is what we were anxiously waiting for

Our eyes strained in the growing gloom to watch this spectacle unfold. With baited breath, we waited.. and waited. and then, suddenly, it happened. In a matter of a second or two – a pair dashed off the reef bottom, clung together momentarily, and then disappeared. Our camera shutters triggered, the strobes fired and we prayed that we captured

what we came to see. We nervously peeked at our camera's display to see if we captured the images we longed for

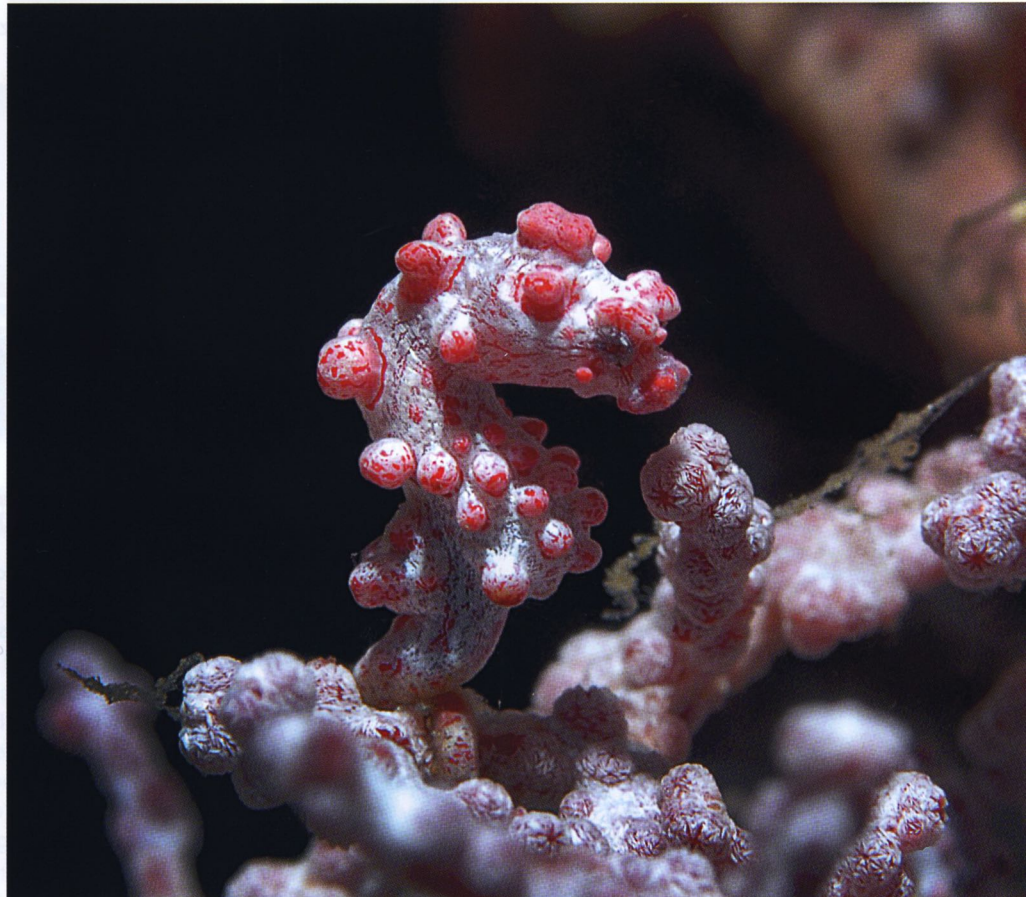
Success!

Sadly, the mating of the mandarinfish was over for the night. We only had one opportunity to photograph this amazing display, and we did!

With that brief embrace, the pair released a cloud of eggs and sperm that would

fertilize and then drift in the ocean currents. Within 24 hours the eggs would hatch and tiny planktonic larvae Mandarinfish would float at the ocean's mercy until settling on a reef where they'd end up living for some 10-15 years. For us, our objective had been met and we returned to the boat all smiles, anxious to see our images with better resolution and to share them with others.

Mandarinfish are found throughout much of the tropical western Pacific Ocean,



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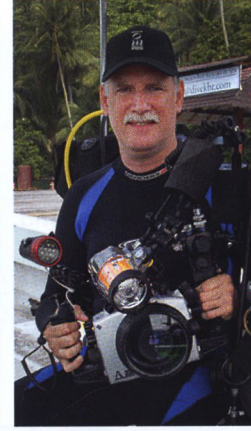
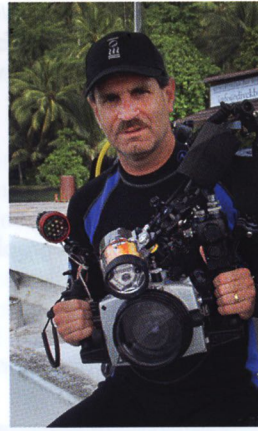
- Look close amongst the soft corals for carefully hidden tiny crabs
- Hello!
- Pygmy sea horse
- Spiny tiger shrimp  
*Phyllognathia ceratophthalmus*

© Eco-Photo Explor





Kungkungan Bay Resort is right on the waters of Lembeh Strait



Authors Michael Salvarezza & Christopher Weaver



including the coral triangle of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia. Unfortunately, despite being as shy as they are, mandarinfish are threatened by overfishing, destructive fishing methods and habitat loss. Because of their brilliant and unique colouring, these fish are often sought after by the salt-water aquarium fish trade. Since these fish are well known as being fussy eaters, many die because of incorrect feeding practices by inexperienced consumers. Others will perish as being confined in aquariums is

not their ideal living conditions. Regrettably, this wasteful practice is contributing to their decline.

For us, the night of the mandarinfish was a success. If you find yourself in a location known for spotting mandarinfish, make sure you ask the local dive guides where to find them... and then be prepared to wait a long time for that brief and exhilarating moment. It's worth it!

## GETTING TO INDONESIA

The best way to reach Lembeh is via Silk Air into Manado. A valid passport is required with 6 months validity and enough blank pages for the tourist visa (purchased on arrival).

**Immunizations and Medicine** Ensure your vaccinations are up to date! Visit a physician or travel health clinic for any vaccinations (Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Malaria, Typhoid, and Tetanus-diphtheria) and travel medicine are recommended. Pack all medicines in original clearly labeled containers, and a signed and dated letter from a physician describing your medical conditions and medications is suggested.

**Note:** Specialized travel health clinics usually provide more detailed health protection measures. Beware of travelers' diarrhea. Insect protection is essential!

**Baggage** International carrier limits vary, check before travel.

**Weather** Equatorial tropical climate. October through April is the wet season. May through September is hottest, with temperatures in the 80s (27°C) and 90s (32°C) Fahrenheit by day. Tropical downpours are common, but severe storms are rare.

**Currency** Rupiah (Rp) but US Dollars are often accepted at resorts.

**Electricity** Power voltage is 220 Volts (50 Hz). Check appliance compatibility before plugging them in! Converters/adaptors may be available via your hotel front desk.

**Customs** Several different religions are practiced in Indonesia; Muslim is the most predominant, about 87%. Christianity is a minority religion in Indonesia, and not evenly spread throughout the region. **Important** - Indonesia is a conservative nation appropriate attire and cultural sensitivities are important. Check with guidebooks on how to avoid offending the local population.

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"Boat is beautiful, crew is fantastic...great trip guys, whale sharks rock!!"  
S.Patterson, Visayas 2013

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