

UNDERWATER

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Undersea Voyager Project • Aquatica 40D • Point-n-Shoot Photography • Sea Turtle Hatch

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Walt Stearns © 2008

Tent Reef, Saba

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Travel Log Galapagos Islands

VALLEY OF BATS

*Story & Photography
by Michael Salvarezza
& Christopher P. Weaver*

The Galapagos Islands are well known amongst divers as a world-class destination for adrenaline-drenched shark dives and heart pounding Whale Shark encounters. Indeed, divers around the world have either traveled to this spot (or dreamed of it) in the hopes of witnessing the fabled schools of Hammerhead Sharks off Darwin and Wolf Island. It is here, perched along rocky walls that tumble into the depths, that divers brace themselves against fierce currents as they watch a veritable parade of marine life that includes schools of Jacks and Creole Fish, squadrons of Eagle Rays, curious Dolphins and seemingly ambivalent Green Sea Turtles. But it is the hundreds of Scalloped Hammerheads, the hulking Galapagos Sharks and the majestically huge Whale Sharks that command the true attention and focus of all who come here.

The Galapagos are, in a word, magnificent.

Straddling the equator some 620 miles off the west coast of Ecuador, this isolated archipelago of roughly 125 volcanic islands and islets represents a true laboratory of natural history. Made famous by the visit of Charles Darwin in 1835, the Galapagos support more than 3000 species of flora and fauna and it was the subtle variations in several species of birds and tortoises from isolated island to island that led Darwin to his theories of natural selection, theories that remain controversial to this day.





Visitors to these islands are often immediately struck by the fearlessness of its land animals; Galapagos Sea Lions cast a wary but almost indifferent eye to visitors. Land and Marine Iguanas go about their business unperturbed by human observers. Blue-Footed Booby Birds sit vigilantly on their scratched out nests on the barren volcanic soil, tending to their eggs and largely ignoring the two-legged creatures walking about and snapping pictures of them. This cautious ambivalence is one of the reasons tourism to the Galapagos is so popular.

Scuba Divers who venture into the inviting waters around the main islands are immedi-



ately startled by the surprisingly cool waters here -- temperatures can range from a frigid 56 degrees Fahrenheit to a comfortably warm 75 degrees. In fact, populations of the northernmost penguin species (Galapagos Penguin) actually make their homes here, an odd juxtaposition of polar wildlife on the equator! And, although the waters around the main islands are interesting enough for divers, the real action lies some 12 hours away by boat at the uninhabited islands of Darwin and Wolf.

Our target at Darwin and Wolf was, not surprisingly, the schools of Hammerhead Sharks. But we were also hoping for encounters with Whale Sharks, and were not disappointed on both accounts. Literally hundreds of Scalloped Hammerhead Sharks swam lazily back and forth in the currents as we watched awe-struck. Every so often, a Galapagos Shark would emerge from the blue and swim uncomfortably close as it seemed to search the rocky walls for prey. Interestingly, on one occasion we actually observed a small school of five Galapagos Sharks schooling with the Hammerheads. And on one memorable morning, after rising at 5:30am in the hopes of an early encounter, we swam with three 45-foot Whale Sharks in a series of dream dives at Darwin that we will never forget.



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But, there are other fascinating mysteries here, natural oddities that are easy to overlook in the pursuit of "Mr. Big." It was late afternoon at Wolf Island when we descended along a sloping rocky bottom at a dive site known as "The Anchorage."

With daylight waning, our search was not for schools of sharks but, rather, a rarely seen and incredibly weird marine enigma - the Red-Lipped Batfish!

looking fish, the Batfish is a bottom dweller that spends its life hopping around the sea floor, perched on its modified pectoral and ventral fins. Occasionally, this diminutive little creature (7 inches maximum length) will find the motivation to swim short distances, which it does with sideways strokes of its tail. Of course, it is the face that makes for the most interesting photos: bright red lips and a long blackish-brown horn. Under this protu-



Among photographers, the Red-Lipped Batfish (*Ogcocephalus darwini*) is every bit as legendary as the huge animals swarming the swift seas around Darwin's Arch a few miles away. A rather odd

berance is a small-concealed lure, the purpose of which continues to stump scientists. Still, this oddly patched together "Mr. Potatohead" face is a face that only a mother could love.



With bright red lips and a long blackish-brown horn sprouting from the rest of an animal designed by committee renders a face not only a mother could love, but some really interesting photos.

Oh, and one other thing.

Under that funny looking protuberance is a small-concealed lure, the purpose of which continues to stump scientists.

Red-Lipped Batfish are limited in distribution. Originally endemic to the Galapagos, some specimens have now been found off Peru and the coast of Ecuador. However, they are rarely seen and we were quite skeptical when we entered the water with a promise from the dive master that they would be here. So, as we descended the rocky slope to a sandy bottom in 100 feet of water, our hopes were not very high. Perhaps we would find one or maybe two fish. Perhaps we wouldn't see any. The cameras were ready, but we were very much in doubt.

And then, as our eyes adjusted to the diminished late afternoon light, there they were -- dozens of them!

At first, they looked like small rocks on the sand. Soon, however, we became quite adept at distinguishing them from their surroundings and it was quite easy to spot them. If we approached one to photograph it, we had to be careful not to rest on top of another one inadvertently. If we focused our attention on an individual in front of us, two more would hop away to our left or right. And if we approached one too quickly, it would swim away, only to reveal another just a few feet beyond.

Red-Lipped Batfish are generally active at night, and feed on snails, crabs, crustaceans and small fish. They are light brown in color, with varia-

tions of light beige, cream or blue-gray and they have two dark longitudinal stripes along the back. They can be found in shallow water down to 150 FSW, but at "The Anchorage," the resident population seems to stay between 80 and 100 feet.

The Batfish are not only found at Wolf Island, although that is the best place to see them. They can also be found throughout the Archipelago, and are abundant at Punta Vicente Roca, Tagus Cove and Gardiner Island off Espanola.

Our dive at "The Anchorage" and the search for the Red-Lipped Batfish was quite a success. These strange looking fish are just another example of nature's infinite variety and are a fascinating example of adaptation to a specific ecological niche. Or, perhaps, they are an example of Nature's sense of humor! Either way, we think "The Anchorage" should be renamed "The Valley of the Bats." ❖

Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver head **Eco-Photo Explorers (EPE)**, a New York based organization promoting interest in protecting our ocean environment by creating awareness through the use of underwater photography.



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