

Flat Rock and Manta Bommies

Club Dive - Valentine's Day 14 Feb 04

John Kelley

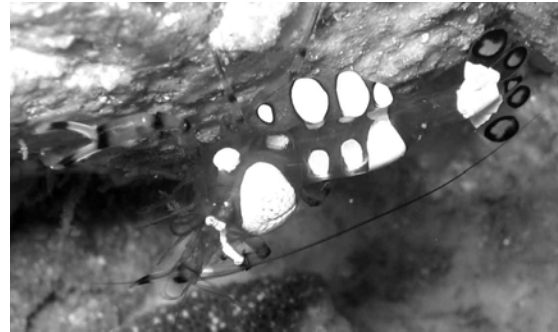
Boat diving always seems to start with the weather and this was no exception – 15 kts rising to 20 kts SE. We left Manly harbour in DIVER1 with a disappointing five divers and Ted at the helm. I mean the number was disappointing not the divers or Ted's driving. It was not a smooth run but the South Passage bar was flat and we zipped across and took a short cut to boot (anxiety level 6 out of 10).

We made for Boat Rock. A few weeks before I had dived at Boat Rock and the sea was swirling around the rock with huge eddies the size of house blocks. These eddies smoothed the sea so much that you could see far below. The currents were running strong but the dive was fine in the lee of the current. This time, however, at Boat Rock we found it a little rough so we headed to Flat Rock.

We anchored on the south-eastern side in the shark gutters. It was great visibility at over 15 metres. We followed the anchor line down and came off the ledge at about 17 metres through a very noticeable thermocline with a drop in temperature of a few degrees to level off at the bottom at about 24 metres. All three of us were taking photos so we did not swim very far because we had a wealth of subjects at hand. Some highlights were a delicately beautiful and partly-transparent anemone shrimp and its comical mate the Bold-spotted anemone shrimp which always sits with its tail higher than its head. As well, there were banded coral shrimps, a large docile jet-black sting ray and a 2.5m shovelnose ray which moved like a hover craft over the rocky reef ever alert for food. Anemones, Christmas-tree worms and feather stars that took a liking to Phil, added to the dive.



Phil & feather star



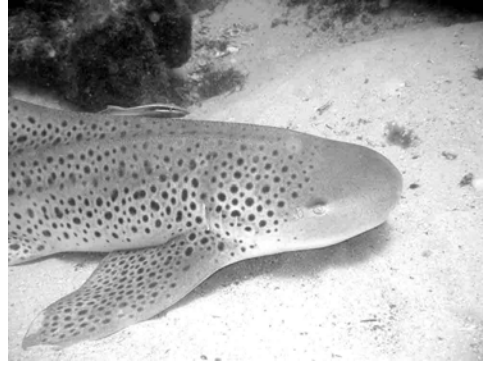
Anemone shrimp

The second dive saw us at Manta Bommies (always a favourite) although I saw no Mantas underwater this time. There were plenty of Leopard (Zebra) Sharks with their Slender Remoras in attendance (my goodness they're suckers for anything bigger than themselves). Matti found the large Spanish Dancer and we flooded it with electronic flashes and absorbed its every detail with the digitals. That night I noticed in my dive log that I had photographed a Spanish Dancer on the same dive in November last year – I'd guess it's probably the same one although it didn't seem to recognise me!

Matti found a whale vertebra and when he placed it on his head he looked like Rudolph the Red-nosed reindeer.



Matti & Whale vertebra



Leopard (Zebra) Shark

The colonial hydroids, like delicate flowers, were swishing with the surge. A Leopard shark or two cruised by at times and one finally lay on the sand for a regulation photo shoot.



Colonial Hydroid

Large scorpion fish, the amazing aeolid nudibranch with its mass of little mauve-tipped tentacles that stand up on the back of its body like porcupine quills and the raggedy mops of the feather-duster worms were simply attractive wild-life features.



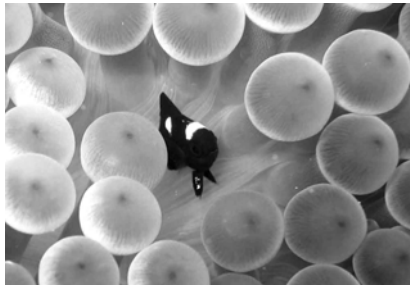
Aeolid nudibranch



Spanish Dancer

The juvenile blue angel fish topped it off although I followed that brilliant blue and white striped rascal about for quite a time to get a reasonable shot of him. How do they know the shutter is about to fire (after they have posed for you) and then with an effortless flick they're gone leaving a blurred image of a tail, a dorsal fin or a backside view?

The wind had been increasing as we lay at anchor near the bommies. The sea had also risen and some large rollers were coming through. I have a not-so-healthy anxiety regarding the boat's ability to stay upright when such a sea is following and my thoughts were firmly on the potentially disastrous and imminent bar crossing. However, Phil handled the waves with ease and Ted skippered the boat through a very flat bar (to my surprise and great relief) to follow the slalom course of marker buoys along the Rous Channel and back home. A good day of diving. Thanks particularly to Phil and Ted.



Small juvenile Three-spot Dascyllus