

Beauty of the Beast



A TRIBUTE TO SCORPIONFISH

THE DEVIL'S CHARM

Masters of camouflage and cunning ambush hunters, Scorpionfish and their allies are an endless source of amazement to the discerning underwater photographer



Rhinopias frondosa

The Weedy scorpionfish *Rhinopias frondosa* is a relatively rare cryptic, venomous, benthic scorpaenid restricted to Indo-Pacific silty, mucky sand bottoms. This is a very variable species which can be observed in several chromatic phases - a bright orange specimen is featured on the opening spread.

TEXTS BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI



Rhinopias frondosa

Another example of Weedy scorpionfish variability - this is a coral pink individual from Northern Sulawesi.

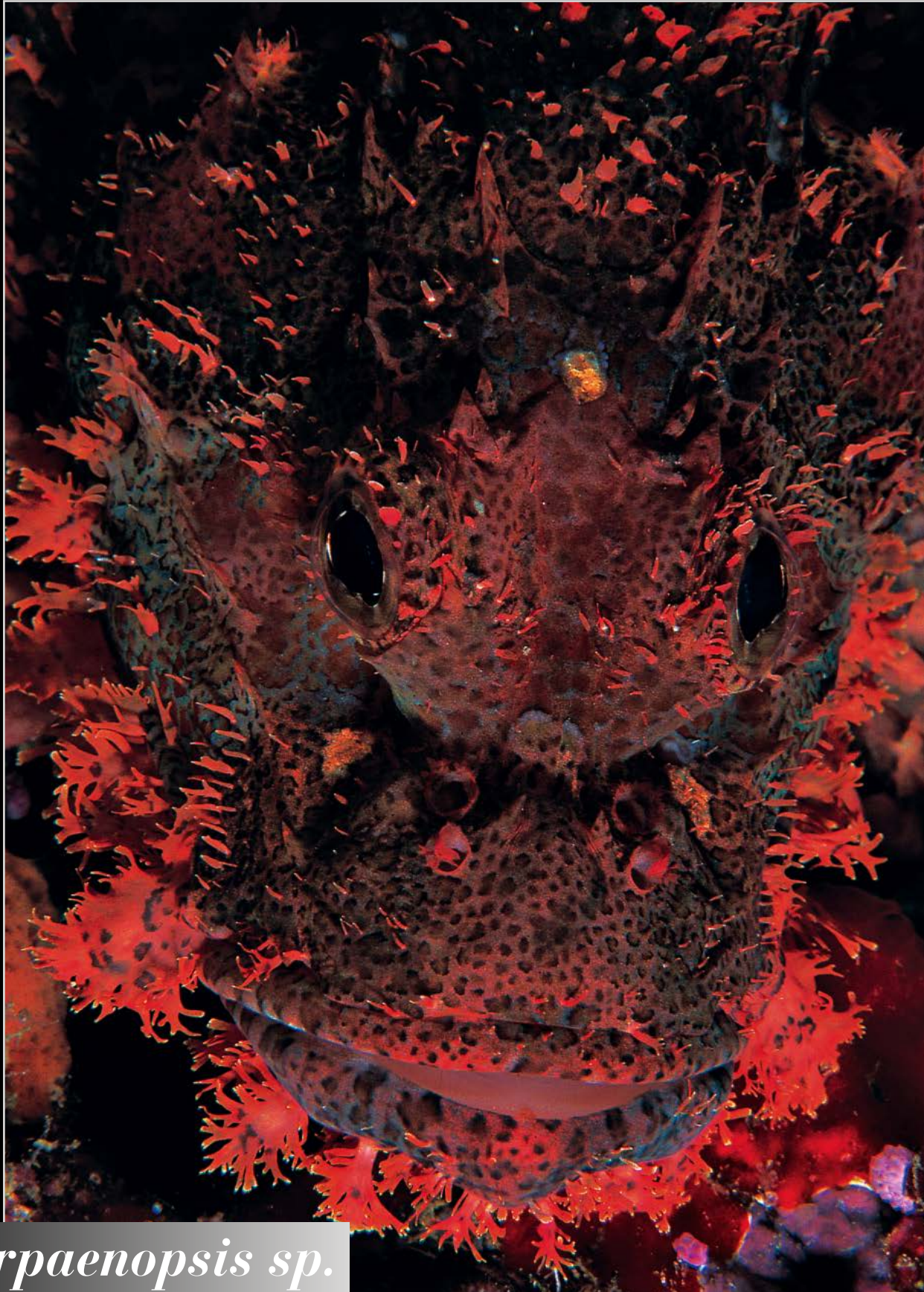
I have always been in love with the quirky, the outrageous, the bizarre and the downright ugly. There's something so much more interesting in the deformed features and contorted bodies of horrendous gargoyles in comparison to the boring perfection of noble knights in shining armour! And when one goes diving, the great and varied family of Scorpionfishes (family *Scorpaenidae*) and their allies certainly fits the bill regarding that. There are many excellent reasons to admire this group of predatory fish, and indeed fall in love with such fascinating subjects! The shameless right-in-your-face ugliness of their features goes hand in hand (or rather fin-in-fin) with some of the gaudiest, laciest, most elegant liveries to be seen in the marine world, and yet such stupefyingly extravagant colors and patterns blend seamlessly in what surely are the best examples of camouflage in the underwater environment. Indeed, such is the absolute perfection and efficiency of their disruptive shapes and liveries - rivalling that of some other equally static masters of visual trickery, Frogfish (*Antennaridae*) - that several Scorpionfish species stand out as some of the most difficult creatures to ferret out of the coral reef environment for the underwater photographer to portray. Some gaudily ornamented species pose as crinoids, some other partially emerge from the silty bottom as muck- or algae-incrusted pieces of debris; others shamelessly sit out in the open, silently

pretending to be coral chunks or drifting vegetable matter; and surely very few other animal species - marine or terrestrial - can compete with the extraordinary camouflage of that great (and extremely venomous) pretender, the Stonefish *Synanceia verrucosa*. Woe to the unfortunate soul who might happen to step on one while wading in shallow waters! The effect of its venom - injected via the needle-like rays of the dorsal fin, capable of penetrating a rubber shoe - is said to be of such atrocious intensity that most victims die of heart failure from the pain of the sting itself. Indeed the ability to defend themselves via their sharp, venomous dorsal and pectoral fin rays is common to all scorpionfish, and one has to be very careful not to touch or even brush against one when photographing it, especially when leaning against dead coral or lying on the sand bottom in silty, mucky environments. But once seen, they are sure to delight - with their grotesque features and shapes, by the complex, Oriental rug-like patterns and colors of their liveries, by the fascinating evolutionary adaptations shown by their benthic habits and ambush hunting techniques. Why, in so many years of finding and photographing them we have even discovered and documented the presence of a false mouth on the nuchal area of several similar *Scorpaenopsis* species - surely evolved to trick their unwary prey before the fatal gulp. Not convinced yet? Turn the page then...and try to spot the lurking Scorpionfish before they swallow you! ●



Pteroidichthys amboinensis

The tiny Ambon scorpionfish can occasionally be encountered on silty, sandy bottoms - it usually sits in the open, pretending to be a bunch of vegetable matter thanks to its outrageous pectoral fins and leaf-like appendages growing above the eyes.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Commonly identified as *oxycephala*, most *Scorpaenopsis* observed on Indo-Pacific reefs actually belong to a complex of very similar species. Correct identification is difficult.



Rhinopias eschmeyeri

The Paddle-flap scorpionfish is a *Rhinopias* species which shows slightly less dermal extravagance when compared to others. This Indonesian specimen is in a lilac phase.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Most *Scorpaenopsis* belong to the *oxycephala* complex tend to brashly perch out in the open, often on coral heads, confiding in their exquisite and extremely efficient somatolitic (ie disruptive) camouflage. A daring combination of colors and patterns makes them almost invisible to the casual observer.



Inimicus didactylus

The Devil scorpionfish has the habit of half-digging and hiding in soft silty and sandy bottoms, becoming a liability to careless photographers lying on the sea floor.



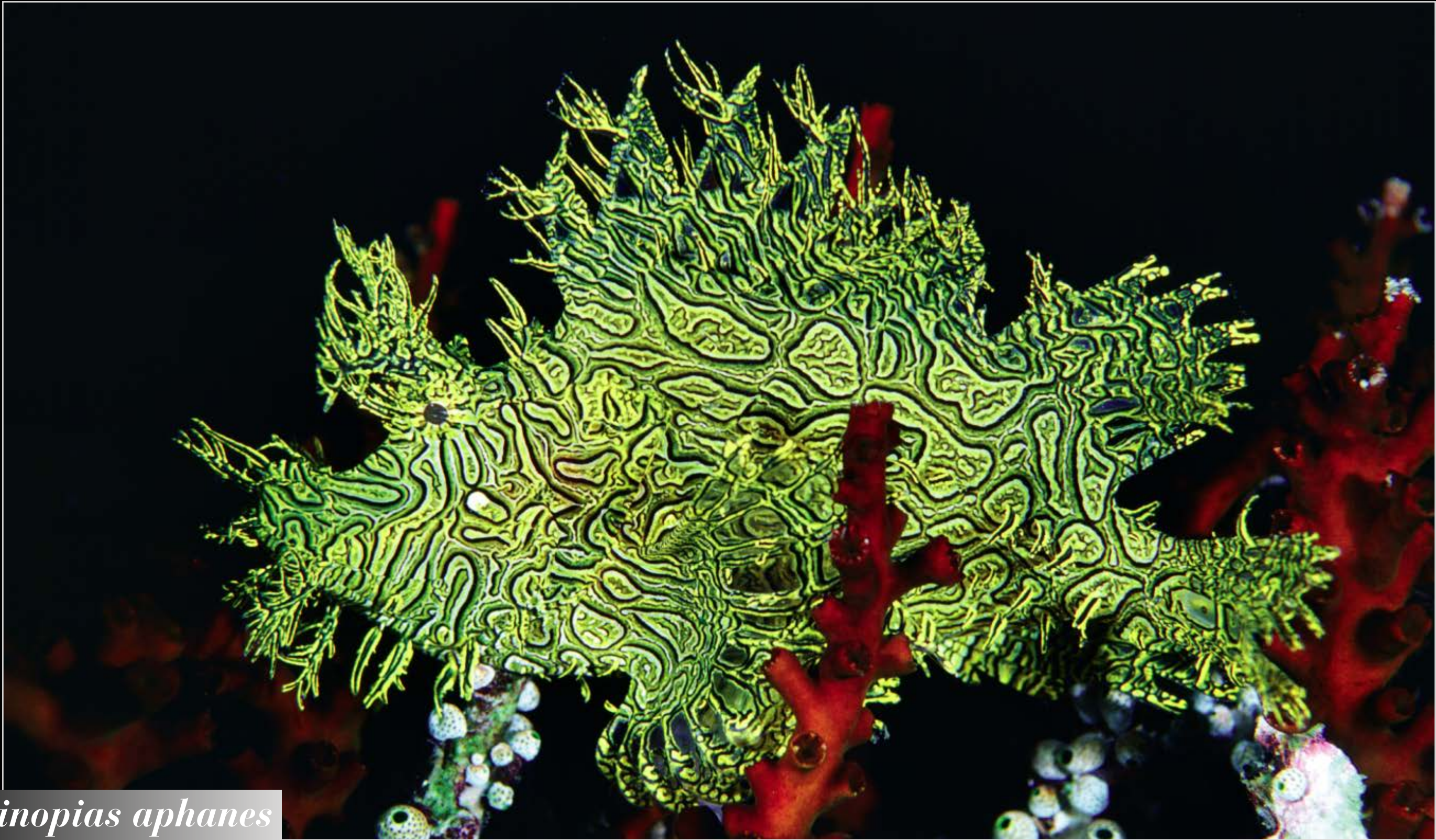
Synanceia verrucosa

Extremely dangerous to waders, the highly venomous Stonefish lies immobile in very shallow water, confident in its extraordinary, algae-encrusted camouflage.



Taenianotus triacanthus

One of the gaudiest and most delicate among the Scorpionfish allies, the paper-thin Leaf fish can occasionally be observed in the open on Indo-Pacific coral reefs, swaying slightly from side to side in the current. Leaf fish can usually be seen in mottled brown, lemon yellow, pure white and even bright fuchsia color phases - as this one.



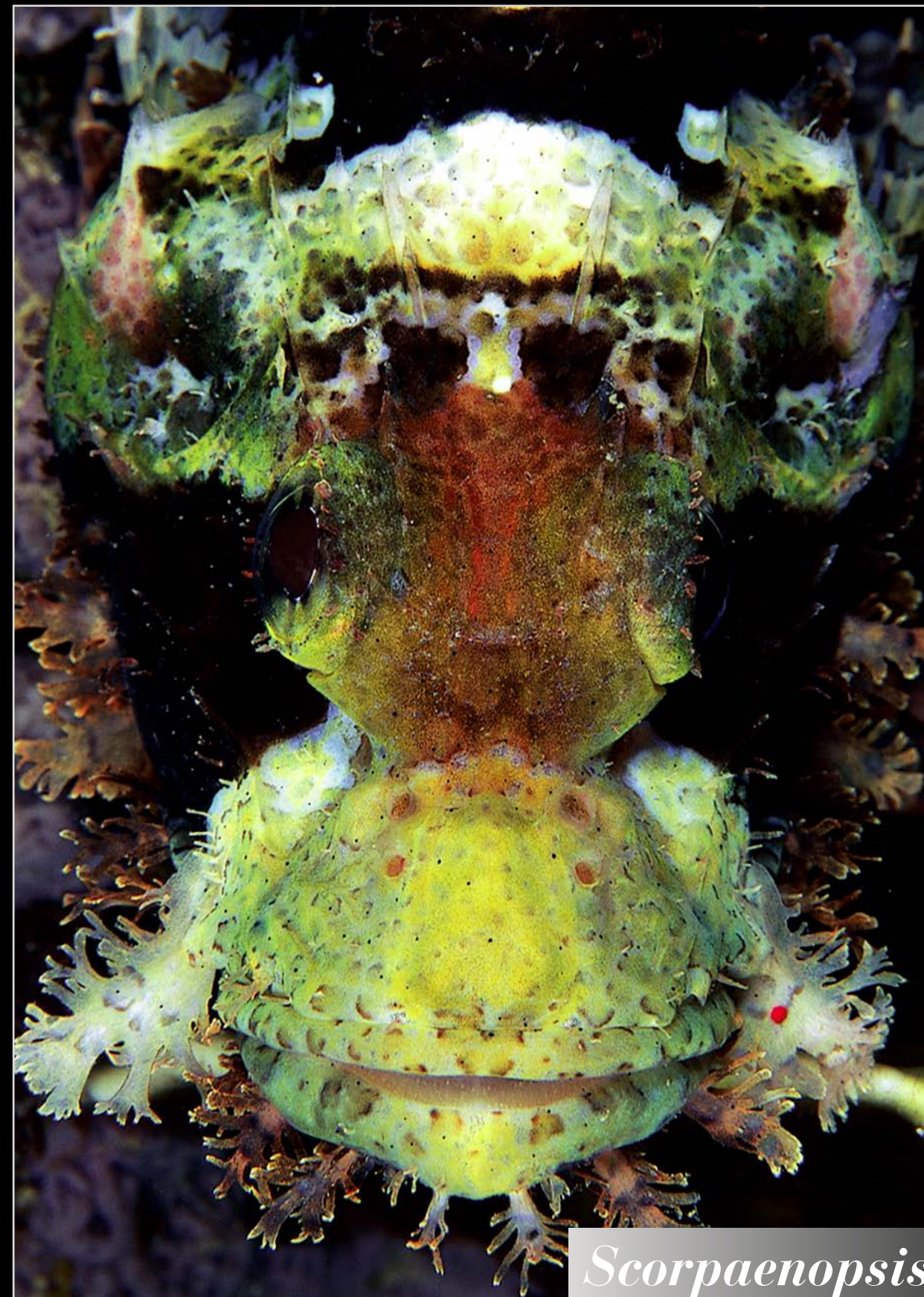
Rhinopias aphanes

The Lacy scorpionfish is believed to mimic crinoids, as it is often found sitting out in the open close to them, and it probably is the most showy (and sought after) of the *Rhinopias* genus. These are benthic, stationary ambush predators which will occupy the same position on the reef for relatively long periods.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Proper reef scorpionfish species - all somewhat related to *oxycephala* - are characterized by minute, colorful ornamentations and dermal frills fringing the lower jaw.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Shape, position of the eyes, fringing frill ornamentation and the disruptive color pattern are typical of the reef scorpionfish *Scorpaenopsis oxycephala* and its allied species.



Inimicus didactylus

The highly venomous Devil scorpionfish can be occasionally observed - especially when flushed - as it "walks" on the substrate, using the loose pectoral fin rays as "fingers" and dragging it half-bent body behind. It can be a rather grotesque and unsettling sight for the uninitiated! Some Devil scorpionfish can be exceptionally colorful, especially those living on black volcanic sand.



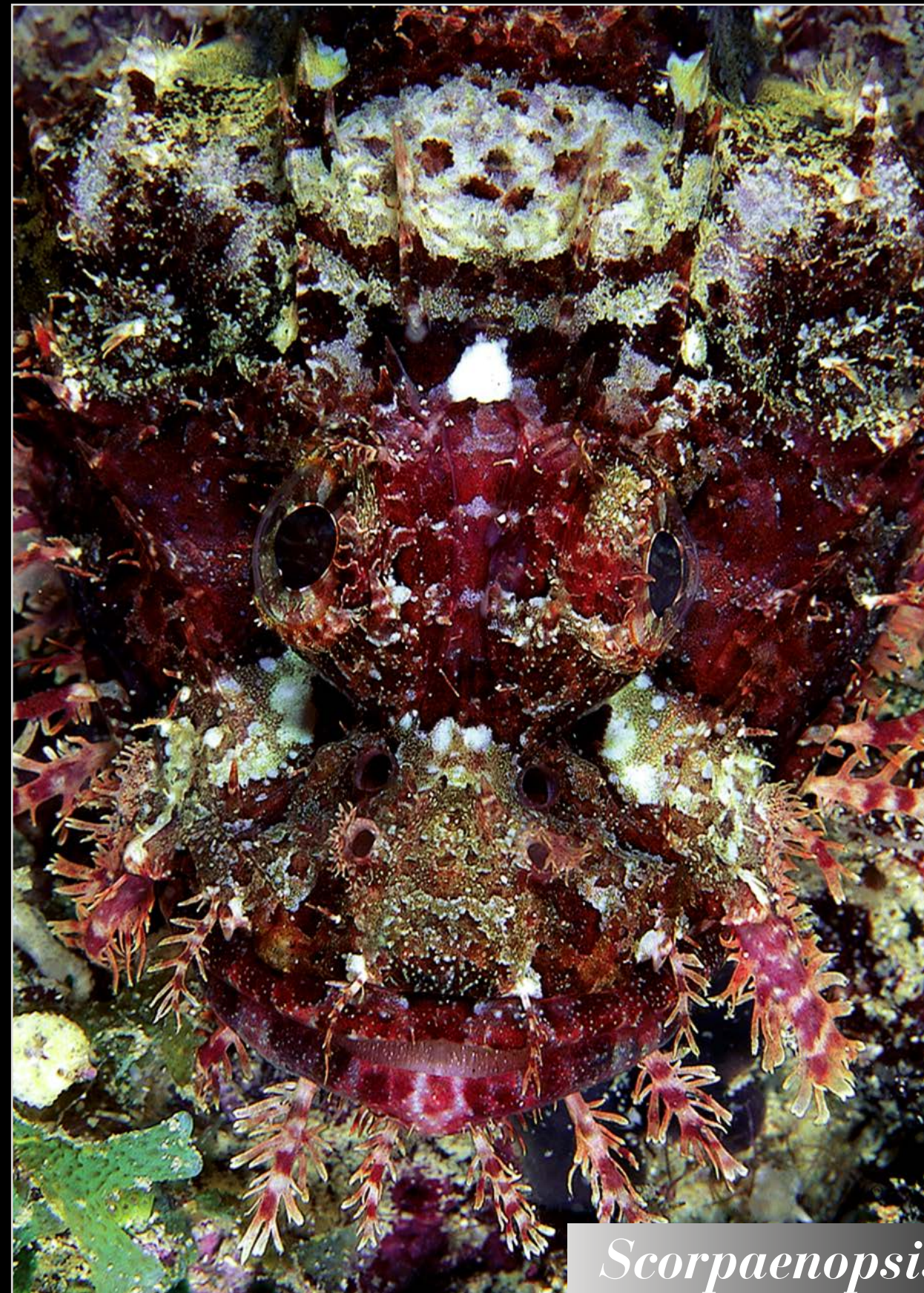
Pteroidichthys amboinensis

A side view of a small Ambon scorpionfish - here seen in a typical orange color phase - shows very well the efficacy of the disruptive effect offered by its frayed fins and various dermal appendages.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Another portrait of a reef scorpionfish showing both the riotous colors of its livery and the highly disruptive, camouflaging effect obtained by its patterns.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Common reef scorpionfish belonging to the *oxycephala* complex can quickly become highly collectable subjects - they all look similar and yet they are all different.



Rhinopias frondosa

Weedy scorpionfish are relatively common on silty bottoms, especially in Indonesia. This frontal portrait of a sulphur-yellow individual shows to perfection its upturned snout, the fake bright white "eyespots" to confuse quick-biting predators such as triggerfish and the curiously glazed, transparent "windows" in its fan-like pectoral fins.



Rhinopias eschmeyeri

A three-quarter portrait of a Paddle-flap *Rhinopias* shows well its exaggerated upturned snout and the dermal flaps and bumps typical of the genus.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Scorpionfish can lie in ambush in the open without fearing of being discovered - the color tones and patterns of their livery make them literally disappear in the reef environment.



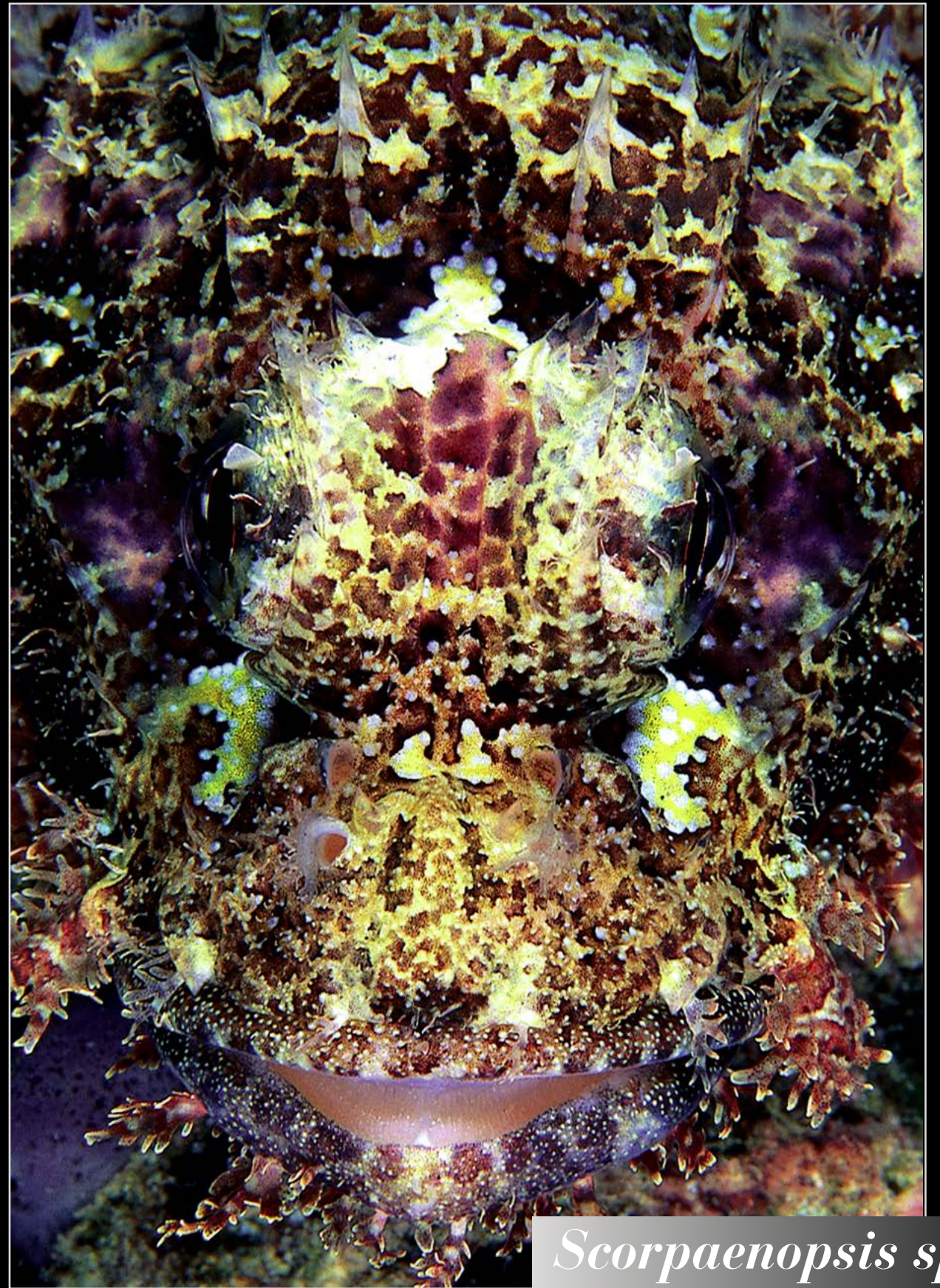
Scorpaenopsis diabolus

The False stonefish is smaller and generally more colorful than the deadly *Synanceia* - besides being usually more creative in the choice of its livery! False stonefish also prefer different habitats, being usually found among coral rubble in healthy reefs rather than on sandy or pebbled bottoms in very shallow water like Stonefish proper.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Notice how the bright white false eyespots on the head of this colorful reef scorpionfish distract pecking predators such as triggerfish from targeting the real eyes of the animal.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

The liveries of some top-notch specimens rival in beauty and complexity the best Oriental rugs from Iran. Notice the sharp bony projections at the top of the head.



Scorpaenopsis obtusa

Several small, sand-bottom dwelling scorpionfish species are very difficult to identify properly, as color and pattern obviously are of little importance here. This exquisitely camouflaged and tiny species from the Sulu Sea has been reliably identified as a Shortsnout scorpionfish. Notice how the livery mimics coral and sponge encrustations on a piece of dead coral!



Taenianotus triacanthus

A close-up portrait of a lemon-yellow phase Leaf fish from Borneo. This species can be very closely approached as it won't try to swim away, confiding in its camouflage.



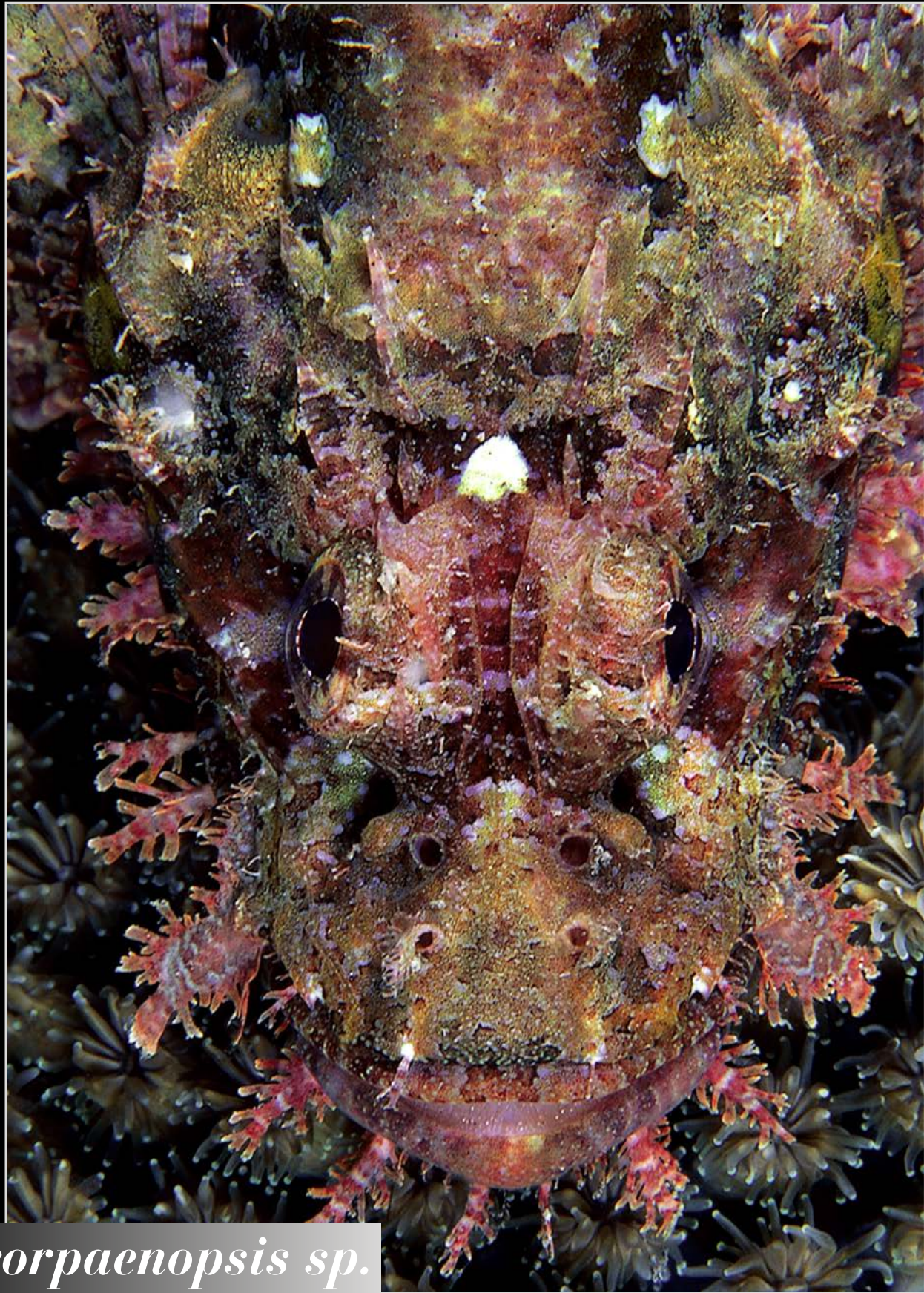
Scorpaenopsis oxycephala

A splendid example of the somatolitic effect offered by the complex, colorful, carpet-like livery of reef scorpionfish species. Under natural light the fish would be almost invisible.



Ablabys taenianotus

Closely allied to Scorpionfish proper, Cuckatoo waspfish are equally well camouflaged and perfectly capable of inflicting painful wounds through their needle-like dorsal fin rays. Members of the *Ablabys* genus are excellent dead leaf mimics, commonly found lying on the sandy substrate and gently swaying from side to side.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Another typical common reef scorpionfish portrait - the dermal frills fringing the lower jaw are exceptionally well developed in this beautiful specimen.



Scorpaenopsis sp.

Reds and yellows disappear at low depth with the gradual absorption of sunlight - what appears very colorful when lit by flashes is in fact almost invisible in natural light.