Beauty *of the* Beast

Tiny, fast and stunningly colorful, these highly territorial marine fish offer unique opportunities to the discerning underwater photographer

Pleurosicya mossambica

One of the most commonly observed species in the Central Indo-Pacific Coral Triangle. The brightly colored and ringed eyes stand out sharply on a semi-transparent body.
As with most coral gobies, framing the subject from directly above allows wonderful compositions with the sharply patterned coral cups in the background.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

Another very common species on Indo-Pacific reefs. A careful, slow approach will allow extreme macro close-ups - here a Nikon 105mm was used on a DX body for further magnification.

TEXTS BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

There seems to be an obsession with today's scuba divers - or maybe it's just a contemporary fashionable fad - with large and possibly dangerous animals. Dive operators worldwide actively promote very expensive trips to hopefully photograph anything with big teeth and a fearsome reputation, from Great White sharks to Leopard seals and from brazilian Anacondas to Nile crocodiles. Well, nothing wrong with that of course - but I occasionally think people are losing their sense of perspective, and risk missing a grander view of things. We, the Ferraris, have always found instead immense satisfaction in the careful observation of the small, the tiny and the minuscule during our diving days. We certainly enjoyed the sight of huge mantas gliding by, of great sharks rising from the darkness of the deep, of shining silver-and-steel walls of jacks and barracudas; yet, our source of wonder always lies in the nooks and crannies of that impossibly colorful labyrinth, the coral reef. And among its countless denizens, coral gobies reign supreme. Ignored by most, invisible to many, their number is legion - absurdly colorful, their semitransparent body flecked in iridescent, rainbow-hued scales - they stake fiercely defended ranges and territories which they survey, hawk-like, from the top of their miniature mountaintops. Despite their diminutive size - most species are less than 2cm long - they are blessed with high-sounding, exotic names: *Helcogramma*, *Trimma*, *Pleurosicya*, *Bryaninops*, and offer interesting habits to those who have enough patience to pause and observe. Most species are to be found in shallow, sunlit reef areas blessed with a healthy coral growth - typical Indo-Pacific dive sites of the "Coral Triangle" are ideal to observe most species. Adults will select a territory - usually a couple of square feet atop a coral mound, a brain coral, or a flat coral table - and perch at a vantage point, always on the look-out for trespassing rivals and permanently ready to quickly rise for a few feet in the water column right above to snatch a tasty plankton morsel. Their dazzling liveries - which appear to be sequined in glitter - and their perches of choice make, in fact, stupendous subjects for discerning underwater photographers, those who have eyes and know how to use them. The endless combinations offered by the colorful liveries of these miniature subjects and the geometric, hypnotically repeating pattern of the coral cups on which they perch can be rivalled by very few other marine sights.

Other species - more sedate in habits and dress - are to be found instead, exquisitely camouflaged, on the fleshy, rubbery, water-filled ramifications of *Dendronephtya* soft corals. These are more to be admired for the excellence of their cryptic qualities rather than for the gaudiness of their livery, and yet they too make wonderful subjects.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

What makes spectacular photographic subjects of many coral gobies species is their sequined, iridescent livery, which greatly contrasts with the colors and patterns of the coral heads or large sponges on which they are usually observed.

Helcogramma striata

Possibly the most commonly observed coral goby species on Indo-Pacific reefs, often found in small groups. The body is in metallic red with white longitudinal stripes.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

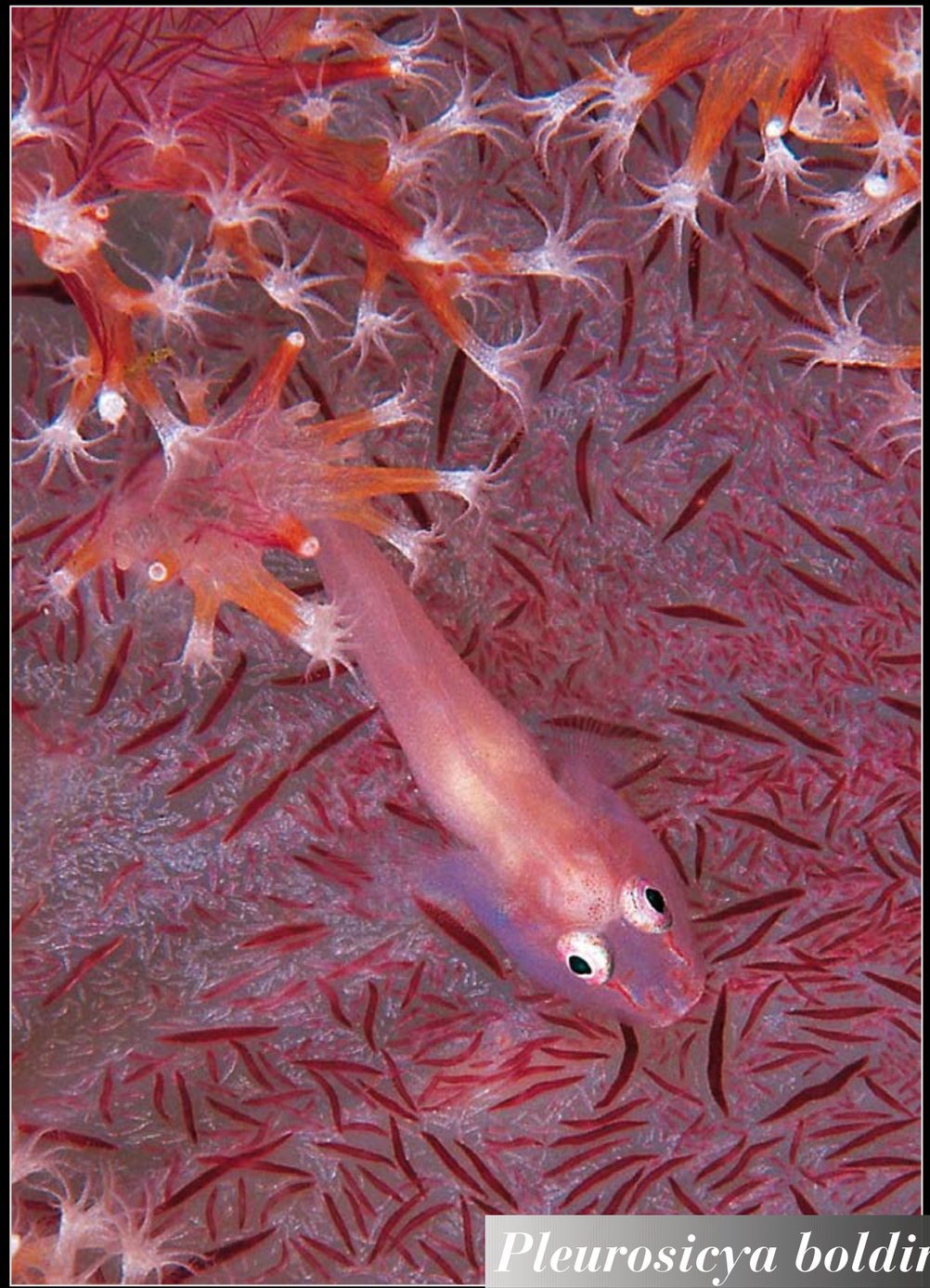
A very colorful species, identified by a semi-trasparent body flecked in countless tiny brilliant, metallic spots. Red, green and gold are prevalent on most individuals.

Helcogramma striata

Side portraits of most coral gobies - not easily attained given their choice of habitat - evidence the jutting lower jaw and the habit of perching on the pectoral fins displayed by most species. Coral gobies can disappear in an instant if disturbed, but will usually return to their usual perch - a bit like dragonflies.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

Portraits from directly above can be quite striking when the goby is found perching on a suitable substrate. Mound and brain corals make excellent backgrounds.



Pleurosicya boldinghi

Gobies living on soft corals are usually very cryptic, showing delicately-hued or even completely transparent liveries, but make great photographic subjects.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

A fitting example of the photographic qualities offered by several coral gobies species when framed from directly above - here the technicolored flecking of the fish and the wavy corrugations of the coral head in the background complement each other perfectly.

Helcogramma gymnauchen

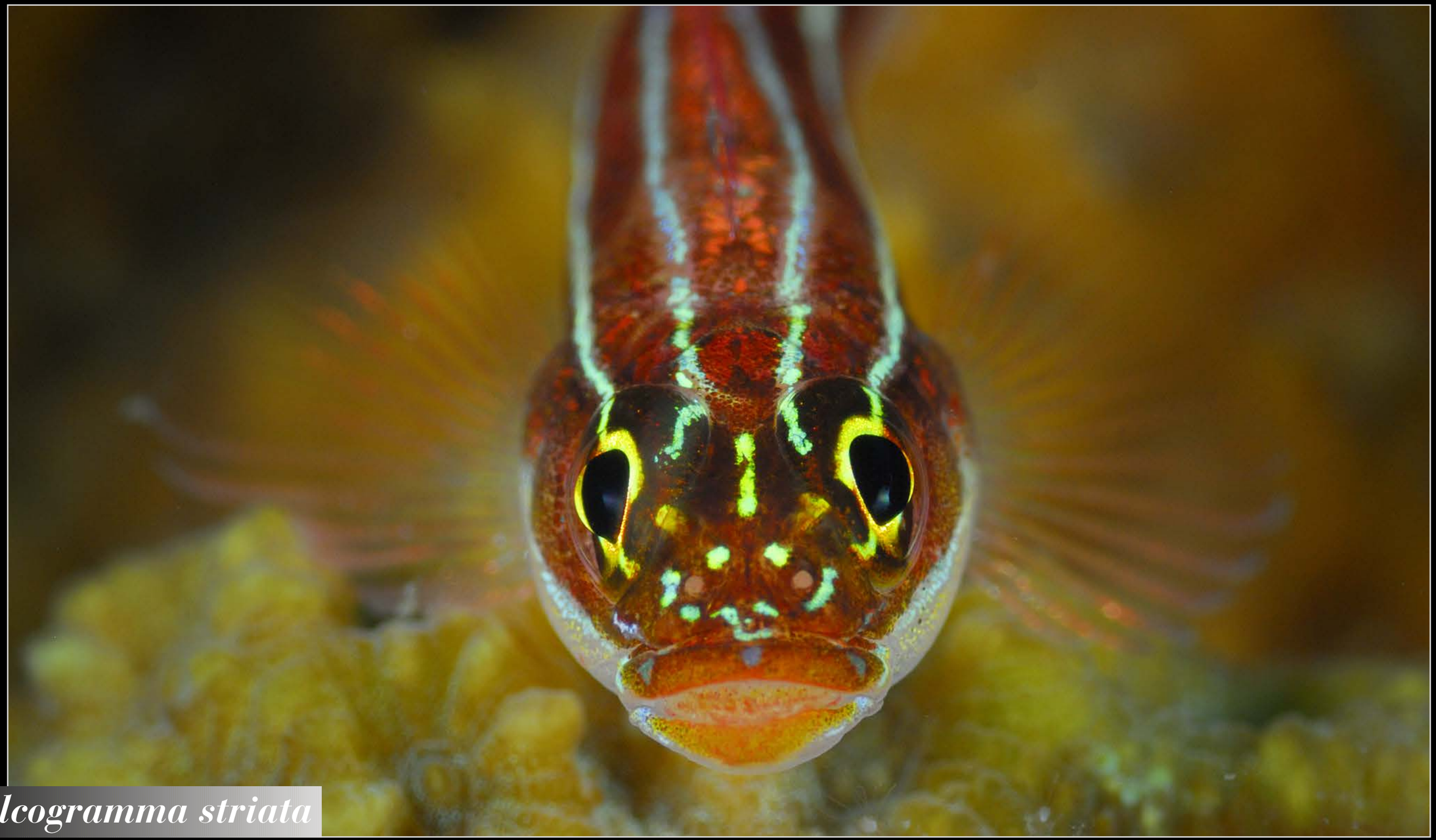
Another example of the same technique, utilized here with a subject of the same species but on this occasion on a completely different, more delicately patterned coral background. Shallow depth of field is not a serious drawback when shooting from directly above as here.

Bryaninops erythrops

Correct identification of many central Indo-Pacific coral gobies species can be difficult - this individual could actually also be *Pleurosicya mossambica*.

Trimma sp.

Many other species - several extraordinarily colorful and beautifully patterned but somewhat less common - are still waiting to be scientifically described.



Helcogramma striata

Besides the classical portrait from directly above, several coral goby species can offer pleasant photographic results if framed in extreme close-up from directly ahead. Depth of field is minimal here, so sharply focusing on the eyes of the minuscule subject is of paramount importance.

Pleurosicya boldinghi

Delicately-hued or even completely transparent, the coral gobies living on soft *Dendronephtya* colonies are fun to find and can provide excellent images thanks to the finely patterned background. Notice the calcareous spicules embedded in the tissues of the soft coral.

Pleurosicya mossambica

Several extremely small species or individuals - usually less than 1cm long - can be occasionally observed on bubble corals *Plerogyra sinuosa*, which make truly spectacular, alien-looking backgrounds. The "bubbles" in the photo are not bigger than a small grape.

Trimma flammeum

A rarer but spectacularly-marked Indo-Pacific species. Notice how the red-spotted livery of the goby is enhanced by the blue sponge it was perching on.

Helcogramma striata

Another great example of the importance of the background - here the striped livery of the goby complements to perfection the sinuos stripes of the purple sponge.

Trimma anaima

Another less-frequently observed species - here the rather bland livery of the specimen actually enhances the brightly patterned and highly textured shapes of the coral cups it is perching on. This is one aspect of coral gobies photography which never disappoints - be it their livery or the coral background, there's always something in the end to make the picture special.