

Trip Report

SEAHORSES OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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IN SEARCH OF DRAGONS

Scuba diving in the waters off Tasmania and South Australia with two of the strangest and most wonderfully camouflaged fish species of the planet



Common or Weedy seadragon *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*

The Common or Weedy seadragon is a marine fish related to the seahorse. Adult common seadragons are a reddish colour, with yellow and purple markings; note the egg mass sticking on the tail. On the opening spread, a portrait of the equally amazing Leafy seadragon or Glaucert's seadragon *Phycodurus eques*.



Leafy seadragon *Phycodurus eques*
 The common name of this species derives from its appearance, with long leaf-like protrusions coming from all over the body which serve as camouflage.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
 BY ALDO GALANTE

The cold waters off the coasts of South Australia and Tasmania are the home of the astonishing "Sea Dragons", a common descriptive name given to two marine fish species somewhat related to Seahorses or *Hippocampus* but with very different characteristics. These are the Weedy sea dragon *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*, Lacepède, 1804, and the Leafy sea dragon *Phycodurus eques*, Gunther, 1865; their sobriquets are due to the dazzling ornamentation these fish have on their bodies to camouflage themselves in their environment, which is their main method of defense. Surprisingly to most divers and underwater photographers seeing them for the first time, these animals in general are quite large, reaching up to 50 cm, although the average size is between 30 cm and 35 cm long approximately.

As for the reproduction, like the seahorses, the males are the ones who take care of the eggs. The female gets to produce around 120 eggs in the case of

the Weedy and up to 250 eggs in the case of the Leafy, which are a bright pink color. The eggs will hatch after about nine weeks and the male helps the birth of the eggs by shaking and rubbing his tail (where they are sticking) against algae and rocks. When the fry are born they are about 2 cm in length, and they will reach adult size after only two years. Only 5% of the hatched babies survive. Like many other wonderful species of the planet, the Dragons are also threatened - essentially by pollution, climate change, habitat destruction and by depredation of fish collectors for the aquarium trade, taking into account that they manage to survive only for a very short time once in captivity. The reason that led me to write this article, after taking numerous dives in South Australia, is that this species is one of the most incredible creatures in nature.

In the south of Australia, which by the way covers a very extensive area, one can find many dive sites where the

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Common or Weedy seadragon *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*

Common seadragons can reach 45 cm (18 in) in length. This species is endemic to Australian waters of the Eastern Indian Ocean and the South Western Pacific Ocean. It can be found approximately between Port Stephens (New South Wales) and Geraldton, Western Australia, as well as Tasmania.



Leafy seadragon *Phycodurus eques*

The lobes of skin that grow on the Leafy seadragon provide exceptional camouflage, giving it the appearance of seaweed. It is able to maintain the illusion when swimming, appearing to move through the water like a piece of floating seaweed. It can also change colour to blend in, but this ability depends on the seadragon's diet, age, location, and stress level.



Leafy seadragon *Phycodurus eques*

This species propels itself by means of a fin on its neck and a dorsal fin on its back closer to the tail end. These small fins are almost completely transparent and difficult to see.

Dragons are usually found; from my own experience, some of these are more recommendable than others. On the island of Tasmania, Bicheno is one of the best sites to encounter the Weedy sea dragon, in addition to having beautiful beaches and offering fantastic dives. Bicheno is a small town located about 2 hours by car from Hobart (177 km approximately). The route from Hobart to Bicheno goes through several very nice locations, such as the Freycinet National Park which can be visited during the journey and which is a fantastic place for trekking. Once in Bicheno, I went to the Diving Center (named, not surprisingly, "Bicheno Dive Center"), where the owner and manager Bruce received us, facilitating the logistics of diving with the Dragons. The dive site is called Waubs Bay and dives are made from the beach; here the water temperature varies approximately between 12 °C and 14 °C, so a 7mm suit would be needed. It's a very simple dive, the visibility is about 15 meters. In addition, one can make wonderful dives on the nearby island called Governors

Island. I visited Bicheno in the month of November and I was able to observe the males with the eggs attached to the tail, which was a plus to the dive. Leaving from Hobart, there is another place called Eaglehawk Neck. The trip is about an hour, since it is only 76 km from the capital. The dive operator here is quite aptly named "Eaglehawk Neck Dive Center". Here one can do many dives of different types, in addition to the one related to the Dragons; these can often be observed and photographed in the environment of the giant forests of Kelp *Macrocystis kelp*. Water temperature and visibility are very similar to those in Bicheno.

Perhaps one of the best places in the world to see Dragons is however Bremer Bay, located six hours by car south of Perth (about 580 km), on the West coast of Australia. Here one can enjoy wonderful white beaches, with blue and crystal-clear waters offering more pleasant temperatures than those of Tasmania. In spring and summer the water temperature is around 21 °

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Leafy seadragon *Phycodurus eques*

Individuals were once thought to have very restricted ranges, but research has discovered that seadragons actually travel several hundred metres from their habitual locations, returning to the same spot using a strong sense of direction. They are mostly found over sand patches in waters up to 50 m (160 ft) deep, around kelp-covered rocks and clumps of sea grass.



Leafy seadragon *Phycodurus eques*

As with seahorses, the male Leafy seadragon cares for the eggs. The female produces up to 250 bright pink eggs, which she deposits onto the male's tail with her ovipositor, a long tube. The eggs then attach themselves to a brood patch, which supplies them directly with oxygen.

Centigrade. The dive operator here is - guess what? - "Bremer Bay Dive Center" and its owner and manager is Craig, one of the most knowledgeable people about the subject of Sea dragons in Australia. The most important feature of Bremer Bay is that one can see the two Dragons (Leafy and Weedy) in the same dive area and many times in the same scene. The best dive site is named Little Boat Harbor Beach and is located in Dillon Bay. It is entered from the beach in a very simple dive; other times the area is easily covered by Craig in a Submarine Scooter.

When in South Australia instead, one can spot these enigmatic sea creatures mainly from Adelaide (Kangaroo Island, Rapid Bay Jetty and The Bluff, especially to see the Leafy sea dragon); and from the city of Melbourne as well, especially to encounter the Weedy sea dragon. ●



Common or Weedy seadragon *Phyllopteryx taeniolatus*

The Common seadragon inhabits coastal waters down to at least 50 m (160 ft) deep. It is associated with rocky reefs, seaweed beds and seagrass meadows. These fish are quite slow-moving and rely on their camouflage as protection against predation; they drift in the water and with the leaf-like appendages resemble the swaying seaweed of their habitat.