

Tiny and crepuscular, the Mandarinfish *Synchiropus splendidus* is one of the most incredibly colorful fish species of tropical marine waters and one of only two vertebrate species known to have blue colouring because of cellular pigment.

THE AMAZING MANDARINFISH **PSYCHEDELIC DRAGONET**

TINY, CREPUSCULAR AND DWELLING
IN CORAL RUBBLE, THIS IS ONE OF
THE OCEAN'S MOST COLORFUL DENIZENS

■ This photo - taken in Borneo about 30 years ago by Anima Mundi - Adventures in Wildlife Photography's editors and publishers Andrea and Antonella Ferrari - was for a long time the only one ever taken of a mating pair of Mandarinfish *Synchiropus splendidus*.

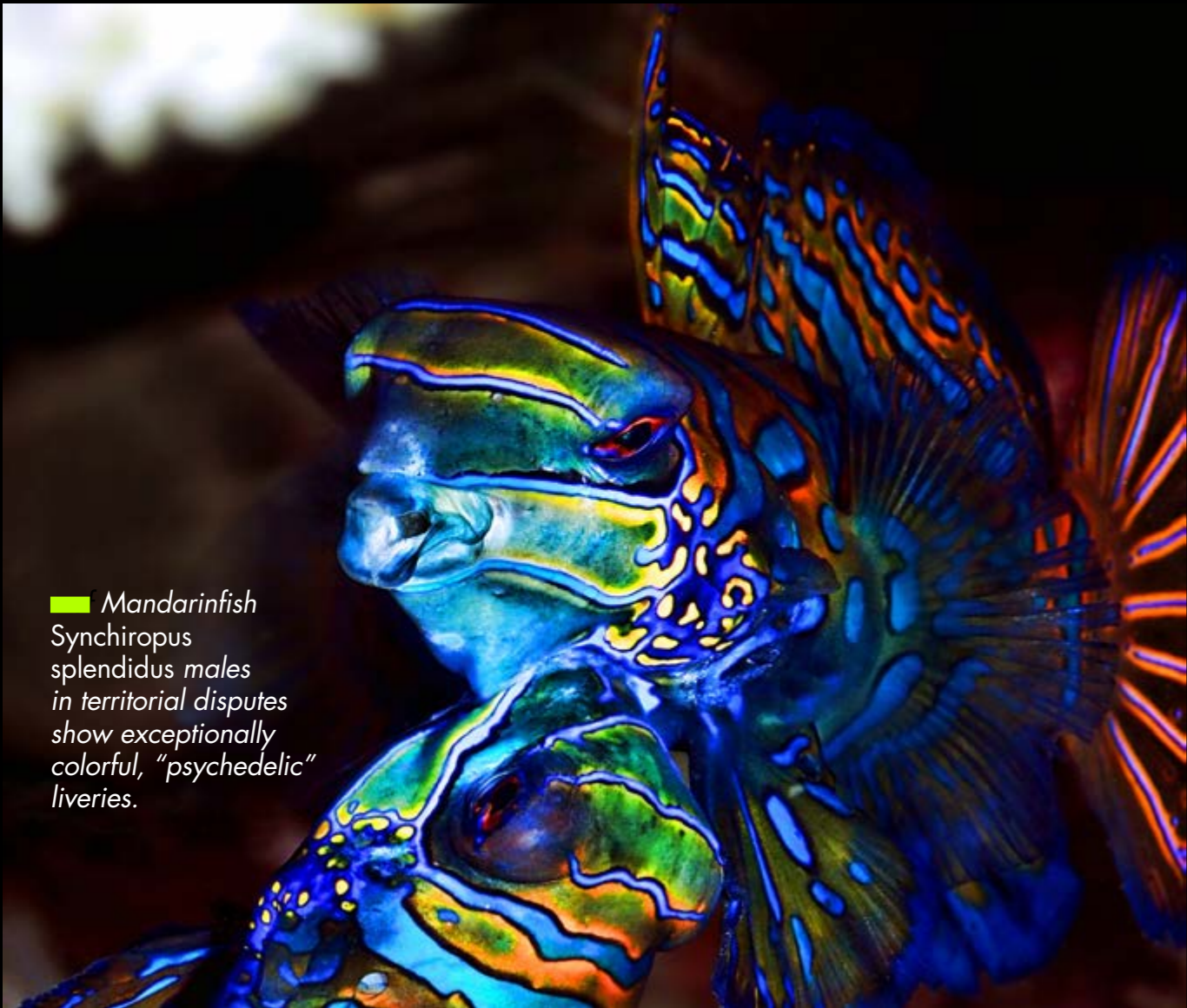
TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY ALDO GALANTE

Sunset is the time of the day when one of the most fascinating events of the tropical marine world occurs - the mating ritual of the Mandarinfish *Synchiropus splendidus*, one of the most beautiful and interesting fish of the ocean, particularly for underwater photographers. Its common name comes from its peculiar coloration and due to the similarity with the clothes of the Chinese Imperial Officers (or Mandarins). The standard colors of the fish are a blue background with orange wavy lines, yellow,

orange, red, purple and green; because of this, they are also known as "psychedelic fishes". It is one of the few fishes that has no scales and as a protective compensation for its lack of scales, it is protected by a viscous and malodorous skin covered with toxic mucus, which not only protects them from parasitic diseases of the skin, but also discourages predators because of its unpleasant taste. Its main predators are scorpionfish and man, who takes them out of the aquatic environment for the high-end aquarium trade, where many fish die, both during transport and in the tanks, since they are very delicate. Mandarinfish feed mainly on small crustaceans and tiny fish. They present

sexual dimorphism, differing mainly because the males are larger than the females and have a much longer spine, so they can be recognized by the divers. They usually measure no more than 7 cm approximately. They hide during the day but can be seen between dead or fragmented coral branches where they live at depths between 3 and 18 meters in waters of 24 ° to 28 ° Celsius. They swim with a quick pulsation of their fins, which makes them look like they are some kind of marine hummingbird. They tend to be very shy, appearing and disappearing quickly, so taking a picture is quite difficult. Normally, they become visible at dusk to mate, avoiding any bright light.

This is why underwater photographers use dim lights or red lights to deceive them a bit and stimulate their approach and subsequent mating, and thus be able to photograph them. This happens just before the sun goes down. Three to five females will go to a particular region of the reef and they will meet with males, which are usually the largest and strongest, and tend to be favored by females. Fights between the males are frequent for them (as you can see in the images). The most successful male will join the female resting on her pelvic fins and together they will line up belly to belly and rise approximately 1 meter above the reef. Once they are at the top of their ascent, the female will release a cloud of eggs (usually up to 200) and the male the sperm. The fish then quickly disappear down to the reef to avoid being devoured by predators, ending the mating. The whole affair barely lasts one or two seconds. The fertilized eggs are incorporated into the plankton and in 2 weeks the fry will hatch, settling in the reef and choosing an appropriate habitat where they will live during the next 10 to 15 years of their long life. For the underwater photographers, this pairing is one of the most incredible and looked-for opportunities, since the resulting images usually do not disappoint. Mandarinfish inhabit the Pacific Ocean and the Coral biodiversity triangle that includes Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Australia. They are so shy that any sudden breathing or movement will scare them, quickly sending them back to their shelters to avoid being seen. That is why photographing them is not simple, and we must always do it with extreme patience, care and perseverance.



■ Mandarinfish
Synchiropus
splendidus males
in territorial disputes
show exceptionally
colorful, "psychedelic"
liveries.

