

A tiny crinoid cuttlefish (possibly *Sepia papuensis*) less than 1 cm long hides among the polyps of a *Xenia* soft coral.

INDO-PACIFIC CUTTLEFISH  
**CAMOUFLAGE  
CONNOISSEURS**

From tiny to large, often very colorful but not easy to identify correctly, always stupendously adept at disappearing at will in their marine environment

Identifying small cuttlefish in the field is a difficult task - this might be a baby Broadclub cuttlefish *Sepia latimanus* or an adult *Sepia cf mestus*.



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Say "Sotong" and most people in SE Asia will immediately think "Yum yum". But translate that to "cuttlefish" and most experienced divers and underwater photographers will go "Wow". It's a fact: these camouflaged cephalopods are among the most fascinating critters of the reef. Curiously shaped – the Class name means "footed head" in Latin – incredibly adept at changing body shape and color with lightning speed and exceptionally intelligent, these common mollusks never cease to amaze those patient enough to stop for a while and try interacting with them while on a dive on tropical reefs. Powerful, stealthy and cunning predators, they are in turn hunted and eaten by large morays, reef whitetip sharks and large groupers.

**COMMON BUT CAMOUFLAGED**

Cuttlefish are quite common and are often encountered in shallow water, especially the two largest Indo-Pacific species, the Broadclub *Sepia latimanus* and the Pharaoh *Sepia pharaonis* – which look rather similar and are often confused underwater by novice divers: both can reach an impressive size with a length of about 40 centimeters in the largest specimens. The latter usually

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A tiny *Sepia latimanus* baby mimics to near-perfection the dead mangrove leaf next to which it is resting.



A rapid-fire five-second sequence showing how fast and how impressively the usually showy Flamboyant Cuttlefish *Metasepia pfefferi* can change its appearance.

sports thinly white-barred tentacles, but both are capable of switching patterns, colors and even skin texture in a matter of seconds, going from a smooth unicolored or faintly mottled general shape to a perfectly camouflaged one sporting all sorts of spots, bars and skin flaps. In season they can often be observed among branching coral colonies, courting each other, mating and subsequently laying clusters of

blackish, grape-like eggs among the coral ramifications, where they will be better protected by roving predators. If you meet some during one of these occasions, stop and take your time without disturbing them – you’ll be able to enjoy some very interesting behaviour and a lot of very colorful displays. Belligerent males will often flourish their tentacles, waving them to and fro in a intimidatory display which

really makes them look like creatures from another world (which in fact, after all, they are): it’s a behavior which is better described by photographs than by words. These two large species usually display a large degree of curiosity towards divers if left undisturbed, and will come close to investigate their human observers, occasionally allowing gentle touching and in general giving the unmistakable feeling they’re somehow trying to communicate – always be careful however, as they can always mistake you for food, shooting their strong sucker-rimmed tentacles forward and

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■ Several undescribed or unidentified very small species are best named under the umbrella term "crinoid cuttlefish".



■ An adult Broadclub Sepia latimanus shows how well it can blend with its surroundings.

■ Baby or adult? It's difficult to say - this individual is about 1cm/1/2 inch long. This has been tentatively identified as *Sepia cf mestus*.



Adult Broadclub cuttlefish *Sepia latimanus* are easily recognized by their large size.



administering a very painful bite with their parrot-like horny beak, which they normally use to kill and break apart their daily fare such as lobsters, crabs and occasionally fish (we once saw one catch and eat alive a large frogfish – not a pretty sight!). Very elegant swimmers, these cuttlefish will usually slowly float close to the reef, undulating the transparent, iridescent fin which rims their body (or “sac”), often hovering motionless while scanning the surroundings with their penetrating, goat-like slit eyes. But don’t underestimate their speed – if frightened they’ll be gone in a flash, using their jet-propulsion (water is pushed out with great strength by their syphon) to bolt away in the distance, often releasing a phantom-image of themselves from their

ink-sac to confuse their pursuers. Much smaller, quite more static but incredibly more colorful, the legendary and much sought-after Flamboyant Cuttlefish *Metasepia pfefferi* is normally about 10 centimeters long and is usually observed by lucky divers ambling on the seafloor, often among scattered coral heads on sand bottoms, literally “walking” using two modified skin flaps and its front tentacles. Seeing one for the first time is not easily forgotten, as the spectacular critter seems to spend most of its time actively hunting, methodically rolling on the substrate like a miniature battle tank and continuously flashing rhythmic waves of neon-bright white, fuchsia and yellow on its chocolate brown body. Amazing! Flamboyants will usually rapidly switch

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This is the same individual shown on page 96 - notice how different its appearance is now that it is trying to camouflage itself.



Tiny Indo-Pacific cuttlefish species are usually found among soft coral colonies, often on silty or coral rubble bottoms.

to a camouflage mode before striking their small prey – shrimp and the like – becoming a perfectly believable little chunk of rock covered with algae and debris, but after having caught it they'll immediately start moving again, intermittently flashing their outrageous neon-sign waves of color again. Beware! Nobody know for sure, but in fact this bright colors and pattern might

advertise a very poisonous bite in what is called an "aposematic warning" – just think of the bright colors of the Blue-ring Octopus to see what we mean. Rare everywhere but seasonally fairly common and temporarily resident (ie they stay in the same area for quite a few weeks), Flamboyants certainly are among the most desirable of subjects for underwater photographers.

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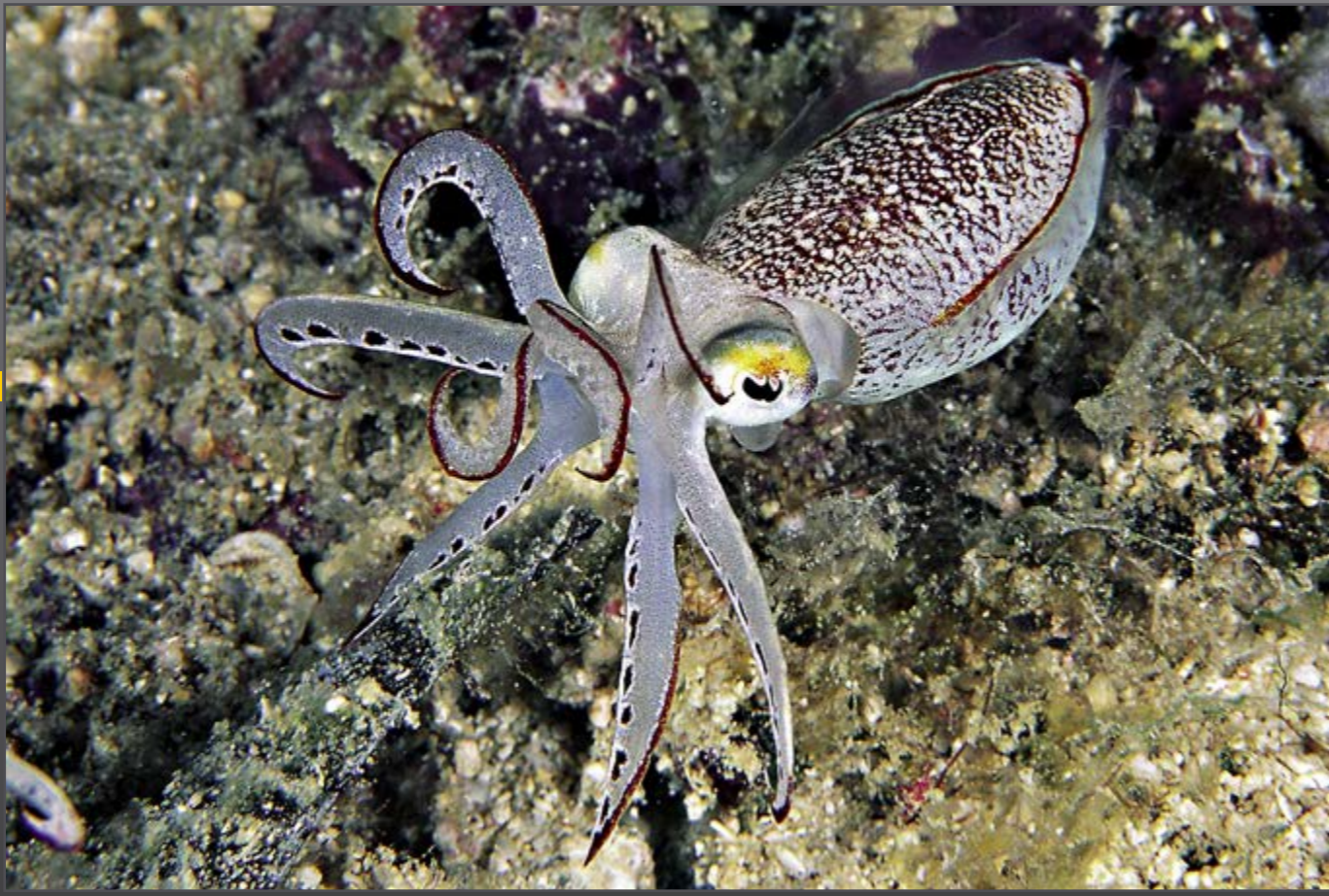


Another [redacted] exceptionally small (about 1cm or 1/2 inch long) individual, tentatively identified as *Sepia bandensis*.



Tiny but pugnacious, a pair of 2cm-long individuals tentatively identified as *Sepia cf. mestus* engage in a showy display - possibly a territorial dispute, or maybe courting behavior.

The fascinating display put up by a pair of 1cm-long cuttlefish belonging to an unidentified species, which we observed only once in more than 20 years of diving in the central Indo-Pacific.



### MASTERFUL MIMICS

Several other smaller and less-known cuttlefish are equally fascinating for the experienced and discerning shutterbug – such as the exquisitely camouflaged Stumpy-spined *Sepia bandensis*, the Reaper *Sepia cf mestus*, the Crinoid Cuttlefish *Sepia sp.* and the incredibly tiny Papuan cuttlefish *Sepia papuensis*. These are highly specialized, little studied and rather uncommon species, often requiring long hours of searching to be observed – look for them among coral rubble at night (*bandensis*), close to branching sponge colonies on sand bottoms during the day (*Sepia cf mestus* and the Crinoid *Sepia sp.*) and among branching soft corals (*papuensis*). They're all very good at mimicking

other stuff (the Crinoid cuttlefish will often assume a black/white/yellow striped livery while swimming in open water from one sponge to the next, looking exactly like a Striped Fangblenny *Petroscirtes breviceps*) and very difficult to spot. Strictly not a cuttlefish, the Nautilus *Nautilus pompilio* is a very primitive "living fossil" which will be occasionally trapped at depth by fishermen at night – if you have the chance to see one do not miss it, as these are very interesting subjects too. Sadly, releasing them after their capture won't do them any good – being deep water dwellers (they spend daylight hours at 300-400 meters depth), they usually get fatally damaged during their capture, and usually die soon afterwards. ●



■ The exceptional camouflage shown by a tiny *Sepia papuensis* hiding on a silty bottom.



Left, a pair of Reaper cuttlefish *Sepia cf. mestus*; far left, the uniquely colorful Flamboyant cuttlefish *Metasepia pfefferi*.



■ Unidentified pair of tiny, less than 1 cm long crinoid cuttlefish, possibly *Sepia* sp.