A Different Kind of Dragon

by Paul Macdonald

The Leafy Seadragon (Phycodurus eques) is endemic to the waters of southern Australia and is closely related to seahorses and pipefish. The Leafy Seadragon is the South Australian Marine Emblem and they get their name from the leaf-like appendages on their bodies. They resemble pieces of seaweed, which makes them difficult for predators to find in their natural habitat of kelp and seaweed. Leafies are generally brown to yellow in body color with spectacular olive-tinted appendages. As an adult they can reach a total length of 35 centimetres.

The Leafy Seadragon sucks up its prey using its long pipe-like snout and small mouth. Its favourite food is mysid shrimps. Being slow moving, they rely heavily on camouflage for survival, but also have long sharp spines along the side of the body. They are also able to change colour to some degree. So much so that they blend in very well with their habitat. For novice divers Leafy Seadragons are extremely difficult to locate and many swim past thinking this majestic creature is just a piece of weed. With experience they are more easily spotted and once found are amazing to watch as their movements mimic the swaying kelp. They steer and turn by moving the tiny, transparent fins along the side of the head and move through the water using the dorsal fins along the spine. Sea dragons have eyes that move independently of one another and the pattern around the eye is unique to each sea dragon. This pattern is used to identify individual animals.

Unlike its relatives the sea horse, the Leafy Seadragon is unable to coil or grasp things with its tail.

Unusually it is the male that gets pregnant and gives birth to live young. The female produces up to 250 bright pink eggs and then deposits them on to the male's tail via a long tube. The eggs then attach themselves to a brood patch on the male's tail, which supplies them with oxygen. It takes a total of nine weeks for the eggs to begin to hatch, depending on water conditions. The eggs turn a bright purple or orange over this period, after which the male pumps its tail until the infants emerge, a process which takes place over 24–48 hours. The male aids in the babies hatching by shaking his tail, and rubbing it against seaweed and rocks. Once born, the infant sea

dragon is completely independent, eating small zooplankton until large enough to hunt mysids. Only around 5% of infants survive. Leafy Seadragons take about 28 months to reach sexual maturity.

The Leafy Seadragon generally reside in the same location for their entire life. Divers have recorded seeing the same animal in exactly the same place for many years. The male dragon may travel some distances however to disperse hatching infants to increase their chance of survival. They are then known to return to the same location after eggs have hatched. Often Leafy Seadragons are found in mating pairs and it is widely thought that they mate with the same partner for life.

It is important to have an intimate knowledge of the Leafy Seadragon in order to photographically capture its beauty. They have a very unique behaviour that needs to be considered to create exceptional photographs.

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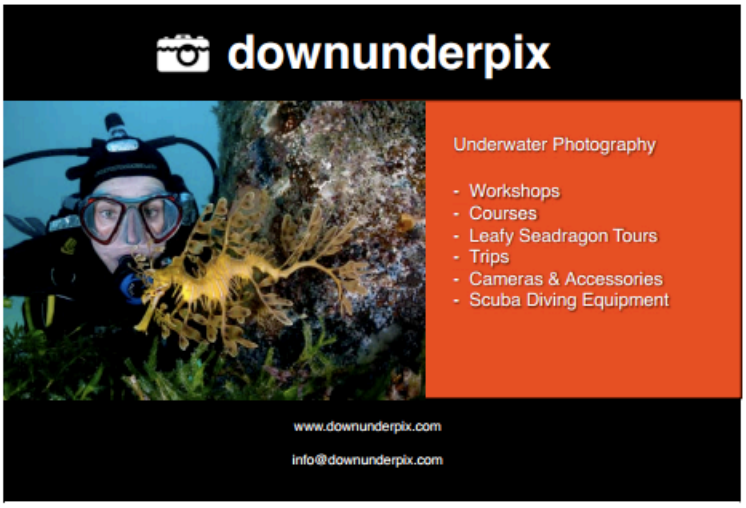
Paul Macdonald is an underwater photographer with a passion for Leafy Seadragons. He has been diving with them for over 20 years in his local South Australian waters. With his considerable experience he is an expert at finding and photographing this magnificent marine animal. Diving regularly he is able to locate known individual dragons.