

: NIGEL MARSH & HELEN ROSE



> WE RECENTLY HAD A WEEK LONG DIVE ADVENTURE WITH ONLY FOUR DIVES, ONE SNORKEL, AND WENT NO DEEPER THAN SIX METRES. MOST DIVERS WOULD CONSIDER THIS A FAILURE BUT OUR VISIT TO SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S EYRE PENINSULA WAS ONE OF THE BEST DIVE TRIPS WE'VE EVER DONE. IT WAS FILLED WITH HUNDREDS OF BREEDING CUTLEFISH, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH TUNA AND A COUPLE OF GREAT WHITE SHARKS THROWN INTO THE MIX.

GIANT CUTLEFISH We started in Whyalla at the top of the Spencer Gulf. This isn't the prettiest or liveliest town we've ever visited. Surrounded by desert, Whyalla doesn't have much to attract tourists, it's more of an industrial centre. But it does have one major attraction for divers – cuttlefish, lots of them. Several years ago local divers discovered giant cuttlefish gather at nearby Point Lowly to breed en masse.

Giant cuttlefish are found right around the southern coastline of Australia, but Point Lowly is the only known spot where this or any other cuttlefish species aggregates in large numbers to breed. The cuttlefish breed from May to August and it's been estimated there's one cuttlefish for every square metre in an area covering several square kilometres.

We arrived mid May and our first stop was Whyalla Diving Adventures, where owner Shane Grant reported the cuttlefish had arrived just a week before. He runs boat dives on demand, but you don't need a boat to view the cuttlefish as they breed close to shore in shallow water. Point Lowly is 35 kilometres north of Whyalla, but there's no signs indicating the best spots for seeing cuttlefish, so we were lost for a while, but following the dirt road next to the Santos Petrochemical Plant fence leads you to a small carpark at Stony Point.

Once geared up we scampered over the rocky shore to the water and found our first giants within seconds – two metre-long males side by side displaying to each other. They were sizing each other up. They'd flattened their bodies to look bigger and were flashing dark bands across their bodies. The slightly larger male held his ground, and shielded his female hiding under him in a crevasse. The challenger, backed off and swam off to contest another male for breeding rights.

A great display - two male cuttlefish fight for the right to mate.



the giants of eyre



Point Lowly

CUTTLEFISH UNDER THREAT

The giant cuttlefish aggregation at Point Lowly is one of the most unique natural history events in the world and fortunately the cuttlefish are fully protected. However, this may not be enough to save them as there are plans to build a desalination plant right where the cuttlefish gather. This plant will dump massive amounts of brine water in the area and research has shown that cuttlefish embryos die as the salinity levels rise. If this plant is allowed to go ahead it could only take one season to wipe out the entire giant cuttlefish population.

But that is not all, as several mining companies also want to build facilities and another jetty at Point Lowly for the loading of iron ore and possibly copper concentrate and uranium, plus a petrochemical and diesel refinery. One spill from any of these materials would also spell the end of the giant cuttlefish.

Local action group the Cuttlefish Coast Coalition are fighting these proposed developments. We can only hope that the Federal or State Government blocks these developments and protects the most unique gathering of cuttlefish in the world for future generations to enjoy.

There were cuttlefish everywhere; big and small males and even smaller females (always guarded by a large male), all hovering amongst the rocks and seaweed. In the eight metre visibility we could turn 360 degrees and count two dozen cuttlefish and more – and this was just the start of the breeding season! Point Lowly is the only rocky headland in this part of the Spencer Gulf, the reason the cuttlefish gather here in such large numbers. It was clear why – the rocky bottom has countless ledges and crevasses which are perfect for laying eggs.

We swam no deeper than six metres and saw more cuttlefish behaviour in one hour than we'd normally see in a lifetime. The most common behaviour was large males battling for possession of a female. Most sessions ended peacefully with one of the males swimming off, but quite a few attacked each other and left bite marks. Even though it was early in the season we also observed several females disappearing under ledges to deposit egg capsules.

But the highlight was witnessing cuttlefish mating. We were photographing one large male and his consort when they turned towards each other; suddenly the male lunged forward and wrapped the female's head in his tentacles. He was twice her size and half her body disappeared in the embrace. They were locked together for several minutes, so we had time to photograph this encounter. During mating the male passes a package of sperm via a modified tentacle into the body cavity of the female, which she then uses to fertilise her eggs. The young cuttlefish hatch after a few months and disperse into the Spencer Gulf, returning the following year to breed themselves.

Giant cuttlefish live only one to two years, so most we were observing would be dead by the end of the breeding season.

We spent an hour exploring the rocky reef and must have seen over a hundred cuttlefish in the small area we covered. There was other marine life to see, including reef fish, nudibranchs, a school of large kingfish and even a huge smooth stingray.

Next day we saw much the same behaviour, but also observed one of the most unusual behaviours recorded in the animal kingdom – cross-dressing males! Researchers have discovered that the smaller males have developed a unique strategy to mate. Knowing they can't compete with the larger males, they instead pretend to be a female by changing their colouration and behaviour, and sneak up on a male and his female. Once under the larger male's defences he quickly changes back to normal male colouration, displays to the female and if lucky will mate with her. On both days we watched smaller males sneaking up on larger males, but each time they were chased away. But on day two we saw two small males sneak through the defences and successfully mate, the larger male remaining unaware for several minutes. When they woke up to what was going on they attacked the smaller male and drove them off. Research has shown that these smaller cross-dressing males appear to have a higher success rate than the big guys do!

After two unforgettable days at Point Lowly we headed south, hoping the next time we visit Whyalla the giant cuttlefish will still be there (see Cuttlefish Under Threat box). Next stop, Port Lincoln.

GIANT TUNA Port Lincoln is at the bottom end of the Eyre Peninsula at the tip of the Spencer Gulf. The town is a major fishing port, once home to a huge tuna fishing fleet. But the decline in fish stocks forced the tuna fishing industry to restructure and now tuna are captured, held in pens for several months and fed daily to fatten them for the lucrative Japanese fish markets.

Never having seen a yellowfin tuna underwater, as these fish are pelagic wanderers, we checked out the option of diving in a tuna pen and found that former fisherman Matt Walling, owner of Adventure Bay Charters, offers visits to his

tuna farm and snorkelling with the fish. He's set up a tuna pen with 40 tuna just south of Port Lincoln. Matt plans to add another 40 fish to his very popular tourist attraction.

The first thing you notice are the high fences around the farm to keep seals out, while security cameras are to keep an eye on human intruders. Matt told us he once lost a pen full of tuna, stolen before the security measures were put in place, and they weren't taken by a seal!

THERE WAS AN EXPLOSION OF ACTIVITY, TUNA APPEARING FROM NOWHERE TO GRAB A FISH THE INSTANT IT HIT THE WATER

While Matt explained the tuna farm to the other visitors, we suited up and went into the pen. Six metre vis was fine for an entertaining hour snorkelling with these fast moving fish. We were quickly surrounded by metre-long silver bullets blasting past us, but then Matt produced some pilchards and started tossing them into the water. There was an explosion of activity, tuna appearing from nowhere to grab a fish the instant it hit the water.

After shooting stills and video of swarming tuna we had a turn at feeding the tuna by hand. The bait was held out for a second before a tuna zipped in at full speed and grabbed it. We loved the experience and will be back when the tuna reach their full three-metre length! Adventure Bay Charters also runs trips to snorkel with Australian sealions at Hopkins Island, but rough weather ruled this out.

GIANT SHARKS The main reason for coming to Port Lincoln was great white sharks. This used to cost thousands of dollars for a liveaboard shark cage trip, but since 2006 Calypso Star Charters have been running very popular and successful one-day shark cage trips to the Neptune Islands. We booked two daytrips to up the odds of seeing at least one shark. The trip to the Neptunes takes two and half hours so we met at the boat at 6.30am. Calypso Star is 17 metres long and takes a maximum of 19 passengers on shark cage trips; everyone gets around 45 minutes in the water if the sharks cooperate. At North Neptune Island the baits and burley were thrown in then skipper Andrew Wright explained their shark

cage etiquette; four divers at a time on hookah and no hanging limbs outside the large viewing openings. The first four divers rushed into their wetsuits, but they were a little hasty. One hour, no sharks; two hours, no sharks; three hours, no sharks. By then they'd de-suited, and we all enjoyed a barbecue lunch. Suddenly someone shouted "SHARK!" and we raced to the back deck. In a few minutes we saw it – a 3.5 metre great white rising from the depths to grab one of the baits. The first group of divers entered the cage,

and in 10 minutes the shark reappeared. It chased one of the baits across the surface heading towards the cage, before disappearing into the blue again. This was a BIG shark and everyone was excited to just see it from the surface. For the next 45 minutes the shark made regular appearances, but for mere seconds at a time.

Then it was our turn. We put on heavy weightbelts and slipped into the water. The vis was about 15 metres and below we saw schools of silver trevally and yellowtail, but no shark. Everyone got into their corner and scanned the blue. Five minutes passed, nothing. Ten minutes, nothing. Where was the shark? Then we saw her, rising from the depths, headed straight for a bait. She grabbed it then dived down, not even giving us a glance. Amazed, we all looked at each other, stunned by our first great white shark underwater. Another five minutes ticked by before we saw the shark again, cruising under the cage. Five more minutes went by – then BAM! She zoomed up for another bait, and was gone just as quickly. Several minutes later she did it again, but each time she was four metres or more from the cage. It was spectacular to watch, but frustrating to photograph. So much for those documentaries where the shark seems to eat the cage! But as Andrew explained later, all sharks behave differently and you never know what you'll see.

In 45 minutes the shark came in eight times; we got lousy shots but have fantastic memories. Two more dive teams entered the cage; the last one had the closest encounter – a four metre long



Above: Swimming with yellowfin tuna off Port Lincoln is a unique experience; Wall to wall tuna; Yellowtail swarm around the shark cage to munch on the baits and burley; The ultimate thrill is seeing a great white shark underwater at the Neptune Islands.

Opposite: A cross dressing male mates with a female, while her male consort watches on confused.





A great white attacks a tuna bait
Helen holds out a pilchard to feed to tuna

shark smashed into the cage twice. Our second trip started with a bang – the first great white arrived after 15 minutes. It was about three metres long and very feisty, taking the bait several times before it could be reeled in. With only seven divers this trip we'd all get more 'cage time'. The first group went in and we saw some spectacular action from above as the shark continued to make surprise passes for an hour, even breaching several times!

This shark disappeared just as we got into the cage but 10 minutes later the previous day's 3.5 metre shark reappeared. This big girl gave us a wonderful hour as she made repeated attacks on the baits or just cruised up from the depths to check us out. She didn't come very close to the cage but we did get a few good images and a lifetime of memories. We'd have loved to see a great white raging at the cage, but were happy to have seen several sharks over our two days. After two hours in the cage we headed back to port.

We only did a handful of dives around the rugged Eyre Peninsula but left the

EYRE PENINSULA INFORMATION

Whyalla
Whyalla Diving Adventures –
Ph 0418 804 421
Port Lincoln
Adventure Bay Charters –
www.adventurebaycharters.com.au
Calypso Star Charters –
www.sharkcagediving.com.au



area amazed at the marine encounters we experienced – mating cuttlefish, fast and furious tuna and the awesome great white sharks. Who could ask for more from an adventure dive holiday?

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