

# THE MUIRON ISLANDS



by Ken Hoppen

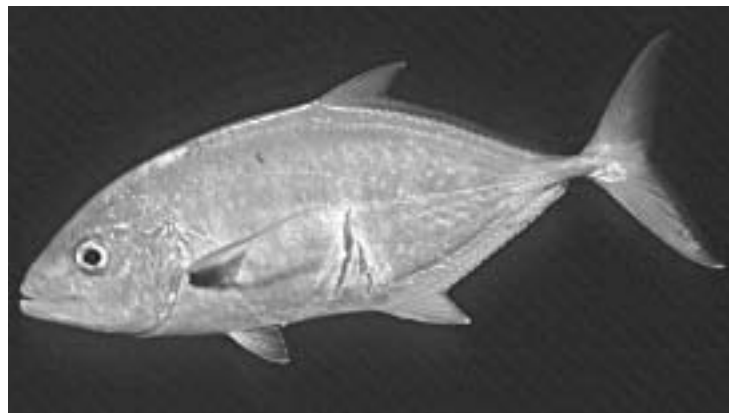
**L**ying at the top of Exmouth Gulf and just over an hour from the Bundegi ramp by boat, this is an out-of-the-way dive site in the remote and wild northwest. What can I say and where do I start? This place has everything!

Located at the top of Exmouth Gulf, they are a little over an hour's boat ride from the Bundegi boat ramp, itself located 15 kilometres north from Exmouth in northwest Western Australia. There are two islands in the group, simply named North and South Muiron. Whilst I am sure that there are many great dive spots around these islands, the trips that I went on concentrated solely on two sites. The first is 'The Spit', named after an underwater projection to the north of this dive area on the western side of North Muiron, and is a great place for all levels of diver. The anchor is dropped in around eight metres of water on the top of a dropoff that goes vertically to a depth of around 17 metres before finding a sandy bottom that slowly shelves off further. The divesites main attraction usually finds you when you enter the water.

This is home to two large potato cod *Epinephelus tukula*; one christened 'Max' is particularly friendly. He comes straight up to you and stares you in the face - while I am not really an advocate of patting or touching marine life, this fish seems to positively purr as he is gently scratched under the chin. I have never seen this before; is this spot the West's answer to Queensland's Cod Hole? Max and his slightly more

cautious companion tend to follow the biggest group of divers throughout a dive, often moving right into the middle of the divers and generally getting in the road in the nicest way.

Once at the bottom, and if you can tear your eyes away from the cod, two large swimthroughs filled to the brim with small fish come into view, as do the many angelfish, surgeon, flutemouth and the like that make up the main colour for the reefs in



the area. On one dive here I found one of the most amazingly camouflaged nudibranchs I have seen, bright yellow and looking for all the world like a sponge. It was slowly crawling across some coral, and as the 'sponge' looked like it was in the wrong place I investigated a little closer to find that this yellow blob had antennae.

Many different angelfish, butterflyfish and other colourful varieties moved about the corals, and moray eels peered out at divers as they swam past. Coral cod *Cephalopholis miniata* are prevalent in spots as they go about their business under numerous coral ledges.

One of my favourite memories from this site is one of going up to the boat after the dive to be greeted by several brassy trevally *Caranx papuensis* feeding on some small fish scraps thrown in for their benefit. They looked magnificent in the sunlit waters as they raced in to snatch a mouthful before their kin and Max beat them to it.

After the dive the boat headed south for a lunch stop at a site on the northeastern corner of South Muiron where the boat could anchor near shore in reasonably shallow water. Once the food had settled a bit, most of the boatload of divers took to the water for a cooling dip. The water here moved northward fairly quickly, but with fins it was easy to swim the short distance to the beach for a quick exploration. The first time I was here I was surprised to see a trio of eagle rays break away as they spotted the boatload of people, so the second day here I took in a camera every opportunity I had. To my

surprise it was worth it.

We'd noticed a dugong meandering around as the boat pulled up, but had thought that a dark shadow we saw on the bottom meant it was swimming out of the area. That wasn't the case, as it swam past me for a quick look as I drifted about 100 metres behind the boat. I have seen many things underwater, but this quick encounter surprised and delighted me more than most. It was only about 2.5 metres long but moved with a surprising grace and poise. This bulky sirenian swam effortlessly in with the current, paused for a moment, looked at me as if puzzled by my presence, and then left with a flick or two of its powerful-looking tail. I can see how sailors became mesmerised by them, though I had difficulty visualising them as mermaids!

The second site visited here is on the western side of South Muiron, 'The Cod Spot' due to the large number of white-blotched rockcod (*Epinephelus multiotatus*) or Rankin's rockcod, that inhabit the area. These cod are smaller than the potato cod, but are nicely patterned when seen up close. They are not as friendly as Max, but they are an interesting fish.

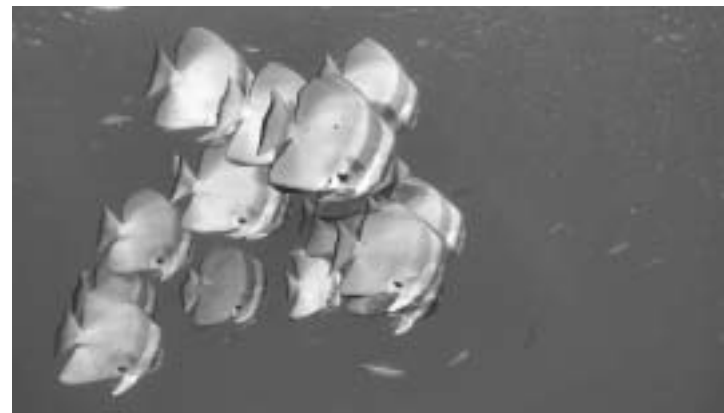
The reef here is slightly

shallower and much flatter than at The Spit, averaging a depth of around 14 to 15 metres, and many of the same fish can be found here, including a potato cod on one dive. This spot is supposedly a favourite haunt of manta's during the winter months. I spotted a whitetip reef shark *Triaenodon obesus* resting on the sand here, and my buddy saw a grey reef whaler *Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos* on the same dive, but neither were curious enough to hang around. I didn't find the visibility on this site as good as that at 'The Spit', but it wasn't bad at around five metres.

The best dive I had in this area, however, wasn't at the Muiron Islands, but near a small sandy island about eight kilometres to the north named Peak Island. To the west lies a wall that runs approximately southwest to northeast with the top of the wall in about 10 metres and the bottom in 20 metres. This is one hot location. Intruding southwards from the north-

observed in plague proportions on the Great Barrier Reef, to my knowledge they have not been seen in destructive numbers on reefs in Western Australia.

Apparently as I was absorbed in trying to get a photo of the estuary cod I should have looked up. I learnt after the dive that three pygmy manta rays had cruised past along the reef and must have passed over my head. There is not much known about this unusual species other than they turn up around the Northwest Cape area at about the same time the whale sharks are at Ningaloo Reef. But I did see the dogtooth tuna *Gymnosarda unicolor* patrolling the reef and the tawny shark *Nebrius ferrugineus* that swam down the crevasse until it spotted me, then it raced up over the edge to escape my cameras. This was a dive site that I really would like to be able to explore much further. The locals were even a little



facing wall was a large crevasse, and around this opening a huge variety of fish and creatures gathered. On my descent over the lip of the wall a grey reef whaler about 130 centimetres long cruised past and eyeballed a few divers before disappearing into the distance. Where the crevasse joined seemed to be the meeting place for all the cod in the area, with a large potato cod joining the white-blotched rockcod plus a good sized estuary cod *Epinephelus suillus*. The potato cod was particularly curious about my strobes. I think he was attracted by the yellow colour, or maybe he didn't like the flash; he mouthed my strobes continuously as I tried to take shots of the other fish around him. Or perhaps he just wanted some more attention. The estuary cod proved very shy, but after some time he allowed me to slowly approach him at a cleaning station, and to my surprise he opened his mouth fully, an action I had never seen before. He then did it again thankfully, and I was ready to catch the shot the second time.

There was also a large *Acanthaster planci*, crown-of-thorns starfish, on the reef here. Whilst these coral-eating starfish have been

apologetic because it wasn't 'going off' like it can do. Now that I would like to see!

Getting to Exmouth is a long hike from most parts of Australia. You can drive yourself (as I did) or once you've reached Perth, take one of the buses which travel regularly up and down the coast. There is also an airport at Learmonth which is around 30 kilometres south of Exmouth. Most accommodation centres run a courtesy bus to and from the airport, so this short distance is not a problem even with dive gear. You don't need too much as 3mm wetsuits were fine in the 28°C water during my trip in March. Dive centres run a bus from Exmouth to the boat ramp at Bundegi and will even pick you up from your accommodation. Exmouth itself is not a really large town and is easily traversed by foot; the only real need for transport is if you want to explore the Cape Range National Park that is in the area. This is well worthwhile as it has some great scenery. Hire cars and guided tours are both available.

The Muiron Islands and Peak Island are a long way for many major city - and from any minor one - but they are well worth the effort of getting there.

