

STORY & PHOTOS :: RON HARDMAN

SPENCER GULF SPECTACULAR

CLEAR BLUE SKIES AND WARM SUNSHINE CONTRAST WITH THE CHILLY ZONE I'M ABOUT TO ENTER AND CLIMBING INTO A DRY SUIT ON THE ROCKY SHORELINE HAS ME SWEATING. FOLLOWING THE SANTOS BOUNDARY FENCE INTO THE WATER, I'M REMINDED YET AGAIN THAT A DRY SUIT PREVENTS THAT BREATHTAKING INTRUSION OF COLD AS YOU WADE IN.



Males will flare their bodies and tentacles and engage in visual displays to assert dominance.



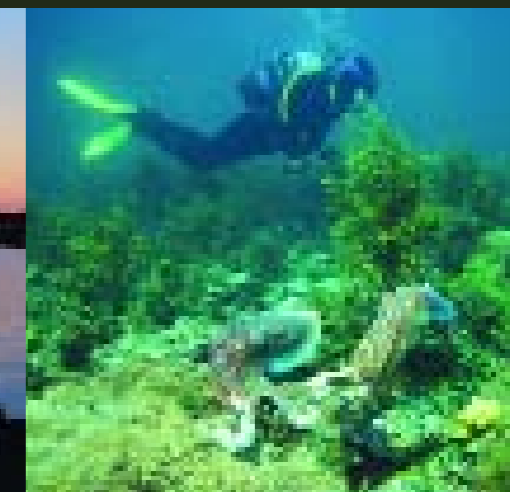
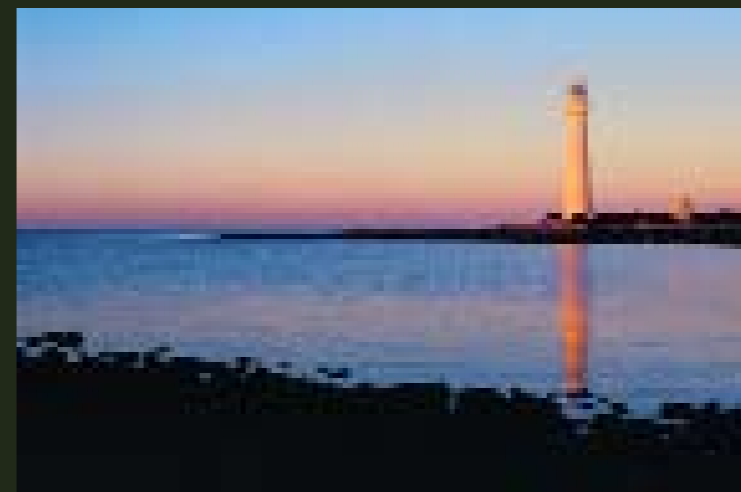
The male grasps the female around the head and deposits a sperm package to a pouch beneath the female's mouth which she then uses to fertilise the egg.

I'm about to dive a favourite site of mine known locally as the 'Fenceline'. Typical for this time of year the water clarity looks great. Following a final check and signal to my buddy we slip under the water. Instantly the 12°C water makes its cold, almost painful, presence known on my exposed hands and face. After checking my camera housing (great to see no red flood light glowing in the window!) and setting strobe arms we drift off towards deeper water. Cuttlefish begin to appear, and at a depth of only four metres we stop to observe the activity surrounding us. It's July and the height of cuttlefish season in the waters north of Whyalla.

The activity is frenetic, with groups of cuttlefish scattered across the sea floor as far as we can see. Closer examination of a nearby group shows a small female guarded by a larger male hovering centimetres above her. Three smaller males lurk close by – keeping a safe distance from the larger guy when he looks their way, but drifting closer whenever his attention shifts. Another group has a similar small female beneath a larger male, but this time an equally large male is confronting her guardian. Both males arch their bodies, stretching their tentacles and flaring in an effort to appear as big and as intimidating as possible. In almost mirror-like synchronization, they both strobe lines of colour along the length of their bodies in a visual battle



The breeding grounds lay in only 3-4 metres of water. Several males of varying sizes compete for the chance to breed with a single female and groups like those at left and below are typical during the breeding season. Right: Two males engage in typical posturing. The female is hidden beneath the animal on the left. Below: After the egg is fertilized the female cuttlefish places it upside down beneath rocky ledges. Here a female is half-hidden beneath a low rock-ledge on the left as she places her egg, still closely guarded by the male hovering to the right. Point Lowly Lighthouse marks the start of the exclusion zone banning fishing for cuttlefish in the False Bay area during the breeding season.



to assert dominance and win the right to mate with the female. She, despite the startling performance above her, seems totally disinterested. While the two combatants engage in their ritual display, smaller males drift casually towards the female hoping for a chance to sneak in and mate.

Displays, males flaring and strobing colour are everywhere as we drift from group to group. The smaller males always stay just far enough away to avoid direct confrontation, but close enough to slip in at the slightest opportunity. Often these young tricksters tuck their tentacles up and take on the appearance of females in an attempt to slip past the watchful gaze of large protective males. These males have been dubbed 'sneaker males' and are really fascinating to observe.

Moving slowly around the displaying groups we encounter a pair of cuttlefish mating. This is an unusual spectacle as the male grasps the female around the head as though he's about to eat her. Cuttlefish mate head to head, the male depositing a sperm package into a pouch beneath the female's mouth, which she then uses to fertilise the egg. After a few minutes the pair separate and the female drifts down beneath a rocky ledge. Out of sight she places the fertilized egg securely underneath the small ledge, suspending it from the rocky roof. Often after seeing a mating pair separate another male will try to intercept the female before she places the fertilized egg in its rocky home. These males are known to flush the sperm away

from the egg and mate with the female who will take their sperm packet – so even after mating, the male cuttlefish will jealously guard his female companion until she's safely out of the reach of opportunistic rivals.

Most cuttlefish activity is highly visual – flaring, arching, strobing multi-hued colours – and even changing skin shape and texture. Occasionally, however, physical violence erupts and cuttlefish engage in multi-armed combat, often resulting in a cloud of ink being ejected by the loser as he retreats.

It's possible to approach these cuttlefish groups and observe their behaviour at close range. The presence of large, noisy intruders on scuba doesn't seem to disturb them and, in some cases, single cuttlefish seem to be attracted to camera ports and approach for a closer inspection.

Reluctantly we finish our dive and head for shore, yet again mesmerized by this fascinating spectacle. Surfacing near shore we see another group of divers preparing to enter the water. The cuttlefish season is in full swing!

Like squid and octopus, cuttlefish belong to the Cephalopod group, and are part of the mollusc family. The Whyalla Cuttlefish are Australian giant cuttlefish *Sepia apama*. Like all cuttlefish they have a long oval-shaped body known as the mantle (encasing the large white cuttle-bone commonly seen washed up on beaches), with two intriguing eyes set on a large head. This head leads directly into eight arms and two longer tentacles (Cephalopod literally means 'head-foot'). They are masters of camouflage utilizing changes in both colour and skin texture.

The Whyalla cuttlefish breeding phenomenon is thought to be unique worldwide due to the large numbers of animals that congregate in a relatively small shallow area. It's believed that the cuttlefish congregate on the fringing reefs of False Bay as they move north in winter from the waters of Spencer Gulf to the south. The fringing rocky reefs of False Bay and the Point Lowly Peninsula are the first suitable breeding grounds they encounter. The main breeding grounds are concentrated on the



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Marek's Reef is encrusted with sponges, ascidians and soft corals. Formed from a collection of old boilers, gantry walkways and tyre pyramids it now provides a home for a wealth of sea life.

Large ceratosoma nudibranchs inhabit the sand flats around Marek's Reef; A wavy grubfish is a common inhabitant on Marek's Reef.



The cuttlefish breeding event occurs from mid-May until early August, with numbers generally increasing dramatically at the start and then tapering off towards the end of the season. Despite the cold, winter is the ideal time to dive around Whyalla. Water clarity is at its best and winds are predominantly offshore, allowing sheltered diving along the cuttlefish breeding area. Winter storms affecting Adelaide and areas to the south often slip below Whyalla. The water temperature is a brisk 12-13 degrees Celsius, but mild sunny days are often the norm, making surface intervals enjoyable.

Another Whyalla dive site well worth visiting is Marek's Reef, an offshore artificial reef made from old boilers, gantries and tyre pyramids lying in 12 metres. This reef is overgrown with sponges, ascidians and soft coral and is a haven for schools of whiting, snapper and many reef fishes common to temperate waters. This is a boat dive and it can be arranged through Whyalla Diving Services



Where: Whyalla is located 380 km by road (4-5 hours) northwest of Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, or 40-45 minutes by plane. It's also linked by several coaches per day.

Diving: Whyalla Diving Services - Tony and Marlene Bramley. Phone (61) 8 8645 8050; Email: whydive@ozemail.com.au They can cater for all your diving needs around Whyalla.

When: May to early August (inclusive)

shoreline between False Bay to the tip of Point Lowly Peninsula, although cuttlefish extend further north into Fitzgerald Bay, but are open to fishing in this area. The greatest concentrations seem to occur between Black Point and the Santos fence line.

Unfortunately, uncontrolled commercial fishing of these breeding grounds occurred in 1997 and 1998 until finally closed by the South Australian Primary Industries Minister. This decision followed dramatic reductions in the catch and growing media and community opposition. Fortunately the value of this unique cuttlefish congregation as a tourist, scientific and ecological attraction has been recognised. Since 1999 the South Australian Government has maintained protective fishing bans over the breeding grounds located in a line from the Point Lowly Lighthouse across False Bay to the OneSteel loading jetty at Whyalla.

During this time, the appreciation of the magnitude of this unique winter event has increased beyond reasonable expectation. Visitors now include Australian and international cinematography and documentary crews, marine biologists, journalists, as well as increasing numbers of recreational divers – many who return year after year!

