

Night Moves –the Darkful Delights of the ‘Dond

by Bob Bailey

Night has always been my favorite time to dive. That’s when many of Puget Sound’s underwater natives come out to feed and breed. Dive sites suddenly fill up with all sorts of interesting creatures that you just don’t see during the day, and a familiar dive site can suddenly take on a whole different level of activity. Such was the case recently at one of my favorite dive sites in the south Sound – Redondo.

We arrived on a cold mid-December evening about a half-hour before sunset. My dive buddy Casey and I had heard rumors of Pacific Spiny Lumpsuckers in an eelgrass bed on the north side of the beach, and we decided to find out if those odd-looking little fish were really there. We put our gear together as the sun was setting behind the crest of the Olympic Mountains, and as darkness settled in we entered at the beach north of Salty’s Restaurant. Dropping down without a surface swim, we made our way down to a depth of about 10 feet and turned north toward the eelgrass beds. This would be a very shallow dive, and one we hoped would turn up one of the Puget Sound’s most elusive and photogenic little creatures. As it turned out, we found much more than we hoped for.

The ebbing tide created a mild current pushing us in the direction we wanted to go. Before long we found the eelgrass beds and slowly swam along the downslope edge. I’d been to these beds in daylight, and considered them rather boring and devoid of life. But the onset of darkness brought a whole different perspective, transforming the eelgrass



into a nursery teeming with life. Tiny juvenile midshipmen hovered, gleaming in the glow of our lights, quickly disappearing into the sand as soon as you approached them with a camera. Hundreds of tubesnouts flitted into and out of our beams, feeding on the tiny crustaceans inhabiting this botanical nursery. A larger green shape

darting by turned out to be a penpoint gunnel seeking dinner. Hooded nudibranchs, gracefully undulating as they fed on bits of floating plankton, provided a fine photo opportunity.

And then we found the object of our quest – a lumpsucker, barely an inch long, clinging to a blade of eelgrass like a tiny golden jewel. Our lights startled him off his perch and he started swimming around like a little bumblebee, weaving between blades of grass and making it a challenge to get a picture. He was such an odd-looking little creature I was torn



between concentrating on capturing the image or just sitting back and chuckling at his funny behavior. But at last I got the shot I wanted and it was time to move on. We found several more lumpsuckers that evening, but there was so much more to see.



At one point I found myself looking at a piece of eelgrass that seemed to be looking back at me. And I realized it wasn't eelgrass at all, but a green bay pipefish, aligned perfectly to blend in with the natural contours of the grass it was using as camouflage. A tiny red octopus – smaller than the tip of my thumb – moved along the bottom, seeking an evening meal. Tiny comb jellies, catching the reflection of our lights,

cast shimmering waves of color from their reflective cilia as they drifted along in the current.

This was turning into one of those magical experiences that divers live for. With the onset of darkness, the eelgrass beds had transformed into a miniature forest filled with diverse life forms interacting with each other in a kind of enchanted dance that we – the uninvited guests – were privileged to see.



Suddenly, out of the darkness – flying at us like little jets – came a school of opalescent squid. Apparently they were attracted to our lights. But as quickly as they appeared, they decided we weren't food, inked us, and jetted away back into the darkness – leaving us with a “what the heck just happened” moment. That was exciting.

By now we were 40 minutes into our dive and we reluctantly decided it was time to turn and head back toward the beach.

We found several more lumpsuckers on the way back. One even tried swimming into my camera lens as I was taking its picture, looking like a tiny orange helicopter with its landing gear down. I simply couldn't get enough of these delightfully funny-looking little fish.



At last we reached the end of the eelgrass and turned toward our exit. But the show wasn't over yet. Lying in the sand we found yet another treasure of the night – a marbled snailfish. I hadn't seen one of these fish in a long time, and was thrilled to find it here in its classic pose, looking at me like a three-inch long puppy begging for attention. Finally it was time to turn upslope toward the beach. But one last thrill remained.

In about 4 feet of water, just as we were preparing to end the dive, we spotted an opalescent squid hovering just above the rocks. What a finale to a memorable dive! We spent a couple of minutes taking some pictures and watching it weave back and forth, trying to decide if our lights represented friend, foe, or food.



Altogether it was 80 minutes of virtually non-stop photo opportunities! Rarely have I seen so many delightful creatures on a single dive. But this is what night diving in Puget Sound is all about.

Redondo has long been one of my favorite Puget Sound dive sites. And although it is a wonderful place to dive during the daylight hours, the night turned out to be the time to experience some of the most delightful creatures that Puget Sound has to offer.