

Coconut Octopus

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Some creatures are not that spectacular on the first look. They may not be colourful, not be dangerous, or be a critter that you have seen seemingly thousands of times before. It pays to have a second look.

Coconut octopus (*Octopus marginatus*), are also known as Veined octopus due to a colour pattern that they adopt which has rich red lines running all over the body. They are very variable in colour, ranging from red to dirty brown. The suckers range in colour from white to a very pale blue. The body of these small octopuses can grow to around 8cm, and their arms to around 15cm. A large one rolled up is about the size of a tennis ball.

On first glance they are not that much different to many other octopus species that I have observed. They are diurnal hunters, preferring the dull light of the morning and evenings to search for their prey of small shrimp, crabs and fish. It is a behavioural aspect of their lives that make them fascinating to watch.

Living in silty, rocky conditions, they often bury themselves in the dark sand to hide themselves from predators. This can be a bit of a 'hit and miss' option on their part, as predators still have a chance of just blundering into them as they lie just underneath the surface.

This little octopus has solved the problem however. It grabs scallop shells and coconut halves, and puts them over itself, creating a very impenetrable residence for itself.

Sometimes they grab two shells, or two coconut halves, and use their eight arms to close them together, providing 360° of protection. Smaller octopus can live in shells in the same manner that hermit crabs do.

This is fascinating to watch on its own, but they take it to the next level again. When confronted by a predator, or an annoying underwater photographer, they pick up the pieces of their abode and carry it with them to calmer pastures! They grab their construction materials

with some suckers, and use the end half of the arm for locomotion, running over the sand backwards as they keep an eye on their pursuer. They are actually quite quick!

The first time seeing this is quite jaw-dropping. You simply don't expect a mollusc to be quite as cognisant in what it wants, or dexterous enough to be able to achieve it with the ease that these small cephalopods do.

The two coconut octopus that I have seen do this both sped off, running across the sand for three or four metres, before having a quick rest and re-arrangement, then doing it all again at least twice. Most of the time I imagine that this removing of themselves by some twelve to fifteen metres is more than enough to deter or confuse most slow-moving predators. One predator of this little octopus seems to be the innocuous flounders that move slowly around the dark sand that these octopus prefer. Several times I have had to shoo away an over-interested flounder as I have been photographing coconut octopus, and I wouldn't trust any lionfish that potter about either.

Coconut octopus can be found in the tropical coastal waters of south-east Asia, in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. It is commonly encountered in the Indonesian archipelago, and prefers 'muck diving' areas of rubble and black sand.

Spending time watching this small octopus will produce sightings of some behaviour that scientists only dream about. This is definitely a creature that not only deserves a second look, but a third and a fourth as well!

Useful Stuff

Cephalopod: Animal group comprising octopus, squid, nautilus, Argonauts and cuttlefish.

Dexterous: Skilful use of the hands or body.

Cognisant: Having shown knowledge, understanding or perception.

Archipelago: A chain or cluster of islands.

