

Comet Capers

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There are some things that you just don't expect to see in your diving career. Top of the list would be creatures such as the coelacanth, sperm whales, the Loch Ness Monster, and a two headed shark. Not entirely impossible, but not really likely at your average divesite.

Whilst not quite in the same league as those listed previously, the Comet, *Calloptilops altivelis*, is simply one fish I thought I'd never see. Not that they are all that rare relatively. It's just that they are seldom sighted. They tend to spend their time hanging out in the back of caves and crevasses, holed away where they are not likely to attract attention. Their dark colouration makes them hard to see even if they are within sight.

They are found in tropical waters from the Red Sea eastwards to Tonga, and from Australia northwards to Japan, and grow to a maximum length of around 20cm. They belong to a family of fish known as Longfins. This group includes scissortails, hulafish, and the larger blue devils.

Comets come out of their crevasse hideaways late in the dusk light to hunt for small fish and crustaceans, from any depth along the reef wall from just a few metres to around the 45m mark.

The long reef wall that is the main, huge, divesite at Moalboal in the Philippines is the perfect place to see these small fish, and it was on a dusk dive here that I finally managed to see one. The dive resorts here are situated on a squat peninsula, which has a vertical wall some fifty metres or so off the beach running its entire length. Not many places have a 65m+ wall just off their doorstep, but they all do here! This makes it the perfect place to see these incredible fish.

This comet was trying to hide in a small outcrop but couldn't get itself properly hidden, to its great disgust! It didn't take too long for it to find a more suitable hole and get itself out of sight, but not before it gave us a chance to take some photos, and also give us a brief look at its moray impersonation.

These fish are thought to impersonate whitemouth morays, which are also found in dark crevasses and caves! The large ocelli on its dorsal fin is thought to mimic the moray's eye, and the body pattern is remarkably similar. It also has the habit of sticking its head into the hole, leaving its tail with its false eye sticking out. More than enough to put off many potential predators that would not like to mess with the much larger and more aggressive moray!

Juveniles have less dots, and a second ocelli on their anal fin, and these really would be hard to find!

So next time you are doing a dawn or dusk dive in a tropical location, keep your eyes open for this beautifully decorated fish, and you just never know your luck!

Useful Stuff:

Blue Devils and Eastern Blue Devils are large longfins that live on the southern and eastern coast of Australia respectively. They are a bit atypical of this family, as these two fish are reasonably happy out in the open, and are much larger than other family members, growing to 35cm or so. Hulafish are longfins that are also very different in that they are smaller and like to be out in the open in large aggregations. Scissortails and Alison's Blue Devil are typical longfins which live secret lives in the back of dark crevasses. This is a small fish family with only around twenty species in all, all of which are found in the Indo-Pacific Region, with seventeen of these species found in Australian waters.



The photo above shows a white-mouth moray. It is thought that the comet is pretending to be this species.