

I didn't See A Thing!

Back on the boat after a rewarding day of diving, the first thing I hear is "There was nothing down there!" I check my camera. I've taken almost three hundred photos over the course of two dives. Were they asleep on the dives? Was their mask fogged?

They missed the mating flamingo tongues, the Chain Moray tucked into a crevice, the arrow blennies, the juvenile Rock Beauty and so much more. Even when the boat has dropped us in "no man's land," I've seen Sand Divers, Guitarfish and many other critters. How did they miss all this marine life? I remind myself, that I know where to



Photo by Jeri L. Curley



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look and what to look for. More importantly, I know when I find something that is rare or unusual.

Knowing where you would expect to find marine life is key to actually seeing things on a dive. Sea Turtles munch on sponges, jellyfish, squid, sea urchins, mollusks, crustaceans and tunicates. They sleep under ledges for hours at a time. During a recent dive, a hawksbill turtle followed our group, stopping occasionally to munch on a sponge or two. Most of the time people miss turtles because they don't look on top of the ledge. That is where the majority of their food is located. A lot of times, the turtles and sharks zoom by divers because the divers are simply not looking up.

Scan the sand and the horizon for larger creatures such as sharks or goliath grouper. Carry a flashlight in order to check under the ledges. Slow down; check out the nooks and crannies. Juveniles tend to hide. So look for a pattern that doesn't belong or a movement that does not seem "natural." Juvenile filefish, for example, hide in soft coral. The trick to getting close to these guys (and most underwater critters for that matter) is to keep your movements to a bare minimum. Diver's displace a lot of water when they swim or move their hands or camera. Little guys can "feel" that motion and they WILL hide.

Most creatures, juvenile or adult, will respond to movement. Stop kicking! Most of our dives are DRIFT dives. Goliath Grouper are notorious for slipping under a ledge the second you catch a glimpse of their shadow. Sometimes they are so quick that you never see more than a shape in the distance. Slow down, control your breathing, drift toward your intended photo subject. You'll find that you get a lot closer. (FYI: the "thumping" produced by the Goliath Grouper is made by the muscular contraction of the swim bladder)

Take a specialty course in reef critter identification or buy ID books. Take the time to look up fish or invertebrates that you've seen on a dive. You'll begin to SEE more on your dives.

—Jeri L. Curley, MS Marine Biology



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