



MATING mandarins

By Tony Wu

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My dictionary defines the word “frustrating” as defeating one from completing a purpose or fulfilling a desire. I equate the term with my nemesis, the mandarin fish. Try photographing one of these and you’ll see what I mean.

The first time I tried to photograph *Synchiropus splendidus*, I was muttering muffled expletives more often than triggering the camera shutter. These colourful fish have a wide range, from Japan down to Australia and through Micronesia. They live in shallow water, often in open rubble areas and reach a maximum size of something like 60 mm. Since they’re relatively common in shallow water, the problem isn’t necessarily finding them, but getting them to pose for a nice picture.

By day, they’re usually hidden, so the best time to see them is in the evening when they come out to feed. Again, perfect for taking pictures, since there is very little light for focusing. When they do come out, they sort of “glide” across the rubble, stopping and starting irregularly, ducking behind dead coral branches, hovering for a moment in midwater then darting around an urchin. They often pause to look mockingly at the camera lens, rarely staying long enough for a portrait to be taken.

After one particularly frustrating and fruitless attempt, I heard from one of my friends that he had seen mandarin fish mating! That did it. I was officially obsessed and had to get pictures of these elusive fish mating. Of course, first I had to do some research.

Among the more interesting facts I uncovered, mandarin fish are dimorphic, meaning that the males and females are shaped slightly differently. The males are larger, and have more colourful dorsal fins for courtship and territorial displays. Knowing this made it easier to identify which individuals to follow around. Males initiate mating, so I figured that by following around a male, I’d maximize the chances of capturing candid moments of amorous mandarins. Another useful piece of information is that the fish mate in the evening, generally around sunset.

One text pointed out that mandarin fish, like other members of the dragonet family (Callionymidae), have a tough, slimy bad-tasting skin instead of scales. I wondered who tasted the skin, but I decided not to try it myself.

Armed with this knowledge, I took a trip specifically to look for mating mandarins. With the help of an experienced dive guide, I was able to locate a sizable group of mandarins, and spent several



days observing them, including several mating sessions. What my research didn’t prepare me for though was the “personal” side of mandarin courtship.

Watching the same fish day after day, I picked up on some entertaining behaviour. I noticed that there is a point in time when most of the mating activity begins, almost as if the fish were obeying some romantic cue. This generally occurred during daylight, but when light levels were at their absolute lowest. Couple after couple would come together, gracefully ascend above the rubble and then separate suddenly as they released their eggs and sperm into the water.

While this in itself was fascinating enough, there were more interesting things to come. On several occasions, I watched as males were apparently “rejected” when they approached females. The females would turn their backs and flit away. Perhaps I’m thinking too much of my own experience, but I could’ve sworn that the fins on those males sagged a bit after that.

Then there were the fights. Males encountering each other around mating time would often extend their dorsal and pectoral fins and briefly attack. They didn’t seem to do any harm to one another, but there was one fellow with a good portion of his caudal fin missing. I referred to him as Scrappy, as he seemed to get into a disproportionate number of confrontations.

Finally, once there was a male who was surrounded by four or five females. I watched him mate, and mate, and mate, and mate... ten or more times in all! Highly impressed and hoping for a repeat performance, I found him the following evening. Unfortunately, he showed no interest in the females that day, worn out perhaps, from overextending himself the previous night. I suppose there’s a valuable lesson in that for us all!