



WUNDERPUS

Wunderpus photogenicus

Imagine an animal that, at one moment, could appear to be a Jellyfish floating along in the current, and then in a flash take the shape of a Sea snake. You could view this animal as a flounder swimming along the bottom of the sea, and the next minute it could take the form of a venomous lionfish. This might sound like an imaginary creature, but it's real. And its name? Wunderpus!

The Wunderpus is a newly discovered species of octopus from the Indo-pacific. It was unknown to science until the mid 1990's, and has only recently been given the scientific name Wunderpus photogenicus. Its is similar in appearance and character to the true mimic octopus *Thaumoctopus mimicus*, another recently described species, and the chances are the Wunderpus genus will be split in to several sub-species over the coming years as differences between individual populations become apparent.

This octopus is distributed over much of the Southeast Asian waters, mainly around Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, stretching down south to Papua New Guinea. Populations may also be found as far down as Australia.

The wunderpus is part of a group of octopus that have taken to mimicking venomous animals as a defensive strategy (and possible hunting strategy too). Between the several groups of mimic octopus found (many being unnamed as of yet) around 15 separate species of animal have been seen being impersonated, including lionfish, jellyfish, sea snakes, anemones, cuttlefish, mantis shrimps, crabs and flounders. But these are just the ones viewed by divers, and the chances are mimic octopus have the ability to impersonate a much greater number of animals.

Wunderpus are highly intelligent animals. They seem to have the ability to mimic many animals (and coral and algae for that matter) simply by viewing them and copying what they do. A Wunderpus I have viewed in captivity quickly learnt to mimic the red grape caulerpa algae growing in the tank

By Tom Charlton.

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and would even copy the swaying motion of the algae in areas of little flow. This ability to impersonate new objects and animals in their surroundings shows that this animal has a well-developed brain and is one of most intelligent invertebrate species.

In comparison to body size, the Wunderpus has amazingly long, thin tentacles. The mantle (body area) may be just 2-3cm in an adult specimen, but the tentacles can stretch as long as 30cm each. Its body colouration consists of white bands and spots covering an orange/red body. This vibrant colouration may be used to warn predators it is venomous (or possibly to fool them into thinking so), although as far as I am aware no one has started research as of yet to find out if this is a venomous species or not.

Wunderpus do not appear to have the impressive colour changing capabilities associated with other species of octopus. The best these creatures can accomplish is dimming of the red colouration in the body and legs to brown, and also flashing their colours rapidly, possibly to try and confuse predators.

Although not known for sure, it is likely Wunderpus have very short lifespans, around 2-3 years at the most. This is true for many octopus species and indeed most cephalopods. With most captive specimens being sub-adult or adult when imported, you can expect to measure

their captive lifespan in months rather than years.

In the wild Wunderpus feed on a variety of small crustaceans and fish found in the soft sediment beds where these octopus live, and it is thought they will eat just about any animal small enough for them to overpower. They employ a clever way of catching their food, using web-like membranes flared around their legs to erect a tent-style trap ensuring the prey item can't escape. To find their prey they will swim around the ocean floor poking all their 8 tentacles into every hole and crevice until they find something edible.

From what I have viewed in captivity, these animals are crepuscular, meaning they are active during dawn and dusk. Nick Terry, the owner of the Wunderpus pictured in this article, stated his octopus comes out every morning and evening at almost exactly the same times everyday. Once out, it stays active for a few hours and then retires under a rock after being fed. During the day the animal cannot be seen apart from the occasional tentacle appearing from whatever hole it has decided to take residence in.

Not much is known about the captive requirements of the Wunderpus, as it is so rarely seen in the pet trade. Even when it is seen, many people are instantly put off by its price tag, as you can expect to pay around £200-£250,

perhaps a bit too expensive for such a sensitive animal that may only survive a few months. As with all octopus, an escape-proof aquarium is an absolute must. They are best kept by themselves and should not be trusted with small fish, crabs, shrimps and snails. Corals are safe and provide excellent areas for the Wunderpus to hide and hunt. These corals will also aid in making the aquarium more aesthetically pleasing during the times when the octopus is hiding away. In captivity Wunderpus seem to readily accept frozen foods such as whole shrimp. Because they are relatively active and live in warm waters, they have a fast metabolism and require feeding daily. They are messy animals and produce a lot of waste, and so excellent filtration and regular water changes are must to prevent a build up of waste levels in the water.

I must stress that this article is not intended to encourage people to purchase and try to keep this animal in captivity. This unusual creature is still classed as rare within its range, and not enough is known about its current wild population to be taking any quantity out of the wild to supply the pet trade. If you want to try and see this animal, do it the exciting way by completing a diving course and travelling to the ocean areas where it can be found!

Finally I would like to thank Nick Terry for allowing me to photograph his Wunderpus and for sharing information about its captive habits. ■



Bold colouration may be used to deter predators



A captive Wunderpus readily expecting frozen shrimp from tweezers