

Mediterranean Nudibranchs

The Dotted Sea Slug

by Miquel Pontes and Josep M^cDacosta



Discodoris atromaculata
(Bergh 1880).

Length: ~4 cm

Depth: 9 m

Date: 5.07.1998

Time: 8:30 GMT

Location: Illa Pedrosa, Torroella de Montgrí, Costa Brava, Spain

This nudibranch is well known by all those who dive in the Mediterranean Sea. Most people have the pleasant experience of knowing it after few dives, since it is one of the most common opisthobranchs and it is very easy to spot.

The scientific name is *Discodoris atromaculata* and was first described by Bergh in 1880. Formerly it had a different scientific name: *Peltodoris atromaculata*.

What does the name mean?

According to the mythology, Doris is a marine divinity that gives name to the dorid nudibranchs. Doris was the daughter of the Greek gods Ocean and Thetis and was married to the marine god Nereus, becoming parents of 50 marine nymphs or Nereids.

"Atro-" is from the Latin word "ater" which means "black" while "maculata" comes from Latin "maculatus" that means "spotted". The scientific name *Discodoris atromaculata* means "black spotted round dorid", origin of the common English name: "dotted sea slug".

In Europe it is known by other names, always related to its characteristic spots. For example, it is known as "leopardschnecke" (leopard slug) in German, "vaquita marina" or "vaquita suiza" (marine or Swiss cow) in Spanish, "vacchetta di mare" (marine cow) in Italian or "doris dalmatien" (for its similitude to a Dalmatian dog) in French.

The spots are randomly distributed, although the biggest and darkest spots are usually located in the central part of the animal's body. The reason of such a festive coloration is no other than camouflage purposes. It's hard to believe, but the system works, and it is known as "disruptive coloration" that makes the animal almost indistinguishable to its food, the sponge *Petrosia ficiformis*.

The body of the animal is smooth and, when it is resting, the contour is almost circular. The body's consistency is coriaceous, hard and rough to touch. This roughness is caused by conical protuberances distributed on the surface of the body that give it a granulated affect. It is generally accepted that its maximum length is about 7-12 centimeters.

The dotted sea slug has a branchial tuft on the back end (posterior) of the body and two rhinophores near the front end (anterior). Both are retractile and in fact only a cautious diver could see them, as the nudibranch withdraw them when disturbed. When danger passes the rhinophores and gills are again extended very slowly and generally the rhinophores first.

Discodoris atromaculata is found in shady or dark areas of the marine bottom, in caves, on walls and overhangs, and can be found in shallow or deep water. It is generally found laying on the sponge *Petrosia ficiformis* of which it preys exclusively. Looking for the sponge is the common way to find this beautiful opisthobranch.



1999 Miquel Pontes

Photographer:

Miquel Pontes

Technical data:

Nikonos V with Nikkor
35mm lens

M-3 extension ring for
macrophotography (1:3)
TTL Strobe Sea&Sea YS-
60N

Fuji film 100 ASA

F Stop: f16, mode A

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An endemic (exclusive) Mediterranean species it is present all year, although more frequent in Summer.

You may find excellent pictures of this species at Medslugs, Erwin Köhler's Mediterranean slug site http://www.medslugs.de/E/Mediterranean/Discodoris_atromaculata.htm

The CIB, a Spanish diving club, has adopted this popular opisthobranch as their mascot, and use it as their logo. We can see that the regulator is located (logically) on the gills, and therefore on the back of the animal...



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