

Mediterranean Nudibranchs

Dondice banyulensis

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Pictures by Lluís Aguilar



This beautiful nudibranch can be easily identified thanks to two unmistakable traits: its body's colour, translucent bright orange, and its size, which reaches a maximum of 60 to 70mm on adult animals.

The oral tentacles are quite characteristic on this aeolidacean being double the length of the rhinophores, and coloured, orange with translucent white tips. The rhinophores have transversal rings and are also coloured orange. The *Dondice banyulensis* has a white line along the top of its body, from between the oral tentacles down to the tail. Another white line runs along the foot's border, whose front end corners resemble bent tentacles.

It has many appendixes on the dorsum called cerata, distributed in 5 groups and coloured bright orange with red tips. Cerata contain ramifications of the medium intestine where the animal stores the urticant cells (cnidocysts) of the hydrarians it seems to prey on.

According to the bibliography, the cerata can be erected when the animal is disturbed, giving it the dangerous aspect of a stinging anemone. This defensive action also puts the cnidocysts as a primary, and expendable, objective for a possible predator. The cerata can be easily replaced by the nudibranch, while the aggressor has to cope with the stinging cells (still active) stored in them, bitterly learning which possible preys can be attacked and which not.

Some authors discuss heavily this animal's feeding habits. Some suggest that this nudibranch feeds on algae and annelids, while others state that it preys on *Eudendrium* sp. hydrarians. This kind of feeding seems likely, as in our observations *Dondice banyulensis* surrounds the hydrarian colony's trunk with its foot while apparently feeding on it. Other authors even suggest that this nudibranch preys on other opisthobranchs like *Flabellina affinis* or *Cratena peregrina* when starved (i.e. in aquarium).

Dondice banyulensis lives on rocky bottoms at depths ranging from 2 to 35 meters, and occasionally seen in shallower waters. It is a fast moving nudibranch so, if approached incautiously, it may adopt its defensive strategy and the diver may miss the opportunity of taking impressive pictures.

This nudibranch can be easily confused with similarly coloured *Coryphella lineata*, but this one is much smaller (up to 30mm maximum) and the oral tentacles have the same length of the rhinophores, while these organs and the cerata end in white tips instead of red tips.

Dondice banyulensis was formerly known as *Godiva banyulensis* but, as certain authors still use this name, it has been kept as a synonym. According to the BEMON etymological index, the new genus name *Dondice*, like some of the taxon names created by the Berlin zoologist Ernst Marcus, (1893-1968) and his wife Eveline du Bois (1901-90), are difficult to derive. It seems that *Dondice* was the name of a firm in S^ao Paulo (Brazil) where they lived in the past.

We consider this is not an uncommon species, but neither is frequent. It's considered endemic (exclusive) to the Mediterranean Sea. You can find more pictures at Erwin Köhler's site about Mediterranean Opisthobranchs, Medslugs, at http://www.medslugs.de/E/Mediterranean/Dondice_banyulensis.htm