



the Magnificent Melibe

Everyone tends to have favorite subjects in the field of underwater photography. This is usually owing to the beautiful color, or unusual appearance of the animal or because they are abundant. Nudibranchs are very popular with photographers since they fit into all three areas. Articles about diving in cold, West Coast waters often feature these beautiful animals.

Although I have nothing against nudibranchs (they are my favorite subject, too), my complaint is that of the 100 or more nudibranchs found off the West Coast, only a few vibrantly colored ones are pictured. What about the other, less photogenic species?

If you look closely at a kelp blade you may find a half dozen of these drab creatures such as the *Melibe leonina*.

Found in the top 12 inches of a kelp bed, *Melibe* has no common name. It is a wierd-looking creature, like something out of *Star Wars*! The *Melibe* is a master of disguise and unless someone showed you one, you probably would never see it. There are literally thousands in kelp beds from Canada to Mexico, and yet even the most experienced divers are unaware of their existence.

The *Melibe* can grow to five inches in length and assumes the color of the kelp

Text and
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blade while remaining somewhat translucent. If you look at a kelp blade from the top, the *Melibe* is invisible. If you look from the edge, you will see a small blob of jelly. As you move the blade, the *Melibe* will unfold the wing-like gills on its back, called cerata, which are used to take in oxygen. These are shaped like kelp blades and help disguise it.

The *Melibe* feeds on crustacean larvae and its method of capturing these organisms is unique. When in quiet waters, the *Melibe* opens a giant hood fringed with a double row of tentacles and extends this forward, much as a South Sea islander casts a throw net. After each "throw" the edges are brought together, forming a

screen that retains the prey in its mouth as the water is forced out. When the animal is feeding in a current, it simply extends this feeding "basket" and twists back and forth catching its food.

The *Melibe* also has the ability to move in open water. If this strange creature is knocked loose from its home on the kelp blade, it will start undulating from side-to-side. It cannot control its direction, however, and must go wherever the current takes it.

Plan to search for *Melibes* on your next trip. But, when you reach the dive site and see dozens of other divers scouring the kelp beds, you can safely assume they read this article before you did!