

The Flashers and



Flasher and fairy wrasses are often missed by unobservant divers. But, once the uninitiated see one of these beauties soar over the reef, they will never overlook them again! This Carpenter's flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus carpenteri*) was photographed at the best flasher spot on earth — Anilao, Philippines.

Photo: S. Michael

Fairies of Anilao

John Hoover

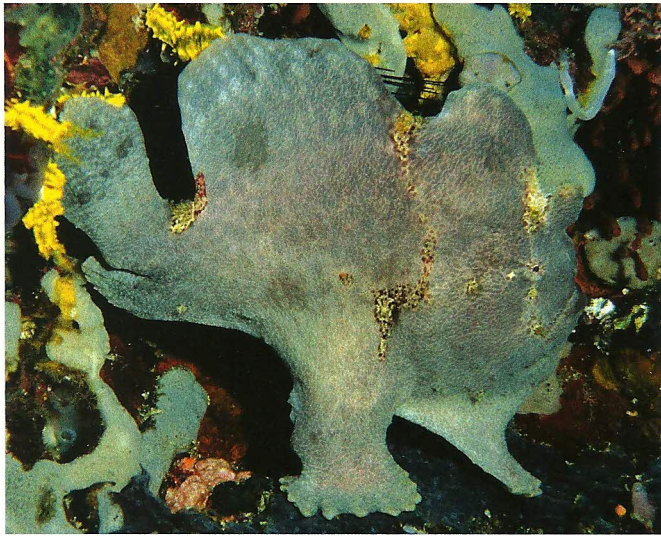
It's just a tiny resort village, but it serves up some of the hottest nightlife in the Philippines. My travel companions returned nightly with stories of bobbit worms, stargazers, flamboyant cuttlefish, painted stingfish, garbage crabs, blue-ring octopuses, huge gelatinous nudibranchs and more. The mucky bottom off the Anilao "Fish Market" offered a nonstop feast: Spot an animal, photograph it, turn to swim away, and there would be another creature even stranger than the first. And always in the background, was the distraction of nearby divers frantically waving lights at you to signal their latest finds. A single night dive at Fish Market, my friends insisted, was worth any number of day dives elsewhere.

Ho hum. None of this was enough to lure me from sunset on the verandah of "Club Ocellaris." Warm, dry and freshly showered, a San Miguel in hand and supper on the way, I daily enjoyed the spectacle of my companions struggling in the gathering gloom with cold, heavy wetsuits in preparation for their evening ordeal. Who cared about bobbit worms when the place swarmed with flasher wrasses? And, because flasher wrasses are completely inactive at night, there was no reason whatsoever to dive then. It was a win-win situation — or so it seemed at the time.

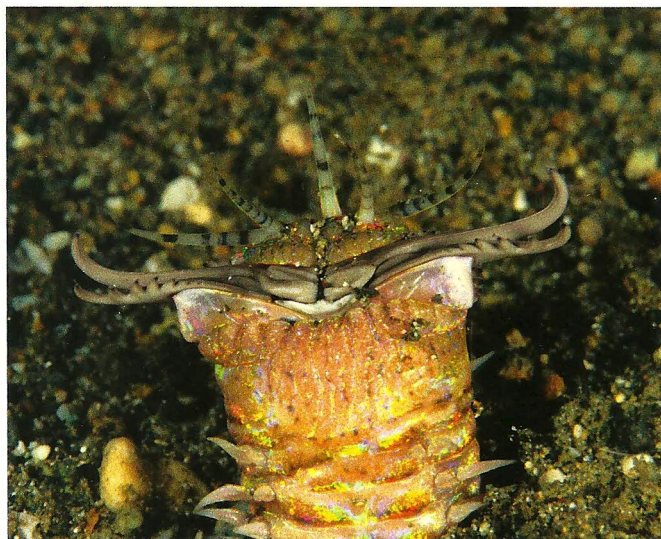
This twisted logic was the product of an obsessive-compulsive state of mind in which nothing seemed quite so fine as photographing flasher wrasses — I call it "flasher wrasse fever." Persons previously afflicted with flame wrasse fever (see the May/June 2009 issue of this magazine) are particularly susceptible, and I had caught a bad case of it in Anilao — so bad that I was now smugly brushing aside easier pho-

tographic subjects, of which there were many. It was crazy — one of the animals I have long wanted to see and photograph was the bobbit worm (*Eunice aphroditois*), an enormous, 3-foot (1 meter) long polychaete that emerges from the sand at night to catch fish in steel-trap mandibles. They were common at Anilao, and now I didn't care.

What manner of fish could cause such madness? Flasher wrasses are typically small, pinkish, about 4 inches (10 centimeters) long at most, and, at first glance, completely unremarkable in appearance. They live in colonies of a male and numerous females, over rubble or algae patches, often far from reefs, and aggregate in the water column to feed on passing plankton. Because they live at depths where their color appears grayish, most divers don't give them a second glance. When they enter reproductive mode, however, a remarkable change takes place. Males raise long, spiky filaments on their dorsal fins, extend their anal fins and perform high-speed water column acrobatics to court their females. At the peak of excitement, they flash brilliant, electric colors — hence the term "flasher wrasse." When one of these iridescent, fast-moving jewels attracts a female or two, they swim upward together, to spawn, releasing their eggs and sperm in a tiny white cloud. But, the act is over in an instant, and the male resumes his frantic dashing and flashing, almost without missing a beat. There are plenty more females in his harem, and in the harems of other males if he can get them. To protect their females, males often flash at each other, warning rivals away from their territories. It's a frantic and exciting scene, if only on a small scale. It happens daily, usually in the afternoon.



Anilao will not only be appealing to labrid aficionados. It is one of the best dive locations to find the much endeared frogfishes. This is a "house cat-size" *Antennarius commerson*. Photo: S. Michael



If you are into the alien world of monster polychaetes, you may want to spend some time underwater at night. Anilao is a great location to see the infamous Bobbit worm (*Eunice aphroditois*). Photo: S. Michael



There are many commensals associating with echinoderms on the reefs and rubble of Anilao. Pictured here is a pair of *Periclimenes colemani*, which clear a patch of spines and live their entire lives on a venomous sea urchin. Photo: S. Michael

The fevered photographer's compulsion, of course, is to capture the dancing male at the peak of his flash. It's fiendishly difficult. The fish move far too fast to follow in a viewfinder or camera display, but if you are willing to spend most of your dive with them, and dive with them multiple times, a displaying male will eventually flash in front of you, and actually hold still long enough for you to focus and snap the shutter. In the days of film, it was all too easy to use up your 36 shots, usually in the first half of the dive, without scoring any keepers. Digital photography has greatly increased one's chances of success, but it's still not easy.

Currently, about 17 species of flasher wrasses are known, all but one in the genus *Paracheilinus*. Frequently, two species of flashers occur together and hybrids are not unusual. Their close cousins, the fairy wrasses (about 46 species in genus *Cirrhilabrus*), frequent the same type of habitat. Fairy wrasses lack the spiky dorsal filaments typical of flasher wrasses, but many are just as colorful and behave similarly — the Hawaiian flame wrasse (*Cirrhilabrus jordani*) is an example. There are also reef-dwelling fairy wrasses, but these tend to be larger, and usually lack brilliant colors and large extensible fins. Both flashers and fairies live exclusively in the tropical Indo-Pacific.

Where, specifically, can you see these beauties? For the truly spectacular species of fairies and flashers, you need to dive over rubble or algae, often far from reefs. Any dive destination offering "muck diving" is likely to have some of this habitat. Anilao (about two hours from Manila) is excellent, as is the Lembeh Strait, off north Sulawesi, Indonesia. However, even at the well-known muck diving resorts, dive guides (I'm referring to humans, not books) may be clueless about them, being principally attuned to the slow-moving animals, such as nudibranchs and scorpionfishes, that most divers like to photograph. And who can blame the dive guides? Few of their customers would even recognize flasher wrasses, much less ask for them, or have the patience, skill and equipment to photograph them.

So it was with me — I hadn't given flashers a thought as we first dove the muck site called Basura, right in front of Anilao town. It was only by accident that I found them. Having told Alex, our guide, that I wanted to photograph a Coleman's shrimp, he obliged me by trying to find some of the big, venomous *Asthenosoma varium* urchins in which these shrimps live. We swam and swam, without success, over almost featureless dark sand punctuated here and there with an old tire, a coil of rusty cable, a half-decayed wooden box and the like (the site name, "Basura," means "garbage," in Spanish). Finally, Alex motioned for me to stay put in the general vicinity while he searched further on his own. By chance, he had left me near a rubble patch swarming with several species of *Paracheilinus* and *Cirrhilabrus*, and the lusty males were going at it full tilt. At once, I lost all interest in the Coleman's shrimp. Here were at least four species of mixed flashers and fairies I had never photographed or even seen before!

The most common, starting at a depth of about 45 feet (14 meters), was a spectacular fairy wrasse — a sort of Philippine version of the Hawaiian flame wrasse. Both males and females had pinkish-orange bodies, but males sported large, deep red dorsal and anal fins, which they frequently erected in display. They also had a light-blue patch under the "throat."



An excited male redfinned fairy wrasse (*Cirrhilabrus rubripinnis*) soars through a group of females. Compare this with the photo on the right. Photo: J. Hoover



A *Cirrhilabrus rubripinnis* exhibiting its full courtship coloration. Photographing a fairy or flasher in full display is a very difficult exercise that requires patience and a fast shutter finger. Photo: J. Hoover

At the peak of excitement, they developed a broad light bar down the center of the body, the blue throat patch enlarged and became electric, and iridescent blue spots appeared on the extended red fins. Sometimes the males posed vertically, head up or head down, at the same time extending and wagging a pair of extraordinarily long, pointed, deep red pelvic fins. Multiple males often displayed at the same time and displays lasted for many seconds — a memorable sight. (When I got back to Club Ocellaris and looked in the books, these fish turned out to be redfin fairy wrasses, *Cirrhilabrus rubripinnis*, known from the Philippines and northern Indonesia.)

Proceeding down slope to about 60 feet (18 meters), I began to see, mingling with the redfin fairies, a species of flasher wrasse with a light-yellow body streaked with iridescent blue lines and spots, and a red anal fin. I knew they were flashers, not fairies, because of the distinctive two to four extended filaments, typical of the genus *Paracheilinus*, that extended from the erect dorsal fin, a characteristic of the genus *Paracheilinus*. Females and non-displaying males were pinkish, with darker lines and spots. (This species turned out to be Carpenter's flasher wrasse, *Paracheilinus carpenteri*, known primarily from southern Japan and the Philippines.)

Further down slope, I began to see another flasher that sported backward-pointing dorsal and anal fins with no spiky filaments. When raised in display, these fins gave the fish a distinctive "arrowhead" shape. This had to be the sharp-finned flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus angulatus*). When not flashing, it was pinkish orange with violet or blue lines, much like Carpenter's flasher wrasse. In display, however, the backward-pointing dorsal and anal fins became dark red outlined in iridescent blue — truly a fish to remember!

Finally, at about 90 feet (27 meters), mingling with the Carpenter's and sharp-finned flashers, I occasionally saw a dark bluish-looking flasher. In display, it raised a dorsal fin with six to seven filamentous spikes that, at the peak of excitement, became bright yellow over a greenish base! In addition, two large, light-blue patches glowed on the body. This species, the least common of the four, was the most

intriguing. I managed to get an out-of-focus shot of it in display and, according to the books I consulted, it later turned out to be the spot-lined flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus lineopunctatus*). It was actually magenta, but looked bluish at depth, due to the lack of red light.

Alex had left me at 45 feet, but by the time he returned, I was down at 90 feet with the blue flashers. How he found me I don't know, but, in any case, I was out of bottom time and was happy to return to the shallows with him to see the nice pair of Coleman's shrimp he had located. The shrimp were nice, but, at this point, of marginal interest. I was hooked on the flashers and could hardly wait to return. I had secured crummy, fuzzy photos of all the species, enough for ID, but surely I could do better — indeed, I had to do better or the dive trip would now be a flop. However, I was diving with a



In Anilao, it is not uncommon to find flasher hybrids. Several species can be found intermingling during the day, and when courtship and spawning occur later in the day, some cross-breeding is likely to occur. This is probably a *Paracheilinus angulatus* x *P. lineopunctatus* "mutt." Photo: J. Hoover



A young male sharpfinned fairy wrasse (*Paracheilinus angulatus*). Note the characteristic lunate caudal fin and the lack of filaments on the dorsal fin. Photo: J. Hoover

group. Would the others want to return day after day to the same dive site while I tried to get my photos? Most likely not. I resigned myself to probable disappointment.

The next day, we dived a site called “Bethlehem” where, by great good fortune, I found almost the same set of species over an extensive rubble patch at 60 feet. Only the deep-dwelling, “blue,” spot-lined flasher was missing. By the simple expedience of not staying with the group, I was able to spend almost the entire dive with the wrasses. Redfin fairies were especially abundant here, and I was able to get a series of good photos before I ran out of bottom time. One species down!

That afternoon, I was able to persuade my dive buddies that Basura was worth another visit. I had talked up the flashers and many of them wanted to see them too. During that hour-long dive I managed to get one good shot of *P. carpenteri* in full flash. This was going better than I thought possible — two species down!

Luck was with me. Windy conditions during the next several days limited the dive sites available to us. Tragically, we had to dive both Bethlehem and Basura again and again. In another hour-long dive at Bethlehem (so called because it's across the channel from a dive site called “Gaza”), I was able to get a photo of a gorgeous male sharp-finned flasher, with his fins extended, though regretfully, he did not have his display colors turned on. My score now stood at about two and a half out of four. During that dive I saw an unfamiliar elongate wrasse mingling with the redfins. At first, with great excitement, I thought it might be another species of fairy wrasse. It turned out to be a royal wrasse (*Pseudojuloides severnsi*), a rather uncommon fish actually, but not a fairy or a flasher and thus of marginal interest. (For those of you who read my piece in the last issue, this fish was discovered by, and named for, photographer Mike Severns, who figures in that story.)

The weather stayed windy (good, because I was able to dive my sites repeatedly), but it also turned cloudy (bad, because that made it too dark at depth to focus on the moving flashers). That afternoon at Basura, I asked Alex to spot flashers for me and illuminate them with his dive light, while I desperately tried to focus and shoot. It worked a little bit, but the light just wasn't bright enough to make much of a difference. I got one shot of a male spot-lined flasher at peak display, but it was

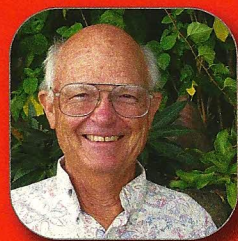


A displaying male Carpenter's flasher wrasse (*Paracheilinus carpenteri*) swoops down as it attempts to attract potential mates and drive off possible rivals. Photo: J. Hoover

out of focus. We had one more day and the weather cleared. Again, luck favored me — the other divers were getting tired and chose to sit out the afternoon dive, enabling me to return to Basura once again. To ensure success for this last dive, I had the brilliant idea of borrowing my roommate's powerful 100-watt video light to illuminate the elusive spot-lined flasher — the bluish one with the bright-yellow dorsal spikes. Alex held the light, but it was so bright that all the flashers dived into the rubble. So much for that idea. Then my computer started beeping at me. I had been too deep, for too long, for too many days. Although I had plenty of air, I had to ascend. With heavy heart, I moved upslope, the job unfinished. As a consolation, I did get a good shot of an apparent hybrid, a cross between the spot-lined flasher and the sharp-finned flasher, but the actual pure-bred spot-lined had eluded me.

Later, at home, I was unable to find a good photo on the web or in books of the spot-lined flasher at peak display. There were photos of it, with fins extended ready to flash, but not at the moment of the flash. Such a photo might not exist. Is my blurry image the only record of this magnificent fish at its moment of ecstasy? That alone would be reason to return to Anilao. Indeed, I have to go back. How could I have been such a fool as to miss the bobbit worm?

Interested in visiting Anilao? Although there are numerous dive resorts in the area, Club Ocellaris caters to scientists and serious underwater photographers. Accommodations are basic, but comfortable, and the dive guides know many of the animals by scientific name, especially the nudibranchs. For more information, visit www.clubocellaris.com



About the Author

John Hoover lives with his wife in Volcano, Hawaii. An active writer, diver and photographer, John has published seven books on Hawaii's undersea life. *Hawaii's Fishes, a Guide for Snorkelers and Divers*, featuring a male flame wrasse on the cover, is in its second edition and has sold over 100,000 copies, and *Hawaii's Sea Creatures* is the de facto standard guide to Hawaii's marine invertebrates. In 2008, John published *The Ultimate Guide to Hawaiian Reef Fishes, Sea Turtles, Dolphins, Whales, and Seals*. Visit John's web site, at www.hawaiisfishes.com