

Lord Howe Island Marine Park News

Creatures of the Seagrass

Many fascinating creatures live in the seagrass meadows of the Lord Howe Island Marine Park (LHIMP). Often these species are so small and camouflaged they are easily overlooked. Several have remained so well hidden that only in recent years have they been documented in the LHIMP. This includes a species of pygmy squid, two pipefish, and a sea hare.

The pygmy squid *Idiosepius hallami* is a tiny species which only grows to 2cm. It attaches itself to seagrass leaves using a specialised sucker and can change colour to blend in against the green background. It was documented in the LHIMP during an Australian Museum expedition in 2017, and described as a new species the following year by Dr. Amanda Reid and Professor Jan Strugnell of James Cook University.



The widebody pipefish (*Stigmatopora nigra*) and hairy pipefish (*Urocampus carinirostris*) also hide amongst seagrass, gripping on to individual leaf with their long, slender, prehensile tails. They were first documented in the LHIMP during dedicated surveys lead by Dr. Graham Short of the Australian Museum and California Academy of Sciences in 2017.



There is also a small sea hare (*Phyllaplysia viridis*) which has a flat, emerald green body and sits flush against seagrass leaves so is difficult to spot. It was first documented in the LHIMP during the 2018 annual Sea Slug Census, and the species was redescribed using new information from this population by Dr. Matt Nimbs (National Marine Science Centre – Southern Cross University) and colleagues in 2020.

The pygmy squid Idiosepius hallami (top – photo credit NSW DPI) and widebody pipefish Stigmatopora nigra (bottom – photo credit David Muirhead) camouflaged in seagrass

Other fascinating species which rely on seagrass meadows in the LHIMP include the orange and mauve coloured side gilled slugs *Pleurobranchus forskallii*, which can be seen laying ribbon-like egg masses on the seagrass each February, and a small endemic sea snail *Prothalotia porteri*.

In addition, seagrass habitats provide shelter for many juvenile fish, including commercially and recreationally important species, as well as feeding areas for turtles and threatened and migratory bird species which are key attractions for some visitors. Seagrass meadows also collect and stabilise sediments, protecting adjacent coastlines from erosion and help to maintain water quality.

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Reminder: Anchoring in North Bay

The seagrass meadows in North Bay are a sensitive habitat and contribute to important environmental, social and economic values of the LHIMP. Anchor damage is a key threat to these values, including the species this habitat supports. Seagrass roots - known as rhizomes - grow slowly and take a long time to establish and grow in an area affected by anchor damage.

To reduce the impacts of anchoring, residents and visitors are reminded that anchoring vessels in the North Bay Sanctuary Zone is only permitted if:

- the vessel is less than 10m in length, and
- the vessel is anchored within 100m of the eastern end of North Beach



Map showing the permitted anchoring area in the North Bay Sanctuary Zone, also featured on the new North Bay sign installed in collaboration with the Lord Howe Island Board.