



Bali has several sites with garden eels, none more impressive than one off Menjangan Island; (below) a wolf eel.

Eel-ectric Eels

Gulping throats, unblinking eyes and a propensity to undulate out from under you — here are four spots to stare down one of the oceans' most interesting fish **BY TERRY WARD**

Despite their reptilian resemblance, eels are fish, and they are endlessly fascinating to divers. Of the roughly 800 species on Earth, most eels live in the shallow waters of the ocean, where they can be found peering from holes in the rocks, undulating their way across a bed of sea grass, or popping in and out of the sand like something from Aladdin's lamp. Fierce predators endowed with fearsome jaws and sharp teeth, they pose little danger to divers; here's where to go to be wowed by four of the oceans' most photogenic eels.

GARDEN EELS BALI

A subfamily of congers, garden eels are often mistaken for flora rather than fauna. That's because a colony of them looks just like a waving bed of sea grass — until you approach, of course, and the long, slender animals lower their bodies in one smooth motion back into absolute invisibility in the sand. Common in shallow water where there's reliable current to deliver their food supply, garden eels are often seen with

their hungry mouths gulping at passing zooplankton. Divers can attempt to fin through them, but get within six feet or so and the eels will pull their disappearing act. Off the western tip of Menjangan Island in northwest Bali, a massive colony of garden eels lives in a channel at about 45 feet. After you've gotten your eel fill, there's an incredible wall plastered with colorful fans and mobbed by schooling fish just around the corner.

> WHEN TO GO The garden eels are at the same spot in Menjangan year-round, but visibility can be compromised on the nearby reefs and walls during the rainy season, from November through March.

> OPERATORS AquaMarine Diving – Bali (aquamarinediving.com) arranges trips to Menjangan and other sites as either a day trip or multiday safari. Stay in style at the luxurious Ayana Resort and Spa (ayanaresort.com) in Jimbaran.

BRANDON COLE; OPPOSITE: BILL HARRIGAN



> PRICE TAG Day trips to dive Menjangan with AquaMarine Diving – Bali cost \$130 per person, and include two dives, lunch, transport and all gear. Rooms at Ayana start at \$239 per night for resort-view rooms, and \$776 per night for an ocean-view villa with a private pool and butler service.

WOLF EELS VANCOUVER ISLAND

With a face only a diver could love, the wolf eel looks like a mutt from the pound that nobody will adopt — a weird cross between a toad and a Muppet. But for divers venturing to the cold and wildlife-rich waters of Canada's Vancouver Island to see the resident wolf eels at sites like McCurdy Point, they're one of the most sought-after species both to photograph and ogle. Wolf eels are named for their caninelike teeth that can easily crush



Divers on Bonaire might get lucky with a sighting of the rare goldentail moray.



A male ribbon eel is distinguishable by its blue body and yellow face.

the crustaceans and marine invertebrates that are the animals' preferred diet. Wolf eels have been seen sparring with giant Pacific octopus over prime den real estate — both animals hunt the same prey and have similar taste in homes. If you come face to face with the wolf eel's singularly eccentric mug peering from a crevice in low visibility (sightings are usually below 90 feet deep), it's a sight you won't forget. (More so if you luck out with a juvenile sighting — the young wolf eels are deep red in color and don't have the same "ugly" mug of the adults.) Beautiful cloud sponges are often seen in the same deep waters and make hunting for the eels all the more rewarding.

> WHEN TO GO The water is far colder but visibility is best during the winter months, since summertime can be fraught with plankton blooms. The eels are seen year-round.

> OPERATORS Rockfish Divers' (rockfishdivers.com) boat is named *Loup de Mer* (French for "wolf eel"), and owner Elly Pendleton knows where to find the local denizens. Dive trips operate out of the marina in front of the Brentwood Bay Resort & Spa (brentwoodbayresort.com), a beautiful waterfront hotel about 20 minutes from downtown Victoria.

> PRICE TAG Two-tank guided dives with Rockfish Divers cost \$114; it's \$50 extra if you need to rent gear. Winter rates at Brentwood Bay Resort & Spa start at around \$200 per night for oceanfront rooms with fireplaces (double occupancy).

GOLDENTAIL MORAY EEL BONAIRE

Get used to making the underwater sign for "eel sighting" — close your first two fingers against your thumb to mimic a chomping mouth — during shore dives along Bonaire's fabulously fishy walls. While green moray eels are spotted quite often, the goldentail eel — with its brown skin covered in tiny yellow spots and namesake yellow tail tip — is a bit more of a cause célèbre in these parts. The creatures are very shy and it's rare to see more than a head peeking out during daytime dives, making them quite challenging to photograph. But along Bonaire's endless walls — and particularly the pretty

KIM YUSUF; OPPOSITE: TERENCE ROSS/TOM STACK AND ASSOCIATES

stretch at Karpata, on the northeast of the island — you might get lucky and see a goldentail foraging out in the open or poking from the coral or a rocky crevice.

> WHEN TO GO The eels are here year-round, but visibility tends to be best from April to January.

> OPERATORS Captain Don's Habitat (habitatbonaire.com) fronts a fabulous house reef where you can scout for goldentails day and night. The resort has a full dive center and a range of lodging, from standard rooms to two-, three- and four-bedroom suites.

> PRICE TAG Double-occupancy in a bungalow starts from \$163 per night, and it's \$56 per extra person per day, for one daily boat dive and unlimited shore diving from the resort's pier (tanks and weights included).

BLUE RIBBON EELS ANILAO, PHILIPPINES

With flared nostrils that resemble trumpets and three bizarre tendrils strung from their lower jaws, blue ribbon eels are among the more eccentric and beautiful eels. And their amorous propensities for sex changes make spotting this Indo-Pacific dweller all the more fascinating. Ribbon eels are the only moray eels that are protandric, meaning they undergo a sex change during their lifetime to turn from male into female. The males are easy to single out with their bright-blue bodies and yellow mouths. When they switch into the fairer sex, however, their bodies turn mostly yellow. Before

making the leap into the colorful world of adulthood, juvenile males are jet black with yellow dorsal fins. Dive sites such as Cathedrals near Anilao in the Philippines are particularly reliable for spotting ribbon eels, which prefer to dwell in sand bottoms and rubble zones rather than on reefs. What's more, if you find one eel, another is likely nearby.

> WHEN TO GO Year-round

> OPERATORS Crystal Blue Anilao Diving Resort (crystalblueanilaodivingresort.com) makes a great land base for diving.

> PRICE TAG Crystal Blue packages start at \$175 per day, including up to four dives, lodging and full board. Banca Diving (bancadiving.com) charges about \$200 per day for full board and four dives daily with land-based lodging.