

# **Excerpts from an Ocean Diary**

**Simon's Town, South Africa**



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# Introduction

I retired from my academic job in December 2019. A month later Anne and I moved house from central Cape Town to a small cottage on the hillsides of Simon's Town, a village on the South Peninsula that is also the main base of the South African Navy. Our living room overlooks the harbour and a sweep of mountainous coastline. Standing at the window, the light changes continuously as clouds sweep in and out, winds and swells enliven the surface of the sea, sunlight dances and dims. The ocean calls, and I respond by trying to swim every day, if at all possible. I snorkel and free-dive in the magnificent kelp forests a few minutes away, and bodysurf on the wave-swept sandy beaches. For the past year I have kept a diary that details every swim, and tries to capture something of the intensity of these experiences. It also chronicles my painfully slow progress in seeking to understand aspects of an entrancing but mysterious underwater world, beginning with the identification of the main reef fish species. Seasonal shifts are another puzzle, which I continue to explore. Our first year here overlapped with a six month stay in a nearby village by my son Kezia and his family, allowing me to teach my 5 year old grand-daughter, Eowyn, to swim. She loves the sea as much as I do, and I have introduced her to a few of the remarkable creatures living in the ocean. Kezia, Maud and Eowyn have now moved to Paris, but the diary helps to keep my memories of those marvellous months fresh and clear. Here is a sample of entries, one from each of the past twelve months.

## Diary excerpts

**21/07/20**

A 45 minute snorkel at Castle Rock at 12.15pm, on a beautiful sunny day, midway to high tide, with a 10kms wind from the south and a low swell. Dozens of my blue friends, *Pachymetapon blochii* (also known as Hottentot Bream), some 45cms long, slowly cruising through the kelp, often just a meter below me. Some seem curious; one comes up to within 30cms of my mask. Some of them seem to follow me around as I swim very slowly through the kelp in a circle of about 25m across. Then: a large brown creature, maybe 1.5m in length, just two or three meters away from me, and speeding off! I am pretty sure it is a Fur Seal, but for a heart-stopping moment I am convinced it's a shark. A few minutes later, a large crowd of *Pachys* are clustered around some kelp about three meters down, with two large Rooimanne (Red Roman, *Chrysoblephus laticeps*), also very chilled out, at one point coming up towards me. Beautiful!

**10/08/20**

We try to get into Cape Point Reserve using our new Green Card, but it appears that all activities other than driving around are still barred, so we decide not to enter. We have our picnic on the beach at Scarborough instead. At Smitswinkelbaai, looking out for whales from the mountain road, we see three spear fishermen out in the kelp, hunting Galjoen (*Dichistius capensis*) according to someone else watching them. Later that afternoon I look in vain for waves at Glencairn, so go to Castle Rock instead, on the way seeing a whale spouting out at sea near Miller's Point. Possibly a Southern Right, given the V-shaped spume?

A 45 minute session at Castle Rock a couple of hours after low tide, in cold, crystal clear water with a mild swell. I head for the smaller rocks south of the big rock, and see one very large Red Roman, maybe 50 or 60cms long, and another mysterious and nervous large fish eight or so meters down (a Steenbras perhaps?). Once again, a great many *Pachymetapon*, circling and unafraid. My latest hypothesis: my blue wetsuit makes them think I am one of them, albeit a very large version.

**03/09/20**

A mild, partly cloudy and breezy day, and some snorkeling at Castle Rock at around 12pm, a couple of hours after low tide. Cold, cold water, reasonable visibility. Pushing towards the rocks to the south of the Castle, I encounter lots of my old friends, the blue ones, and several Red Roman, including two very large ones around 50cms in length or perhaps even more. One seems curious and comes up towards me, until about a meter away. Impressive beasties. I pull down on kelp towards some interesting looking clefts in the rocks, but no sign of the Pyjama Catshark (*Poroderma africanum*) or Octopus that I am so desperate to see. A poorly functioning snorkel, so I retreat to the shore after only 15 minutes.

Later, closer to high tide and as the wind dies, the sea calms and the sun begins to warm everything up, I try again, this time at Windmill Beach. Out to my favourite spot of the moment, near the white rock to the south, and a horde of small *Pachymetapon*. Trying something different, I swim close to the central massif – and suddenly, a Pyjama Catshark! Luminous, pale, with long black stripes, about a meter long, and snaking sinuously through the weeds three meters below me – stunningly beautiful! I follow it for about 20 seconds

before it disappears under an overhang at the base of the large rocks. On my left as I follow the catshark is a big shoal of medium-sized fish, about 40 of them, faint stripes and a black spot near the tail – *Diplodus capensis*, or Blacktail. And then three or four Zebra, *Diplodus hottentotus*. What a swim.... I wonder, as the days lengthen and spring comes in, what new species will come into view?

### **19/09/20**

Anne and I attend a beach clean-up on 'International Ocean Day' at Miller's Point and collect some scratches while retrieving bottles and plastic waste from under the thorny bushes. Some spouting whales out at sea, perhaps Bryde's.

Later, I dash off for a quick snorkel at Water's Edge and see two Spotted Gully Sharks! Directed by some other divers, I head for the sandy area to the north, and there they are, cruising around in shallowish water, as cool as cucumbers. The visibility is poor, and I climb down a kelp stipe to get up close – only a meter or two away. They ignore me completely. One has white marks on one side of its jaw, quite damaged-looking. And another mystery fish, large, frilly fins, nervous as hell .... just a glimpse, and the guide allows me to identify it as a Janbruin (John Brown, or *Gymnocrotaphos curvidens*).

### **16/10/20**

A lovely calm day, no wind, no waves and Eowyn and I are off to Water's Edge, to try swimming in the open ocean with her armbands on. She loves it, and becomes confident very quickly. Then, a breakthrough moment: E. sees several people in the water with mask and snorkel, some exclaiming about the fish they can see. For her second swim, E. asks to have her goggles on - and soon her head is under, if very briefly, and she can see, with the clarity only goggles or mask can provide! Very excited, she paddles around, and I try to direct her gaze to the large school of *Sarpa salpa* (Karanteen, or Strepies) that is meandering about. I don't think she sees them, to be honest, despite her claim to the contrary, but never mind – she does see rocks, the sandy bottom, the kelp and me ....

Around 4pm, as the day wanes and the wind picks up, I head for the A-Frame rocks, and enjoy a short snorkel. Visibility not that good, and it's close to high tide. I see big schools of Karanteen, a very fat *P. blochii*, some Twotone Fingerfin and a mysterious tuberculate creature, about 10cms long, which shoots rapidly away as I dive closer to try to get a better view of it. Biggish swell, and I am basking in the waves as a flotilla of kayakers paddles past a few meters away.

### **13/11/20**

Another wonderful early summer day, hot sun, blue skies and no wind. Eowyn and I have a lovely little swim together in the 'lagoon' at Miller's, with lots of klipvis, Redfinger (*Cheilodactylus fasciatus*) and Karanteen above the colourful garden of sea urchins (the spines of which I manage to get into the side of one foot and also a little finger). Then Janus of the Sea Change Project walks by, not to work, he says, but simply to enjoy the world. A minute later he calls on us to help him find the resident otter, which he has caught sight of. There he is! On top of the rocks near the perlemoen poaching site, eating a crab. Janus beckons to us to join him and begins to film, from as close as a meter away, then from just 30 centimetres, crouched in front of the Otter, which is catching another crab and munching loudly on it. We are also a meter away, spellbound. The Otter catches two more crabs, nuzzling under a small overhang near the waterline, then dives into the waves and is gone.

Janus explains that he is a little worried about this otter becoming so habituated to human beings, the result, he thinks, of fishermen giving him fish to eat. The danger is a dog attack. The dark side of loosening the boundaries between species?

Janus fetches his swimming gear and we are assigned to watch out for Mr. Otter, but no sign of him for around five minutes, and then, there he is on another large rock, further out to the south! Janus swims over to him, but we have to leave to enjoy the after-swim snack that Maude has packed for us (clearly a priority for a five year old).

*En route* to our bags we see a large female baboon on the rocks – and then discover she has ransacked our supplies, eating all the biscuits and also Eowyn's 'squishy' juice pack. E. is outraged, and screams and shouts, as the baboon finds another bag of food belonging to some fellow beach-goers a short distance away. A baboon monitor arrives, but too late. We head for home and a replacement snack. An adventurous morning!

Late afternoon at the A-Frame. Wetsuit, weight-belt, deep water around the largest rocks. About 5 or 6 meters down, large numbers of fish in their favourite habitats, and a new fish species, the Galjoen, South Africa's national fish, as well as some Banded Galjoen. Beautiful! Also a couple of 40cm Twotone Fingerfin (*Chirodactylus brachydactylus*), and a tiny juvenile Red Roman about 10-12 cms in length (a first for me). Diving down right next to the largest rock I see the bright blue creature of a week ago, and investigate. My inquisitive finger results in it curling up on itself, and I realize that it's a type of anemone. The guide book informs me it's a Sandy Anemone, *Bunodactis Reynaudi*, that can sometimes be brown, green or pink as well as blue. It has 300 short tentacles, and feeds on dislodged animals tumbled by the waves.

### 19/12/20

A sunny Saturday morning, with a 25 kms per hour south-easter ruffling the surface of the bay. I investigate the sheltered, sandy area between the A-Frame and Fisherman's. On the edge of a small area of kelp forest I see a large community of *S. salpa* with a few Blacktail keeping them close company, plus some small Zebra. Then, at the far edge of the kelp, about three meters down on the sandy bottom, I see a huge shape moving slowly forward. Diving down to investigate, I realize that it's a stingray, about 2m long, maybe a Short-tailed Stingray. It immediately burrows itself into the sand. A second dive down to have a look reveals a large eye staring out at me. My first stingray .... I am elated.

### 22/01/21

A-Frame for 40 minutes, two hours after low tide, on a hot day with a slight breeze, good visibility - a beautiful swim! In the little channel to the north east of the white rock/central massif, and then to Little Rock. Lots and lots of fish, calm and centred, surrounding me as I pull myself down the kelp stipes. Without a weight belt, my legs want to float back to the surface....

Many different fish today: *P. blochii* and *B. inornata* in large numbers, nervous and large Twotone Fingerfin, young Red Roman, shoals of Karanteen. Near the Little Rock, a group of large (50cm long) and grey-blue fish that could perhaps be *P. blochii*, but are much more deep-bodied than most I have seen. Is this another mystery? Back at home, the picture of a Steentjie (*Spondyllosoma emarginatum*) looks about right, except that I don't remember horizontal pale yellow stripes. Behaviour and environment seem right too: large shoals off shallow reefs. Lechanteur's PhD thesis has them at 6.7 fish/100m<sup>2</sup>, or the fifth most common species of reef fish in False Bay.

**23/02/21**

After several aborted attempts Anne and I finally get to swim in Venus Pool in the Cape Point reserve – a short 15 minutes stroll along the coast to a pretty natural pool. Lovely day, slight breeze, sun. Shallow pool, lots of urchins, anemones, and klipvis.

After lunch I take Eowyn to St. James pool for a swim. Lots of people, but lots of space too. She has her armbands on and we station ourselves at the edge of the sea, with small waves breaking over us. We head back to the shallow end, E. doing her backstroke, some energetic kicking – but going round in circles rather than in a straight line. We build a large sandcastle, eyed enviously by some of the other children on the beach. 'Let's explore the rock pools', says E. and we head out to the sea-edge close to where the waves are breaking.

Then: 'Look, an Octopus!' says E., and there it is, not quite under a rock, looking up at us. A head/body of around 15 to 20 cm in diameter, with tentacles stretching another 30 or 40 cms. My finger can't tempt it to try a touch, and E. is also reluctant to put her finger into the pool. Suddenly it's on the move, to deep under a rock and out of sight. E. is keen to explore elsewhere, but I want to stay with the Octopus, and we are rewarded by a view of a small crab scuttling away with the Octopus in hot pursuit (but unsuccessfully, we think). The Octopus changes colour a few times, from mottled grey and beige to a dark reddish brown, the colour of the rocks. I offer my finger again, and this time it sends the curling end of a tentacle slowly forward to gently grasp my digit. Then a couple more tentacles with large suckers, and strong tugs. Unfortunately for the Octopus, I am just too large to be eaten. It disappears again. What an amazingly strange and beautiful creature!

**02/03/21**

Maud, Eowyn and I visit the aquarium at the Waterfront – a suggestion of mine from last week that E. had greeted with great excitement and enthusiasm. The idea was prompted by her new book on sea creatures and her particular interest in the ragged-tooth shark, the largest creature in the aquarium. The visit is a huge success, and in the restaurant afterwards, another first for Eowyn - a chocolate milkshake. Clownfish, octopus, jellyfish, boxfish, penguins, the kelp forest tank, the open sea tank, the sharks, so many brilliantly coloured species .... the wondrous forms of life under the sea.

After lunch, Ivan and I dive at Castle Rock, on a sunny, calm day, at mid-tide. Ivan battles with a loose weight-belt and we have to climb, with some difficulty given the big swells, onto mussel-encrusted rocks, to allow him to take off the belt and put it on again. We are just off the Castle, on the south-east side, in the deep trough where I have seen a rich diversity of fish before. Not much to see today, though, other than some *P. blochii*, but two large and magnificent Red Roman entrance us. Heading off to the smaller set of rocks to the south, again much fewer fish than ever before, but Ivan spots an elegant shoal of juvenile Zebra with one Blacktail in attendance. We look for Stingrays in the sandy bay, to no avail. My calf muscles begin to cramp after 45 minutes of deep diving and pushing back up to the surface, so it's back to the shore. Exhilarating!

**03/04/21**

Kezia, Maud and Eowyn and I swim at Fisherman's Beach, on a warm, windless and sunny day. E. practices her bodysurfing, and K. helps her into a slightly larger wave than usual – she gets right into the break, with perfect timing, and shoots down at speed as the wave

crashes into the shallows. But only half an hour at the beach, before we have to head for home and lunch.

At 5pm, conditions are still perfect, so I swim at the A-Frame, a small white rock with a swim-through passage beneath it I dare not yet to attempt, deciding to put on full gear for some deep dives. It's idyllic – a flat sea, sparkling in the late afternoon sun, and the water is warm. The wild creatures appear to be much more chilled out than usual. In a mid-water column to the north of the submersible rock, around fifty *P. blochii* – a mix of sizes, from juveniles to very large adults - are slowly circling each other; quite hypnotic.

I circumnavigate the large white rock and see the usual mix of species present at this site. No Octopus. Beginning to head back to shore after half an hour in the ocean, when a 1.5 m Short-tailed Stingray heads straight towards me, about 2 meters from the surface. Wow! Always that moment of shock and its adrenalin, when one suddenly sees a large, wild animal at close quarters. The ray swims underneath me, grey above and white below with some white scratch marks on the grey, undulating its 'wings' in a stately manner but moving fast,. I swim along, above and slightly behind it (keeping an eye on that stinging tail), heading out to sea past the submersible rocks, but after 30 or so meters I decide to drop back and end the swim. What a magnificent sight!

### 10/05/21

Grey clouds all day, but no wind, and glassy conditions. After lunch, a dive at Windmill but without a wetsuit; my Zoom chat with Stanley in Oxford has inspired me to go for the brown fat. A long, 30 minute swim, beginning in the east-facing inlet and its deep water. No other swimmers. No sign of the Pyjama Catshark. Huge numbers of *P. Blochii* and a few Twotone, out in the deep kelp forest. Three very large Hottentot Bream. I swim through the forest and the connecting passage to get into the north-facing inlet, and see a 60 cms long Dark Shyshark (*Habloblepharus pictus*), very close by, but soon disappearing. Then, the resident Octopus moving slowly over the bottom, about a meter down, with a nearby crab scurrying off in a great fright. I hang motionless above the creature, and it settles down on some mottled grey and black stones, perfectly camouflaged and watching me very carefully. I move away for a couple of minutes and then return to the spot, but no change. I dive down, find a corner of a rock to hang onto, and extend a finger to see if it is interested. A sudden change to dark gray, before it hides deep under the stones until almost completely hidden.

Now I am beginning to shudder with cold, I can't close my fingers together to pull down through the water, and my shoulders are aching: time to get out! Thankfully the little beach is just two minutes away. Takes me an hour to warm up properly, after a long hot shower and coffee.

### 01/06/21

Timm and Ivan respond enthusiastically to my invitation to dive, and we set off at 11am, midway between low and high tide. I suggest Fisherman's Beach, which neither of them have swum at before. Sunny, calm, good visibility. We dive at both the submersible rocks and the small headland to the north. The kelp forest gently sways in the tiny swells, the sun lights up the rocks, algae and urchins down to six meters below, and we see a huge number of *P. blochii*, with fewer *B. inornata* and Twotone Fingerfin and some small Red Roman. Two Galjoen only – where has the large squadron of last week gone to? Also, quite a few Strepies. Several small comb jellies pulse through the water (name unknown; not in the guide book). Tim and I see a small Puffadder Shyshark (*Habloblepharus edwardii*), and later



Timm tells me that earlier on he saw two different individuals . Perhaps the same two I saw at this site ten days ago? We look for the Dark Shyshark around the headland, but without success. An hour in the water (the benefit of a wetsuit) and my legs are tired (but happy) by the time we get back to shore.

## Fish



Twotone Fingerfin (*Chirodactylus brachydactylus*)



Pachymetapon blochii (Hottentot bream)



Stingray (*Myleobatoidei*)



Strepie / Karanteen (*Sarpa salpa*)



Galjoen (*Dichistius capensis*)



Puffadder Shyshark (*Habloblepharus edwardi*)





Pyjama Catshark (*Poroderma africanum*)



Rooimanne / Red Roman (*Chrysoblephus laticeps*)



Dark Shyshark (*Haploblepharus pictus*)



Blacktail (*Diplodus capensis*)



Zebra (*Diplodus hottentotus*)



Steentjie (*Spondyliosoma emarginatum*)



Klipvis (39 species in South Africa)