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Researcher finds males pickier than females

By RACHEL TOMPA
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A Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute researcher believes she's uncovered the secrets behind sex, lies and octopi.

And what she has discovered about the habits of a certain species of octopus is a bit disconcerting. Christine Huffard, the lead biologist in the study, found that the female octopi she has been observing will mate with just about any male that comes along, but that the male octopi are more picky, choosing large ladies over small.

Marine biologists recently released their study of the complex mating rituals of octopi among a population of Indonesian octopi.

Previously, researchers thought that octopus sex was infrequent and unsophisticated, said Huffard. These conclusions were based on aquarium studies and brief observations in the wild.

But Huffard and colleagues' recent findings challenge the previous dogma. They saw octopi engaged in complex mating behavior, such as fighting over conquests, flirtatious color displays and careful partner selection.

"Until you see an animal in its natural habitat, everything you think about it is really a best guess," Huffard said. "And our best guesses about octopus mating were actually not correct."

Many octopus species are tricky to study in the wild, either because they only come out at night or because they live in chilly or deep waters, where researchers can only spend a few hours at a time.

But Huffard's octopi of choice, *Abdopus aculeatus*, live in warm, shallow waters and are active during



the day. To study them, Huffard snorkeled from dawn to dusk, and

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wrote down every octopus movement on waterproof paper.

"This is not a unique species of octopus, which suggests others behave this way," said Roy Caldwell, a professor of integrative biology at University of California-Berkeley and co-author of the study.

These octopi are about as big as a human hand, Huffard said, but most of that size is their sucker-covered tentacles. Their

bodies are just walnut-sized. To mate, the males deposit "sperm packets" through a specialized tentacle into the female's body.

The aculeatus octopi are normally yellow with dapples of brown, tan, and gray, Huffard said. But when a male sees another octopus, he puts on his fighting and flirting colors, turning nearly white with dark stripes.

"That signals that he's a male, and that he sees another octopus in the area that he'll fight or mate with," Huffard said.

These critters live in individual dens, and when a male has chosen his partner for mating, he will jealously guard her den to ward off interlopers, Huffard said. If other males get too close, he'll fight them, sometimes strangling the new suitor with his tentacles.

But some little octopi, which the researchers called "sneaker males," will crawl along the ocean floor to a guarded den.

"They just won't win any fights at that size," Huffard said.

Huffard said she saw these crafty Romeos hiding behind rocks as they made their way to the den. While most males change color in the presence of other octopi, the sneaker males remained brown and yellow, typical behavior of a female. By hiding and cross-dressing, these little octopi often managed to get close enough to the dens to successfully mate with the guarded females, Huffard said.

Huffard thinks the aculeatus' mating behaviors are likely to translate to other kinds of octopi as well.

"So many of the behaviors that we've seen here have evolved over and over again in the animal kingdom," she said. For example, "there's mate competition in just about any animal you look at."

Huffard said her findings have provoked some gentle teasing among friends.

"It inspires all sorts of nicknames and jokes at parties," she said. "I'll get introduced as the friend that studies 'octoporn.'"

berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2008/03/31_octo.shtml

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