

Mediterranean Nudibranchs

Cratena peregrina

by Miquel Pontes and Josep M^a Dacosta

This nudibranch is very common and easy to spot in shallow waters, as it lives on rocky bottoms, at illuminated or slightly shaded places. It is frequently found from July to September, although it is present the whole year round.

Formerly known as *Hervia costai* (Haefelfinger), the actual name *Cratena peregrina* was first described by Gmelin in 1791. This is an species considered to be endemic to the Mediterranean Sea.

Its body is white, and it is unmistakable because of the 7 to 10 groups of iridescent violet dorsal *cerata*, filled with brown or orange prolongations of the digestive gland known as *cnidosacs*.

There are two bright orange marks at the base of each rhinophore. The tips of the rhinophores are also orange, making them similar to the *cerata*.

The labial tentacles are often transparent, if not white, on its base, and they are long, as they almost double the size of the rhinophores.

The foot is long, and the tail measures one third of the animal's total length. The maximum length of the *Cratena peregrina* ranges, according to the authors, from 4 to 5 cm.

This nudibranch reproduces in the beginning of Summer, and it lays white convoluted egg strings on the same hydrarians it feeds on.

There are superb pictures of this aeolidacean at Erwin Köhler's Medslugs (http://www.medslugs.de/E/Mediterranean/Cratena_peregrina.htm)

Defence

For defensive purposes, the *cnidosacs* are used to store the stinging cells of the *Eudendrium* hydrarians this nudibranch feeds on.

The defensive strategy of the *Cratena peregrina* is to erect and direct the *cerata*, when disturbed, against the possible enemy. By doing so it confuses the predator because the nudibranch becomes almost indistinguishable, hidden under a mess of stinging *cerata*.

Even when the predator is not fooled and attacks, the *cerata* that cover the nudibranch detach easily from the body, and then the stinging nature of the *cnidocysts* avoid any further attacks. Lost *cerata* are easily replaceable by the injured animal.



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