

Mediterranean Nudibranchs

Flabellina affinis

by Josep M^a Dacosta and Miquel Pontes

The genus name "*Flabellina*" derives from the Latin "*flabellum*" meaning "fan" and it defines a specific gender of nudibranchs that share certain physical characteristics, like having a dorsal fan of appendices called *cerata*. The species name, "*affinis*", means "*similar*" in ancient Latin. So when we talk about *Flabellina affinis* (Fig.1 & 2) we have a nudibranch "*similar to a fan*". These etymological definitions can be found in the glossary of scientific Latin names of Picton and Morrow's book (See review page 16) **NUDIBRANCHS OF THE BRITISH ISLES**, or on the website of the same name at <http://www.pictonb.freeserve.co.uk/nudibranchs/latin.html>.

Flabellina affinis is coloured translucent violet, an attractive colour underwater, which may resemble phosphorescent to divers, and is probably used by the animal as a warning to possible predators. It is widely accepted that the size of this aeolidacean reaches a maximum of 50mm, most of which is the narrow foot.

It has two violet lamellated rhinophores, (Fig.3) with about 15 horizontal rings each, laid perpendicular to the axis of this appendix, something characteristic of this species. The *cerata* are also violet and are distributed in 7 or 8 groups, each attached to a lateral appendix or peduncle, which protrudes from the body. The top third of each *cerata* has a more intense colour than the rest and the red to dark orange digestive gland can be seen inside.

The *Flabellina affinis* can be distinguished from the very similar *Flabellina pedata* (fig.5) by having a smaller number of *cerata*, which end in white tips, become less in number as they progress to the tail, and protrude directly from the body, lacking the base peduncles of the *cerata*, (a characteristic aspect of the *Flabellina affinis*). The rhinophores are flat instead of annulate and the egg masses are white. Violet strings laid by *Flabellina affinis*. (Fig.4) As with other nudibranchs that feed on stinging polyps, the urticant cells or *cnidocysts* are not released when eaten, instead they are transported to a sack located in the medium intestine and from there to the tip of the *cerata*, and are known as "*cleptocnidia*" ("urticant stolen cells"). The *cerata* and their stinging contents are used as an active defence system by the nudibranch. When a predator attacks, one or more *cerata* detach, and release the active urticant cells, often deterring the attacker.

Flabellina affinis is considered common at depths of 5 to 20 meters, in shady areas with moderate hydrodynamism, the appropriate environment for its food: the *Eudendrium* hydrarian colonies. This nudibranch is distributed along the Mediterranean Sea and nearby Atlantic Ocean, being present the whole year round, although it seems more frequent in summer.

The *Flabellina affinis*, together with the *Cratena peregrina* (= *Hervia costai*) and the *Peltodoris atromaculata*, are three nudibranch common species found while diving or snorkelling along the coast of Spanish Costa Brava.

You will find more interesting images at Erwin Köhler's web site for Mediterranean Nudibranchs, Medslugs, at http://www.medslugs.de/E/Mediterranean/Flabellina_affinis.htm



Fig. 1



Fig.2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig.5