## Exploring Eagle Rock Marine Sanctuary ...*Andy Gray, drawings by Kaye Traynor*

Slowing down or stopping for long enough to witness what inhabits the intertidal zone can be a rewarding experience. Not enough respect is paid to the creatures that call this challenging place to survive 'home'.

On a recent field trip, 15 ANGAIR enthusiasts, including family and friends, took the time to explore the intertidal zone of Eagle Rock Marine Sanctuary in Aireys Inlet. Being a twilight wander we hoped to stumble across a Maori Octopus hunting for an evening feed but this was not to be. However, we did come across three very exciting critters.

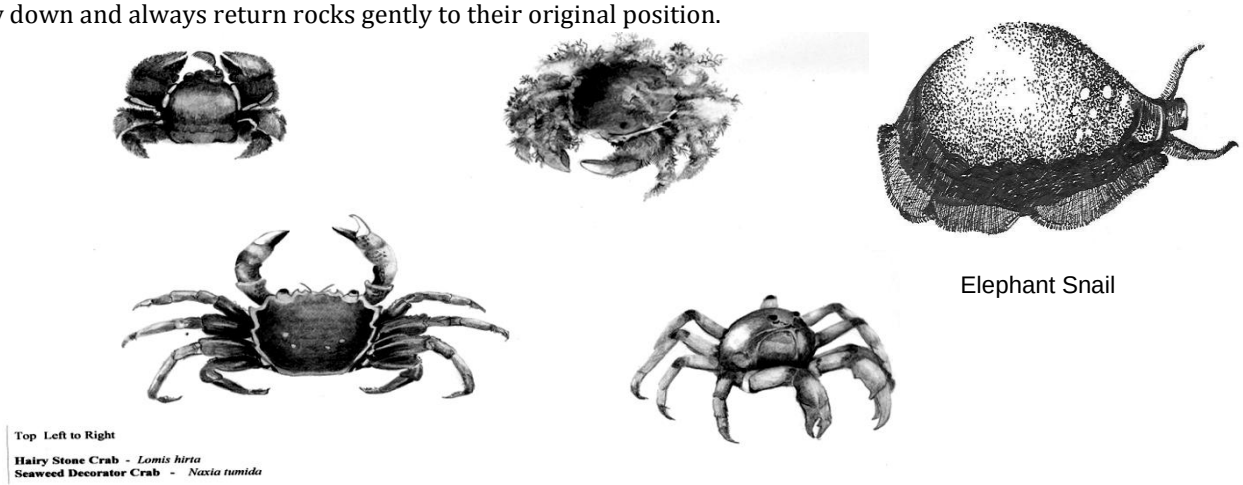
Hairy Stone Crabs *Lomis hirta* are often overlooked in a rock pool. Firstly, they cling onto the underside of rocks with tremendous dexterity and camouflage. They are usually the colour of the rocks they choose to inhabit (sandstone with minimal algal growth). When all their legs are drawn in they can easily be passed off as a lump on the rock. The one give away is their bright blue antennae at the point of their carapace. These are used to filter feed planktonic plants and animals from the sea water flowing under the rock. This feature sets the Hairy Stone Crab apart from other crabs as does the lack of a forth pair of walking legs. The Hairy Stone Crab's best line of self defence is its camouflage, with its front claws enlarged for show more than anything else.

Hairy Stone Crabs (one of my favourite critters to find in the rock pools) are most closely related to hermit crabs.

The Elephant Snail *Scutus antipodes* is relatively common but little understood. Few creatures in the intertidal zone have survived without a convincing protective shell. When the Elephant Snail is disturbed or threatened it often covers itself with a soft fleshy black mantle, until the white shell is not visible. Hardly the best self defence mechanism, yet these creatures have managed to stand the test of time. Elephant Snails eat detached or drifting algae and generally feed on the open substrate at night; otherwise they are under rocks or wedged in crevices. The shell of this gastropod can grow as long as 100 mm, which means a large Elephant Snail fills the palm of an adult hand. That said, it is not recommended that these creatures are handled as they can be easily damaged and killed in the process.

Lastly,we came across the best dressed of the rock pool, the Seaweed or Decorator Crab *Naxia tumida*. This fashionista goes to a lot of trouble to blend in. It has small hooked yellow hairs all over its body. As it moves around the rock pool it attaches seaweed, algae and occasionally sponges to its body with a salivary substance. Often a great surprise to new rock pool observers this crab clings on to the underside of rocks in much the same method as the Hairy Stone Crab. Sometimes you can be watching a rock pool for several minutes before it moves to reveal its presence.

Remember, when exploring the intertidal zone, tread lightly, make sure you can always see your finger tips, slow down and always return rocks gently to their original position.




**Top left and right – Hairy Stone Crab. Bottom left and right - Seaweed Decorator Crab**

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