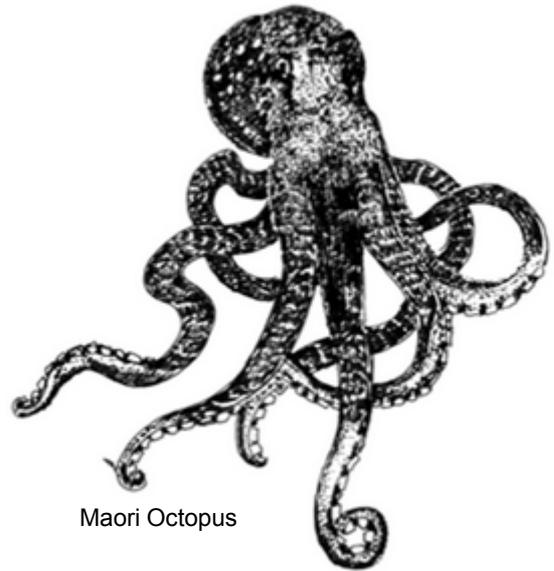


OCTOPUSES IN OUR AREA - ... *Peter Crowcroft; drawings by Kaye Traynor*

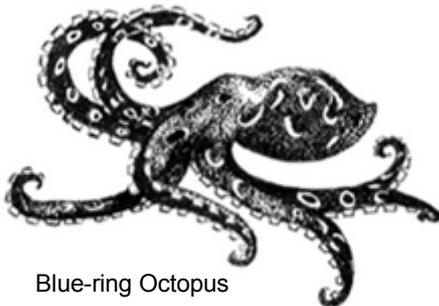
Octopuses belong to the class Cephalopoda within the phylum Mollusca. These remarkable creatures are regarded as the most intelligent invertebrates in the animal kingdom, because of their quick learning ability. They have highly sophisticated sensory mechanisms; for example, their eyesight is comparable to that of vertebrates, despite an entirely independent evolutionary history. They are masters of camouflage, being able to rapidly change their colour and body shape to imitate seaweed or rocks as needed. If all else fails, they will eject a screen of ink, roughly the same size as themselves, and escape rapidly using their 'jet-propulsion' mechanism.

The following species are common in our area, and a walk on a bright, moonlit night, when the tide is very low, will give you a good chance of a sighting that you will never forget.

The apex predator in our local rock-pools is the Maori Octopus *Octopus maorum*. This species can grow to the impressive weight of 10 kg, with a tentacle-span of over 2 metres, and to see one of these amazing creatures hunting after dark is a fantastic experience. This incredible animal will reach into every crack and crevice, and with suckers lining each arm, it can remove all manner of crustaceans and molluscs. Crabs are definitely a favourite – the traces of crushed shell the next morning provides evidence of the nocturnal octopus feast. Abalone is also taken, which is an indication of the strength this species can exhibit. In deeper waters, it is the major predator of rock lobsters, and they are often pulled up in cray-pots as a result! The only hard part in the body is the beak, which is strikingly similar to that of a parrot.



Maori Octopus



Blue-ring Octopus

The Southern Blue-ringed Octopus *Hapalochlaena maculosa* is much smaller in size, reaching just 15 cm in length. It more than makes up for this shortcoming, however, by producing a potent, paralysing neurotoxin, which it uses to defend itself from predators or very unfortunate naturalists. Usually camouflaged perfectly with the surrounding environment, this species will flash vivid blue rings on its body once it is discovered. This is a clear warning statement – *I don't need to be camouflaged, mess with me and you will be sorry!* Fortunately, bites from this

species are extremely rare, with most unwanted contact coming from picking up discarded bottles, cans or submerged shells, thus disturbing the sleeping creature in its chosen home. A compression bandage, a call to 000, and extended CPR are necessary until the effects of the venom naturally wear off.

References:

1. Amanda Reid and Mark Norman, 2000, *A Guide to Squid, Cuttlefish and Octopuses of Australasia*. CSIRO PUBLISHING, Melbourne.
2. Edgar, G. 2008, *Australian Marine Life*, 2nd Ed. Reed New Holland.

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