

Notes on the occurrence of a rare Cardinal Fish at Coral Bay, Southern Palawan, Philippines

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A team of researchers led by Haribon Palawan and the author with staff from DENR-PENRO, assisted by Coral Bay Nickel Corporation (CBNC) staff conducted coastal habitat monitoring in several areas of Coral Bay, southern Palawan in March 2008 and 2014, under the auspices of CBNC.

While diving in one of the survey stations (Maranto Point), the author observed an unusual solitary fish, of which he has seen for the first time in his three-decade work in marine fishes of Palawan. The author took photographs of the fish under water to document fish occurrence (Figure 1).

The fish was found in a shallow (2-3 meters deep) reef patch off the Maranto Point, located west of the mouth of Rio Tuba River in Coral Bay, Southern Palawan. The exact location of the site was: Latitude, 8.50400°; Longitude, 117.28290°. Although *A. griffinii* might have been previously recorded in Palawan waters, it has not appeared in the pictorial guides of Palawan fishes (Schroeder 1980; Gonzales 2013) Seale also described this species from Bantayan Island, Philippines in 1910.



Figure 1. A 4cm TL *O. griffinii* in Maranto Reef, Coral Bay, southern Philippines (March 2008).

In January 2009, the fish photograph was sent to Dr. Kent Carpenter of the Department of Biological Science of the Old Dominion University, Virginia, USA for identification. After about a month, Dr. Carpenter identified the fish as *Apogon griffini* (Seale, 1910), a rarely seen kind of cardinal fish called northern spiny dogfish. Seale described this species from Bantayan Island, Philippines in 1910. The genus of this species was renamed to *Ostorhinchus* (Fishbase 2014).

This cardinal fish is found only from the Philippines to Northern Borneo (Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei), which is a relatively limited range of distribution for a marine fish.

Ostorhinchus griffini is a fish native to Philippines. One alarming issue is that during the period of five-year underwater survey in Coral Bay, only one living individual of this fish species was recorded, found in a very restricted area of Coral Bay, indicating that the population of this fish species is at high risk in the area. The author again went with the same monitoring team to Coral Bay on March 23-28, 2014 and observed most probably the same solitary fish in the very same area at Maranto reef. Through fish visual estimate, the fish has grown three times its original length in 2008.

Although the CITES status of this fish has not yet been evaluated (FishBase 2014), this fish needs some degree of protection, especially in its local population. Its habitat is further threatened being only about 50 m distance from the shore, fronting a fishing village, open to human activities. Possible flush flood from Rio Tuba River and rampant dynamite fishing in the bay are other threats to the existence of this fish species.

Basing from its population status, area occupied, the extent where it occurs, and the threats it is facing, it is apparent that this species needs immediate protection in order to ensure its survival and prevent its loss in Coral Bay. Something has to be done to save this population, like protection of the Maranto Point coral reefs.

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