

Snorkeling & Scuba Diving For Shells Part 1: Night Snorkeling In The Grenadines - A Blessing

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From 2000 to 2002, I had the great opportunity to live in Martinique, a hot spot for cone shell collectors, although at the time when I arrived on the island, I was only interested in cowries! As only few species could be found locally, I switched my interest to the *Conidae* family, thus becoming a true cone shell collector (albeit one still interested in cowries).

Do you know when does one realize that one prefers cone shells to cowries? Easy: it is when, while snorkeling, one flips over a piece of dead coral and starts looking for what is lying on the sand beneath it first (cowries' hunters will surely look at the coral first). Naturally, after developing an interest in *Conidae*, you directly notice that most Caribbean species are endemic of often quite definite locations and you dream about St Vincent & Grenadines species...

In 2001, with some friends, we planned a sailing trip to Grenadines: 10 persons in whole, only 2 collectors. Of course it was not a shelling trip but I knew that every occasion to snorkel there would be great! I had in mind the strong desire of getting my hands on a specimen of *Conus cedonulli* Linnaeus, 1767 or *Conus dominicanus* Hwass, 1792 during the trip. We snorkeled and did some scuba diving during the daytime and mainly along the rocky shorelines, hence very far from the habitat of those species. I also tried the grass fields, but never found any specimens. Several washed ones were spotted on the beaches nearby, though.

One night, after dinner, while everybody was playing dominoes and having Rhum time, I decided to try some night snorkeling. The water was not all that warm and Leo (the other collector in the party – he has stopped collecting shells years ago) told me that I was wasting my time, since the shells I sought were too rare to be found by snorkeling. Then another member of the team decided to come with me, as it would be his first night swim! We decided to go for a tour around the sailing boat and entered the water with our small flashlights.





The sea bed was 6 to 8 meters deep, made out of coral debris. We started the usual searching dance: go down and have a quick look, back to the surface and down again...all this for roughly one hour. No cone shells were spotted. As we were tired and cold, we decided to get back to the boat, but I thought I would dive just one more time.

When I arrived on the bottom, the flashlight illuminated, a cone shell of rare beauty that was crawling on the sandy bottom! Incredible! I was ever so excited, the pleasure I felt was really unsurpassable! I kept searching around for about 30 more minutes but no other shells were exposed by my light that night.

We came back tired. Leo was still playing dominoes. He asked about our finds. I told him that he was right, impossible to find anything interesting...I made a short pause while he laughed and then I finished my sentence "anything interesting... except that!" Just imagine the surprised look on his face! I managed to keep the specimen in a plastic container and kept it alive for several months in my aquarium back in Martinique, where I found out that it fed on fire worm (*Hermodice carunculata*). This *Conus dominicanus* is simply amazing and half of its body shows an interesting bluish colour. You can see it in the accompanying photos.

Size of the specimen: 53.0 mm

(*) – All our readers will certainly enjoy David's site www.seashell-collector.com/articles from its home page the following specialized sections can be reached:

- Cones from Polynesia (2004)
- Cones from Martinique (2005)
- Cones from Seychelles (2005)