

# Out on the Grass Flats

*Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley*





The tide has gone out of the wide lagoon on the west side of Okinawa Prefecture's Tonaki Island; the water is warm and clear and only a little deeper than the width of my hand. I am stretched out flat on a place that resembles nothing so much as a scraggly, inundated lawn. This is far from the most comfortable way to make photographs, I can assure you. And given my unmoving horizontal posture and dark-colored wet suit—more for protection against the countless little marine things that defend themselves with a jab, a slash, a sting, or a bite than against any chill—I risk looking to a stroller on the beach like some bloated, balding, stranded sea lion.

However, I have no thoughts about the beach or what anyone on it might think of my semisubmerged, middle-aged physique. My concentration is aswim in the shallow universe before me. A few centimeters in front of my diving mask, two puffed-up and tubercle-studded starfish navigate over the blades of green sea grass, bulldozing them down as they glide slowly on their radial phalanxes of tube feet. They are unreal animals: clumsy, comical, even absurd, as though they have sprung fresh and alive from some animator's imagination. But to the little sessile creatures that they feed on, they are certainly nothing other than engines of destruction in very slow motion, horrible all-devouring juggernauts. The starfish themselves, of course, surely have no concept of this. All that's on their minds—if they indeed have any—is the lunch menu.

While at high tide a meter or more of water may cover it, at low tide this little world is a kilometer wide but just a few centimeters deep. The lagoon is bordered on its landward side by glaring white-floored shallows of coral sand and shell fragments; the seaward side drops off into deeper pools

and channels just inside the protective barrier of living limestone that keeps the swells of the East China Sea at bay. At first glance these shallows appear desolate: just sea grass and sand and sea grass, a coral patch or two, and then more sea grass. But on close and patient inspection, this underwater prairie is a teeming galaxy of animal life.

Tiny transparent shrimp skitter through the grass blades, past prickly sea urchins and an occasional hermit crab trundling along as if in search of something only half remembered. Brilliant green miniature wrasses hover in shoals, so perfectly camouflaged that they are visible only when they move. Red-and-brown mantis shrimp wait in ambush for prey unwary, their deadly sharp claws held close as if in prayer. Long, snakelike sea cucumbers ingest the sand, their food being the living algae and bacteria clinging to each grain, and void this "digested" sand in neat piles of fragile pellets. Curious gobies with staring goggle eyes approach me warily, coming close, flitting away for a moment, and then streaking back to settle a centimeter or two nearer than before. The starfish just find their way slowly through all this, apparently taking no note of anything other than what is directly underfoot and whether or not it is edible.

I finish the roll and stand. I must walk back to the beach to change film, and I feel I must take special care to watch for what little sea-things may come under either of my non-tubular, un-radial feet. Having been so close to all these creatures wild and free in their shallow universe indeed renews a respect for the complexity of life. JTI

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