

# Nemertina, proboscis worms

## Underwater Field Guide to Ross Island & McMurdo Sound, Antarctica

Peter Brueggeman

Photographs M Dale Stokes & Norbert Wu

### proboscis worm *Parborlasia corrugatus*



*Parborlasia corrugatus* is found throughout Antarctica and the Antarctic Peninsula, South Shetland Islands, South Orkney Islands, South Sandwich Islands, South Georgia Island, Bouvet Island, Kerguelen Island, Cargados Carajos Shoals in the Indian Ocean, Falkland Islands, Tierra del Fuego, southern Argentina, Peru, and Chile at depths from 0 to 3,590 meters [1,7]. *P. corrugatus* has a smooth flattened body with variable coloration (cream through reddish-, greenish-, or grayish-brown to dark brownish-black) [1]. *P. corrugatus* grows to lengths of one to two meters, a diameter of two centimeters, and weighs up to 100 grams..... an example of Antarctic gigantism [1,6].



*Parborlasia corrugatus* is a scavenger and a predator with a voracious appetite and will eat almost anything; its diet includes sponges (including *Homaxinella balfourensis*), jellyfish (shown here), diatoms, seastars, anemones, polychaete worms, molluscs (including Antarctic scallop *Adamussium colbecki*), crustaceans, and fish [1,2,5]. *P. corrugatus* joins in on the feeding frenzy when the small seastar *Odontaster validus* attacks en masse the large seastar *Acodontaster conspicuus* [3].



Feeding pile-ups of up to 22 *Parborlasia corrugatus* have been observed [4]. *P. corrugatus* can detect food at a distance with an efficient chemotactic sense and its large mouth and flexible body can engulf food almost as large as itself [1].

*P. corrugatus* lacks a respiratory system, absorbing oxygen through its skin [6]. Ordinarily, such a large animal would have difficulty getting sufficient oxygen through its skin, but its success is afforded by its low metabolic rate coupled with the high oxygen level of the cold Antarctic waters [6]. If the oxygen level drops in the water, *P. corrugatus*

becomes more flattened and elongated; this facilitates oxygen uptake by increasing its skin area and also minimizes the distance that oxygen must diffuse into its body [6].



Here *Parborlasia corrugatus* worms are eating fish eggs. *P. corrugatus* has a one-way gut with a large mouth and a closed circulatory system; nemertean worms are the simplest animals with a circulatory system. Like other proboscis or nemertean worms, the wedge-shaped head of *P. corrugatus* has a fluid-filled cavity used to rapidly shoot a barbed proboscis which the worm uses to capture prey and defend itself [1]. This harpoon-like proboscis has adhesive secretions which secure prey. *P. corrugatus* is chemically defended by an acidic mucus (pH 3.5) which potential predators avoid [4].

**Taxonomic Note:** Earlier genus was *Lineus*.

**References:** **1:** Biology of the Antarctic Seas XIV, Antarctic Research Series 39(4):289-316, 1983; **2:** Science 245:1484-1486, 1989; **3:** Ecological Monographs 44(1):105-128, 1974; **4:** Journal of Experimental Marine Biology and Ecology 153(1):15-25, 1991; **5:** Antarctic Science 10(4):369-375, 1998; **6:** Polar Biology 25(3):238-240, 2002; **7:** Polar Biology 29(2):106-113, 2006

Text ©Peter Brueggeman. Photographs ©M Dale Stokes & Norbert Wu. Photographs may not be used in any form without the express written permission of the photographers. Norbert Wu no longer grants permission for uncompensated use of his photos under any circumstances whatsoever; see [www.norbertwu.com/FAQ.html](http://www.norbertwu.com/FAQ.html)