

Nelson Bay

Featured Dive

Category: Shore dives

Depth: Various, shallow (snorkel) to 18 m

Rating: Easy (provided you stick to the high tide)

Access: Parking nearby on shoreboats

Special equipment: None, but a camera is highly recommended.

John Turnbull

President, National Parks Association of NSW

Nelson Bay is alongside the Port Stephens / Great Lakes Marine Park. The Park spans from Forster down to the northern end of Stockton Beach, covering an area of 98,000 hectares. It has been in place for ten years and is home to dolphins, turtles, seabirds and a wide diversity of fish and invertebrate species.

The Nelson Bay area is considered to be a biodiversity hotspot, particularly for invertebrates. There are four main dives you can do from shore in Nelson Bay, and all have the same caveat – only attempt them on the turn of the high tide. At other times the currents run strongly and can be dangerous, as well as reducing visibility. Entering 20 minutes before the turn will give you a good 1.5 hours underwater before the speed of the outgoing tide signals time to exit.

My favourite dive is Fly Point. You can access this site from a good set of steps running down from the small headland carpark on Victoria Pde. Once underwater, head north and west, exploring small ledges in 7 and 12 metres. Watch out for turtles, maori cod and big schools of bream, pike and luderick. But most of all, keep your eyes on the benthos as there are a myriad of tiny nudibranchs to be found here. Some species favour a particular sponge or soft coral, so take the time to search these – you'll be surprised at what you will find!

Pipeline is another great place to find nudibranchs. There is a small track heading west from the Fish

Co-op at the end of Teramby Rd; follow this to a set of rough steps into the water. This is a shallow dive, and best results come from not straying too far. Look closely at the benthic life; algae, soft corals, sponges; as you will find a range of invertebrates living among these, including octopus. As you head north and west, you will encounter the encrusted pipeline which gives this site its name; once the current picks up return to the shallows and exit.

Two other sites are Little Beach and Halifax. The former is a good night dive, accessed from the little jetty at the west end of the beach. Once in the water, follow the shoreline northwest, exploring a range of depths. Halifax is accessed from the north end of Little Beach.

Whilst in Nelson Bay, you can also do several great dives at Broughton Island via boat. These include some of the best grey nurse shark diving you are likely to encounter in NSW, and they warrant their own article – perhaps in a future journal!

With its great dive sites, abundance of marine life and high diversity, Port Stephens Great Lakes Marine Park strikes a successful balance between recreational values and marine conservation. Wherever you may live in NSW, Nelson Bay is a great place to visit with your dive gear. In a few days you can do several day and night dives on the high tides, get a boat out to Broughton, and fill in the time between in the many cafes, or sun yourself on the sheltered beaches.



Moray eel *Gymnothorax prasinus*
Photo: John Turnbull



Diver near Broughton Island
Photo: John Turnbull



Grey Nurse Shark *Carcharias taurus*
Photo: John Turnbull