

## ENCOUNTERS

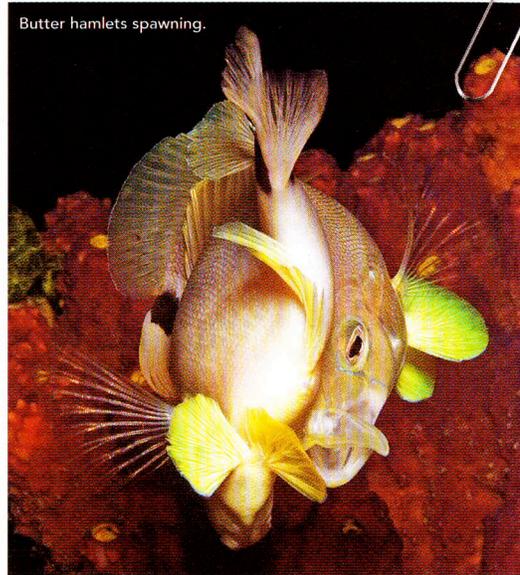
**Hermaphroditic, egg-swapping hamlets prove there's more than one way to reproduce on the reef.**

If you're searching for sex on the reef, there's no better time to be underwater than dusk. Unfortunately, the late afternoon courtship rituals of many fish species are quite discreet, and the actual paired spawning rises are lightning-fast, ending high in the water column where invisible clouds of gametes are released. But the

courtship and spawning behavior of the stately little western Atlantic sea basses from the genus *Hypoplectrus*, commonly known as hamlets, is everything an underwater voyeur could hope for.

Hamlets live exclusively in the tropical waters of the western Atlantic. The little carnivores display one of the most entertaining spawning behaviors on the reef, and have one of the most fascinating reproductive strategies in the animal kingdom. Hamlets have both functioning ovaries and testes. These simultaneous hermaphrodites, as they are known, pull off their odd lifestyle by egg trading. Unlike most pelagic spawning females, which discharge their entire load of energy-expensive eggs in a single event, egg traders parcel out their cargo a little at a time. This behavior ensures that their partner will reciprocate by releasing eggs which they, in turn, fertilize with energy-cheap sperm.

About an hour before sunset, the normally solitary hamlet leaves its private feeding territory for a nightly rendezvous with a customary mate at a traditional



Butter hamlets spawning.

spawning site. If you want to watch the nightly peep show, look for a courting pair flitting about close together above a high coral head or gorgonian. Once discovered, the same pair can usually be found at the same place each evening displaying fins, twitching and chasing each other.

Spawning commences just as night shadows begin to creep over the reef. The partner taking the female role always acts as the aggressor, while the interim male blanches appreciably. Faster than a blink, the palm-sized lovers join together like clasping hands in what appears to be unbridled passion. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, and the fish pop apart. The onetime male regains his colors and immediately pursues his partner. Minutes later, the giddy pair once again rise off the bottom and reclasp for a second time. This pattern usually continues through four to six spawns; but I once witnessed a robust pair trade eggs 20 times before parting for the night. —NED AND ANNA DELOACH WITH PAUL HUMANN