

# A Voyage into Inner Space

Marine Biologist ANDREW STEWART talks with DAVE HANSFORD about deep-water discoveries north of New Zealand.

Scientists aboard the research vessel *Tangaroa* got their first tantalising glimpse of life on the seamounts and underwater abyssal plain to the north of New Zealand, earlier this year. The deep gave up some secrets, but kept many more. As biologist Andrew Stewart recalls: 'We came away knowing how little we know.'

Andrew Stewart shows me one of the discoveries. It's a vision from a watery hell. Little more than a mouth full of murderous fangs and a way of aiming it, but he cradles it gently, teasing out the black gelatinous features with a practised eye for detail.

He's excited. He thinks he could be on to a new species of deep-sea anglerfish here, but the trouble is, his lab is chock-full of new species and he only has one lifetime to try and identify them all.

All about, stainless benchtops groan under ranks of specimen jars. Peering back through the alcohol are some of evolution's most fantastic expressions. Even without the crazy-mirror distortion of the glass these are bizarre animals, confirmed by the pejorative names on the labels floating inside; spookfishes, snaggletooths, gulpers, slickheads, rattails.

This — plus a freezer full of bigger corpses — is some of the bounty

*Transparent squid, a deep-water species, photographed by Peter Batson whose book Deep New Zealand is previewed on pages 32-33.*

reaped by the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) vessel *Tangaroa* as it towed nets and dredges about the deep in New Zealand's northern waters in May-June.

Supported by Australia's National Oceans Office and the New Zealand Ministry of Fisheries, the NORFANZ expedition took a first, albeit sketchy, look under the waters of a triangle between Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands and the northwestern tip of New Zealand.

They began with the Norfolk Ridge, a spine of submarine scarps and volcanoes stretching between Cape Reinga and New Caledonia. While the scientists aboard had never been there, they had seen the results of earlier French projects to the north which had discovered a wealth of oddities, some of which were relics presumed to have gone extinct tens of millions of years ago.

Andrew Stewart, the fishes collections manager at Te Papa, was looking for answers.

'If you look at charts of the region, you see a series of seamounts running down the Norfolk Ridge,' he says. 'We know that during

PETER BATSON