

South West Ramblings 23

with Mark Webster

This will be my first ramble of 2017/8 as a number of other life priorities have impinged on my diving this year. Despite fewer dives I have still managed to collect some pleasing images and as the next issue of UWP is number 100 I thought it was a good prompt to review the events of the year.

If you have followed any of my previous ramblings you will know that I have a bit of a penchant, possibly and obsession, for UK nudibranchs. I always look forward to the first few months of the year when the breeding season commences and these little critters begin to appear in abundance. Often we are seeing the same species each year, but I am always hopeful of finding something unusual and if you look hard enough then usually at least one instance will occur. Finding a rare species is of course the pinnacle, and I was lucky with one this year, but the other approach can be simply to explore different habitats to create an unusual or striking image. So to begin with I will recount the tale of three locations and the nudibranch encounters at each!

One of my favourite dive sites in Falmouth are the maerl beds in the Fal estuary. Maerl is a calcified seaweed which looks a little like pink coral nodules and we are fortunate to have large healthy beds of maerl, particularly on the east side of the river under St. Mawes castle. The maerl and the tidal estuary provides a very nutrient rich environment for a wide range of species and a dive here is rarely a



Sea lemon nudibranch (Archidoris pseudoargus) is perhaps the most common species found on the maerl beds and is not a particularly attractive species. It often has very good colour match to the maerl or food source and so is a challenge to photograph well. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f13 1/25.

disappointment especially with a macro lens.

The most common nudibranchs here are the sea lemons, in a variety of colours and camouflaged patterns, which feed mostly on the top of the maerl and so are relatively easy to find. However, they are not exactly a pretty species and it is hard work producing an image which does anything but illustrate the species and habitat.

There are many other small nudibranch species here, but they are often hidden in the maerl feeding and so you have to spend quite some time in a small area searching and waiting for signs of movement. When you have success and your target climbs out over the maerl to feed in a new area you often have an excellent contrast between a pretty and delicate nudibranch and the deep pink colour of the maerl.



Nudibranch Facelina annlicornis is a spectacular looking nudibranch but not often seen as it spends much of the time within the maerl feeding. The fine white markings looks like it has been spattered radomly with paint! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f22 1/100.

So with some patience the first pleasing find of the season was a very striking example of Facelina annlicornis which I have only seen two or three times before and always in a reef environment. This one emerged slowly from the maerl and appeared to be “sniffing” the current by raising its head in search of the next meal. The current here can be very strong, but a little is a benefit as it will take away any disturbed estuarine silt, so it is best to time

your dives for just before or just after high or low water slack. The nudibranch moved perhaps 30cm over the maerl at a reasonable pace (for a nudibranch) which gave me time to shoot a variety of angles and wait for the silt to clear that I kicked up with each move. It then disappeared back into the maerl making me realise why these critters are not often seen here and that you will only get lucky if you have enough patience.

Later in the year I was exploring



Nudibranch Facelina bostoniensis feeding on a blade of eel grass in the Helford river. These nudibranchs are very small and need patient search to find them. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f29 1/200.

search would turn up some interesting subjects.

The estuary is inevitably quite silty and this tends to settle on the eel grass and is easily disturbed. So my usual method is to stick to the edge of the beds and try to resist the temptation of getting amongst the grass as this not only disturbs the visibility but also damages the habitat.

The nudibranchs here lay their eggs and feed on the blades of grass, so the first thing to look for are egg spirals and once found that narrows your initial search area. Next step is to examine the grass blades in the immediate vicinity and look carefully on the undersides in particular. If the UWP gods are smiling on you will eventually find some subjects and begin to look for angles to capture some images.

When working with a big housing and a macro port it is easy to get too close and disturb the silt on adjacent grass which will then take time to clear in the gentle current, so I like to use my venerable Inon quad

in another nearby estuary of the Helford river which boasts some very healthy eel grass beds.

The winter of 2016/17 was relatively mild in Cornwall, so the usual die back of the eel grass was limited and the vibrant spring growth has led to the area of the eel grass beds to expand significantly beyond the “no anchoring” area marked by a string of buoys at Durgan. But more eel grass equals more habitat of course and so I was hopeful that my



Nudibranch Eubranchius farrani feeding on a blade of eel grass in the Helford river. This orange/yellow colour is less common than the white variety. This subject looks like it is re-growing cerata perhaps after an attack from a predator. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f22 1/30.

flash here which allows me to work a little closer than with a pair of flash guns.

This year I found many of the usual suspects and a couple of less common species at this location, a *Facelina bostoniensis* (I think!) which was slowly spiralling around a blade of grass, and a *Eubranchius farrani* in an unusual orange hue. As your subject is elevated from the seabed on the eel grass you may also be able

to get a low enough angle to collect some natural light behind the subject. Bumping up the ISO for these shots will also help.

The third significant nudibranch encounter occurred at Porthkerris on the Lizard, which is a favourite beach dive location for me.

The dive here is a classic reef system where you can quickly reach a reasonable depth of 18m and more at high water and there are several



Nudibranch Hypselodoris valenciennesi is extremely rare in the UK and would more likely be seen in the Mediterranean or on the Atlantic coast of Portugal and Spain. This example seemed to be all on its own, so hopefully will find another to mate with before Spring! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f22 1/30.

small walls which are exposed to the tide and support a variety of healthy colonies of hydroids which are a favourite nudibranch snack. So this is a good hunting ground especially in the spring time when you can see lots of mating activity.

The nudibranch season here continues all through the summer and into autumn with different species and if the summer is warm then there is often the chance of seeing

something rare. On a dive here in late October I thought I had done well in finding a *Doto fragilis* feeding in the open on red seaweed as they are normally buried at the base of feather hydroids where they can be awkward to photograph. As I began my return something colourful caught my eye on the wall which at first glance I thought was a strangely coloured jewel anemone. I almost ignored it, but on closer inspection was amazed to find



Opisthobranchs Colpoldaspis pusilla were another species seen frequently in 2017 at Porthkerris and are easily missed due to their very small size. Normally seen singly there is possibly three in this image. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f29 1/250.

a stunning nudibranch *Hypselodoris valenciennesi* (well I think it is!) in a deep purple colour with yellow stripes and spots.

This nudibranch would look at home in Bali or Lembbeh, but in fact is a Mediterranean species that can be found on the Atlantic coasts of Portugal, Spain and as far north as the French coast.

From what I have gleaned in my research it is rarely seen on the UK coast so I felt extremely lucky to have spotted it. It was slow moving over a small area of reef nibbling on hydroids so I had plenty of time to shoot a large number of frames and it was only the needle falling on my pressure gauge that brought the encounter to an end. I looked hard for another in the same area, but this seems to be a solo example, so who knows what will happen when the breeding season starts during the winter



Nudibranch Doto fragilis is usually seen feeding on feather hydroids which can make it an awkward species to photograph well. Finding one out in the open feeding on seaweed is unusual and an opportunity not to be missed. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f29 1/250.

months.

As I was getting ready to head back to shore I had a feeling I was being watched, turned my head and just a few inches away sat a small octopus watching intently, perhaps it had been there all the time! Even though I had a 105mm macro lens I had to take a few shots of this very co-operative subject before heading back now doubly pleased with the dive.

I have not seen many common octopus in the south west, but those I have seen have been at Porthkerris. There have been sightings reported all around Falmouth bay this year, so they seem to be making a comeback locally. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f18 1/40.





Local divers have been reporting increased sightings of octopus, so it seems they are making a comeback at a number of dive sites and are generally very inquisitive and willing to pose. The other species not seen with any regularity since the late 1970's is the crawfish and these are also being seen in increasing numbers. Most are small, but occasionally larger examples are seen, so this is a very good sign but we have to hope that the fishing industry does not decimate the population again. So



European crawfish are making a comeback in the south west having been fished out in the late 1970's. So far of those seen most are quite small and we hope that the fishing industry will let them establish and thrive this time. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/40.

Compass jellyfish were the dominant species in 2017 and very few of the usual much larger Rhizostoma were in evidence. Shallow water and a fish eye lens will produce a Snell's window to frame your subject. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/250.

if you dive in the south west you may encounter one or more, but don't tell the fishermen!

I have also noticed that there seemed to be many more of the false cowries (*Simnia patula*) on both soft corals (dead men's fingers) and on gorgonia fan corals. Although I would expect to see several during a season there seemed to be dozens around this year and on one dive site there were one or more on almost every soft coral cluster I looked at, often in pairs. The remaining encounters



*False cowrie *Simnia patula* on a gorgonia fan corals have been seen in large numbers this year. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f25 1/250.*

of the year were pretty much what you would expect in terms of species. There were a lot of compass jellyfish to be seen until quite late in the year, but very few *Rhizostoma* which have been in abundance in the previous two years. No doubt these changes will be reversed next season and another species will appear to be abundant.

So now autumn has arrived and although the weather is quite mellow at the moment it will not be long before the first of the winters gales sidelines any thoughts of diving. But at least we have Blue Planet 2 now on the BBC to enthuse and inspire us to greater imaging achievements!

Mark Webster