

Addictive Frog Fish

by Mark Webster

It has become very fashionable to admit your addictions these days. In fact society has become so tolerant of our self inflicted failings that you can get treatment for almost any addiction ranging from sex to soap dramas, drugs and alcohol and, what's more, much of this curative treatment may be free on the health service. In this politically correct world it seems that it must never be the patient's fault. So, in the hope of receiving the same level of understanding, and perhaps some much needed treatment, I thought I should be amongst the first underwater photographers to declare my own addiction, which I am sure is not unique to me alone. It is difficult to admit it, but I seem to have become addicted to frog fish! Now that it is out in the open perhaps I will be contacted by a number of frog fish support groups, but until then maybe I should try and explain what is so alluring about these critters to help others recognise the symptoms and avoid the same fate!

I saw my first frog fish quite by chance some twenty six years ago whilst diving in Eilat. I had no idea what it was and this was also before underwater photography had consumed me, however, I felt instinctively the need to identify this strange fish and more worryingly the desire to search for more. Once photography had gripped me this urge to search for frog fish became irresistible each time I



Longlure frog fish - The new elevated position of this medium sized (15cm) frog fish offered the opportunity of including the surrounding reef and adding a classic diver pose in the background. Carrying two systems, one in this case with an 18-35mm zoom, opens up your imaging possibilities.

Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom @ 18mm, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60th.

visited tropical waters and now every dive is tinged with this need. The quest of course is never ending as there are so many variations within the species and I know that my collection is paltry compared to

that of other photographers and this of course is what drives me on!

There are between 12-15 genera of frog fish which include more than 40 different species, and identifying them all is



Longlure frog fish- Frog fish are so confident of their camouflage that they will just ignore you and continue to fish for prey. This example in Bonaire was on the side of a coral head which allowed me to get a low angle and include blue water behind the lure or esca. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/15th.



Ocellated frog fish - It is unusual to find a frog fish sitting on live coral, presumably due to the mucus or stinging cells in the polyps. This small (4cm) example in Bonaire obviously has the feet for it as he had been sitting in the same position for several weeks apparently. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/125th.

further complicated by the individual variations of colour, pattern and shape that each fish adopts to suit its immediate environment. Fish of the same species can appear with totally different colouration, texture and pattern and they have been observed to change their colour in a matter of minutes or hours when they move location. They are able to perfectly match their surroundings, which might be sponge, coral, rocks and seabed debris or mixture of one or more.

This camouflage technique is not for protection from predators but is to conceal the frog fish from its potential prey, a technique that marine biologists have labelled aggressive mimicry. It seems that the only reliable way to identify the individual species is by the shape of the lure (or

esca) that the fish uses to entice prey to within striking distance. These may take the form of a small fish, shrimps, worms or planktonic juveniles and if the lure gets damaged or eaten by another fish they are able to regenerate it and continue fishing. There is also a deep sea species of frog fish which possesses a luminous lure to attract its prey in the dark. This level of classification is mostly beyond me and I am more than satisfied with just finding one of these beasts! I have done my best to identify the species which accompany this article but would happily be corrected by anyone with superior knowledge.

Once the preferred prey has been encouraged to approach the killing zone the frog fish is able to strike at amazing speed, as little as 5-10



Striated frog fish - The really unusual species of frog fish are quite common in the Lembah Straits. I asked my guide if he knew where to find a striated frog fish and the reply was “no problem, long hair or short hair?”. This is the short haired variety with its lure extended to attract unsuspecting prey. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 60mm micro, YS50 and YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th.



Wartskin frog fish - Some frog fish are tiny and therefore much more difficult to spot. This one is only 4cm long and the dark colour made the task even more difficult against the black volcanic sands of the Lembah Straits. In fact this example is right next to the tail of the yellow/green wartskin frog fish in the previous picture, and it was not until my second visit that I saw him after the guide had explained that there were actually two together! Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 60mm micro, YS50 and YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th.

thousandths of a second. It does this by extending its mouth and creating a negative pressure inside the oral cavity which literally sucks the prey into the frog fish's stomach. In this way they are able to snatch a fish from a shoal without the other fish noticing and are easily able to consume prey as large as themselves. If you watch a frog fish for long enough you may be lucky enough to observe a yawn or stretch of the mouth in relatively slow motion which might give you the opportunity to

Painted frog fish - It is unusual to find a frog fish so exposed on the top of a reef, yet he was obviously convinced that he looked like a sponge growth. I found this example in shallow water in the Similan Islands, in Thailand, where frog fish were quite difficult to find until I stumbled across this one. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 20mm, YS120 and YS30, Elitechrome, f11 @ 1/60th.



Wartskin frog fish - The Lembeh Straits in North Sulawesi, Indonesia is frog fish heaven for the addict. They are considered common and most of the guides want to concentrate on showing you more unusual species! There are many different species and variations here and between the frog fish are a host of other amazing subjects. . Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 60mm micro, YS50 and YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th.



capture it on film. There are some marine biologists that suggest this may be a sign of distress or threat, however each time I have observed it the fish has continued to ignore me and continued to use its lure to attract prey. This would suggest to me that they perceive these clumsy reef visitors as neither a threat or competitor and we are regarded with disdain.

Frog fish generally remain in a small area on the reef, so once found you should be able to return and find the same fish again. That is the theory of

course. They do move short distances, but are very poor swimmers, preferring to walk or skip along on their hand like pectoral fins. For longer distances they employ a form of jet propulsion by swallowing water and ejecting it out of the siphon like gills hidden behind their pectoral fins, a little like an octopus or cuttle fish. Having moved they will then adopt the necessary camouflage changes required for their new environment. That of course is the problem for the photographer addict who could be within

inches of the fish but still cannot find it!

Frog fish are found throughout the tropical and sub-tropical seas, but are more common in some areas. In the Red Sea I have only ever found them reliably in the north, particularly around Eilat. They are seen elsewhere but I have yet to spot one south of Ras Mohammed. In areas like Malaysia and Indonesia, particularly the Lembeh Straits, they are considered common and so the addict could be in danger of overdosing! The Caribbean



Giant frog fish - This shot is taken on a dive site called the Pinnacle just north of Taba on the Israeli/Egyptian border. These large frog fish seem to be quite common in this area and on the other side of the gulf around Aquaba. Nikon F3, Hugyfot housing, 55mm micro, YS50, Agfachrome 50, f8 @ 1/60th.

salve for this disease which will include extended periods of submersion in soothing tropical waters being slowly fed these weird denizens, in the vain hope that you will be weaned off your habit!

Mark Webster



hosts several species and there are frog fish 'hot spots' like Bonaire, St. Vincent and Dominica. In fact species like the 'hairy' version of the striated frog fish, which you might expect to encounter in the Far East, are now being found regularly in the Caribbean (most notably by our editor on a recent trip to Dominica).

Although it is difficult to differentiate between male and female frog fish they do come together regularly to mate. Methods vary between species

and some merely consign their offspring to the planktonic soup, whilst others (generally the male) either guard their clutch or actually carry them attached to their pectoral fins until they hatch.

Is there a suitable treatment for this affliction? Now that the NHS is offering treatment for such a variety of self inflicted addictions I am hoping that they will recognise the plight of underwater photographers and the irresistible attraction of frog fish. Of course there is only one

Mark Webster is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' (published by Fountain Press) and Diving and Snorkeling Belize (Lonely Planet) and hosts regular workshops both overseas and in the UK. For further details visit Mark's website at www.photec.co.uk

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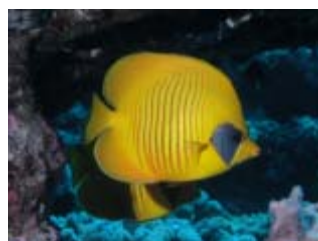
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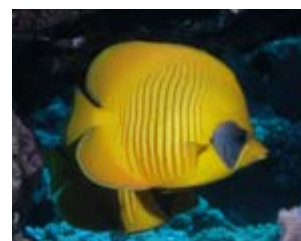
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