

Loch Creran

by Alasdair O'Dell

Loch Creran sits on the west coast of Scotland and at around 12.8 km in length it is not considered a large loch. What it lacks in size however, Loch Creran makes up for in character.

Approaching the Creagan narrows in the North-East of the loch the dramatic silhouette of Beinn Sgulaire creates a breath-taking backdrop, highlighting the outstanding natural beauty of the area. On a calm autumnal night, stags can be heard rutting on the nearby hills and the fortunate adventurer might stumble across pine martins, red squirrels, otters, and eagles in the area. Topside beauty is all very well, and Munroe baggers and nature enthusiasts will be entirely satisfied with a visit to the local hills.

But it is beneath the chilly waters of Loch Creran where the real magic happens! A mere 12,000 years ago the loch was covered in glacial ice which, when it melted left several sills and two main basins. The larger basin sits to the West of Creagan Bridge and connects to the Firth of Lorn by the Isle of Eriska. The smaller, more diver friendly basin has a maximum depth of 37 m and is somewhat protected from currents and eddies by a narrow sill at the Creagan Bridge some 400 m wide.

On the south shore of the upper basin sits perhaps the most frequently visited dive site on the West Coast of Scotland, Queenie Reef. A classic club dive often visited on training days with easy access and a variety of interesting critters and rocky outcrops to explore. The more adventurous diver



might be more interested in the Creagan Narrows. Here, the tidal flow provides an exciting drift dive through coral encrusted rocks and thick kelp forests.

The road around Loch Creran used to be the main route to the North. Since the bridge was built it is now a quiet scenic route which is generally taken by sightseers and adventurers looking for a scenic spot to relax or camp. There are several lay-bys which provide easy access to the loch and each of them offers a somewhat unique diving opportunity.

It is in fact the underwater creatures that have led to Loch Creran's status as a Marine Protected Area (MPA). Designated by the Scottish

***Polycera quadrilineata* - size 1-2 cm. Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II, Olympus housing, 30 mm macro, INON S2000 strobe**



government, the protected area is home to flame-shell beds which are a priority marine feature and occur in the deeper basin. The loch is also home to Serpulid worms which is a type of reef building marine tubeworm with a bright feathery brush like head at the top. Both flame shells and Serpulid worms are very rare and considered very valuable in their ability to enhance biodiversity in the area.

Nudibranchs are not yet prioritised, in-fact many species are listed with 'insufficient data' due to the difficulties in finding, quantifying and establishing their importance ecologically. They are however, very colourful, charismatic and incredibly beautiful creatures (for a slug I mean).

Many Scottish nudibranchs are quite rare and known to only a handful of enthusiastic divers brave enough to venture into the cold waters of Scottish lochs. It is because of this that they don't really have common names and they are generally referred to with their Latin names.

Some species are also very similar looking and often confused with one another. Such as *Fjordia lineata*, *Facelina bostoniensis* and *Fjordia browni*. which, are very similar in shape, colour and often when in their juvenile stages look really similar.

There are also a few species



Carronella pellucida - size 2-3 cm.
Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II,
Olympus housing, 30 mm macro,
INON S2000 strobe. 1/250, F/22, ISO
250

which have many different morphotypes (body shapes) such as *Polycera quadrilineata*. It is only through recent genetic research, that scientists discovered *Polycera quadrilineata* had a second species (known only in Norway at the moment) called *Polycera norvegica*.

Nudibranchs are perhaps the most cooperative marine organism, moving slowly enough that even the most equipment laden, ungainly



Facelina bostoniensis (juvenile) - size less than 1 cm.
Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II, Olympus housing, 30 mm macro, INON S2000
strobe. 1/250, F/8.0, ISO 400

underwater photographer can keep pace with them. It is easy however, to overlook a creature that is sometimes no bigger than a grain of rice and camouflaged perfectly to suit its surroundings. Nudibranchs remain an underwater photographer's favourite mainly because they don't run away at the site of a camera.

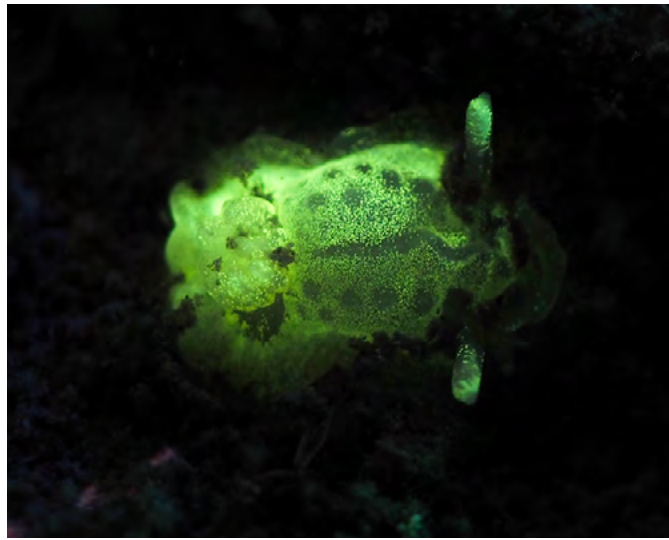
As with most sea-lochs in Scotland nudibranchs are common in Loch Creran, but it takes a keen eye

to find them and maybe a little bit of insider knowledge. In fact, with the right camera and a wee bit of patience, Loch Creran might be able to compete with the Lembeh Straights, Anilao and the Raja Ampat's on top of the nudibranch leader-board!

While none of these nudibranchs are unique to Loch Creran, they were all photographed there during my many days of procrastination whilst studying. The first challenge,



Goniodoris nodosa, size - 1-2 cm. Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II, Olympus housing, 30 mm macro, INON S2000 strobe. 1/250, F/8.0, ISO 400



Goniodoris nodosa, size - 1-2 cm fluorescent! Ikelite dichroic excitation filter on a spotlight with a Smardy yellow filter on the lens



Doto coronata, size - 6-9 mm. Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II, Olympus housing, 30 mm macro, INON S2000 strobe. 1/250, F/8.0, ISO 400

however, is to try and find a nudibranch.

Some UK species are cryptic (they camouflage really well into their surroundings), others hide really well under algal fronds and out of sight and some are just downright tiny! The trick in Scotland is usually to find the thing that they like to eat.

Most nudibranch in Scotland will eat encrusting organisms that grow on kelp (known as epiphytes). For example, sea-mats (such as *Electra pilosa*) that form on kelp blades towards the end of summer, various hydroids (or sea-firs) that also grow on the blades of kelp as well as tiny sea-snails (tubeworms or *Spirobis spirobis*) are common foods of nudibranch.

Nudibranchs are often quite picky and specialist feeders, so if you see a species on a certain type of hydroid, look for it again if you see the same hydroid later in the dive or on a different

dive in another loch.

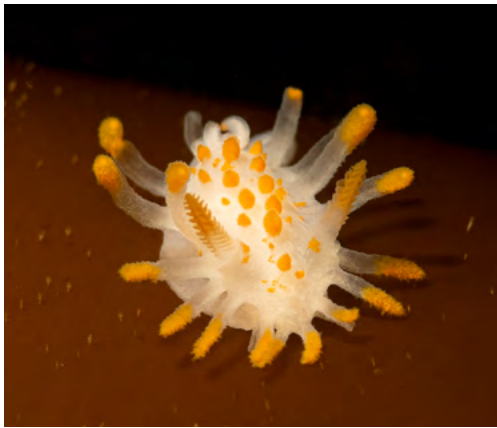
Nudibranchs also tend to have a preference for habitat, and some species are rarely found on kelp. For example, one very interesting species called *Goniodoris nodosa* (which is fluorescent under blue light by the way) is more often found on rocky parts because the type of hydroid it likes to eat lives there (*Alcyonidium* sp..).

Other species can be found in more energetic areas, such as the brightly coloured *Carronea pellucida* that is usually in more tidal areas with a bit of current because the hydroids *Eudendrium arbuscula* live there.

There are limited studies that show the full life history of nudibranchs in Scotland. Some species live for just two years (biennial) while others live for multiple years (perennial) and breed several times during their lives. It does appear that their

occurrence has been linked with the occurrence of food types, and in Loch Creran we have noticed from personal experience that *Facelina bostoniensis* is present in large numbers towards the end of summer and into autumn (August - October). While some species can be found all year round like *Goniodoris nodosa* it is always worth looking for nudibranchs though, you never know what you will find!

There are hundreds of nudibranchs to be found in Scotland, and Loch Creran is just an example of the diverse shapes, sizes and colours of these tiny, special little animals. Below are a few of my top-tips for photographing nudi's. But always remember Loch Creran is a protected area and the priority must be that you don't harm or alter the environment you are in. So, take only photos and leave only bubbles!



Limacia clavigera - size 1-2 cm.
Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II,
Olympus housing, 30 mm macro,
INON S2000 strobe. 1/250, F/22, ISO
250

Top tips

Get low, get close, shoot up, is a bit of a cliché now but it still works!

Make sure you get my best side! Nudibranchs often look best if you're shooting either directly head on, or at a 45-degree angle but from their level.

In Scotland, light is often lost when visibility is low even in very shallow water. You can take advantage of this and up your F-stop giving you a black background effect and it looks like the photo was taken at night.

I use an INON S2000 strobe and usually have it set to a consistent brightness, then I adjust the settings on my camera to get the exposure I'm happy with. This is mainly because the switch on the strobe is small and

fiddly and with big thick gloves on it can be a bit awkward to turn!

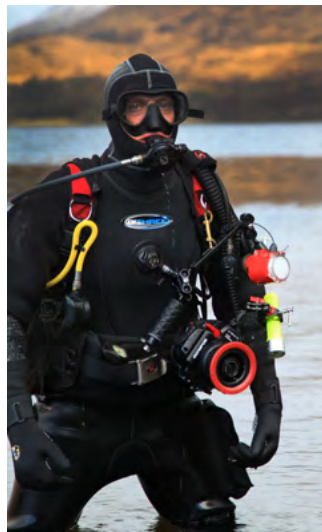
Rhinophores are the pointy antennae thingys at the front, make sure you get them in focus! Most nudibranchs also have an eye spot which is a very primitive light sensing organ usually just below the rhinophores, if you can get that in your photo, it looks very cool as well.

Lens choice is important, I shoot with an Olympus OMD EM-5 mark II and my go-to lens for nudibranchs is a 30 mm macro lens.

Alasdair O'Dell

Alasdair O'Dell is a SCUBA instructor from the UK writing a PhD on the potential for macroalgae (kelp) to contribute to Blue Carbon Storage in Oban, Scotland.

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