Snoot techniques

by Dan Bolt

Since you are being treated to Phil Rudin's superb Marelux SOFT review in this edition of UWPMag I will not try to cover the same ground – I agree whole-heartedly with Phil's opinion that this is a superbly built and very useful tool that will enhance almost everyone's underwater photography. In short… I'll be sad to send mine back.

So for a slightly different perspective, Peter (UWPMag editor) asked me to write a bit about snoot usage in general. To explore a few ways that snoots can be used beyond the 'brightly-lit subject in a pool of black' style that is all too easy to fall into.

Hide the background

My most favoured snooting technique it to use the tightness of the light-beam to help isolate a subject from a busy or uninteresting background. This can really rescue a shot that otherwise wouldn't work, or wouldn't do justice to the subject.

The nudibranch in photo 1 was crawling amongst a lot of dull weeds that were really not working well as a background. Even shooting wide-open to give some subject separation wasn't really cutting it, but using the snoot to light just the leading edge of the slug and the frond of kelp it was on meant that I could completely eliminate the unwanted background.

It's a similar story with photo 2; the beautiful peacock worm was not easily separated from the weed and rocks just behind it, and you can't get

Photo 1
This nudibranch in photo 2 was crawling amongst a lot of dull weeds that were really not working well as a background. Even shooting wide-open to give some subject separation wasn't really cutting it, but using the snoot to light just the leading edge of the slug and the frond of kelp it was on meant that I could completely eliminate the unwanted background. Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 14-42mm @ 30mm, f/16, iso320, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

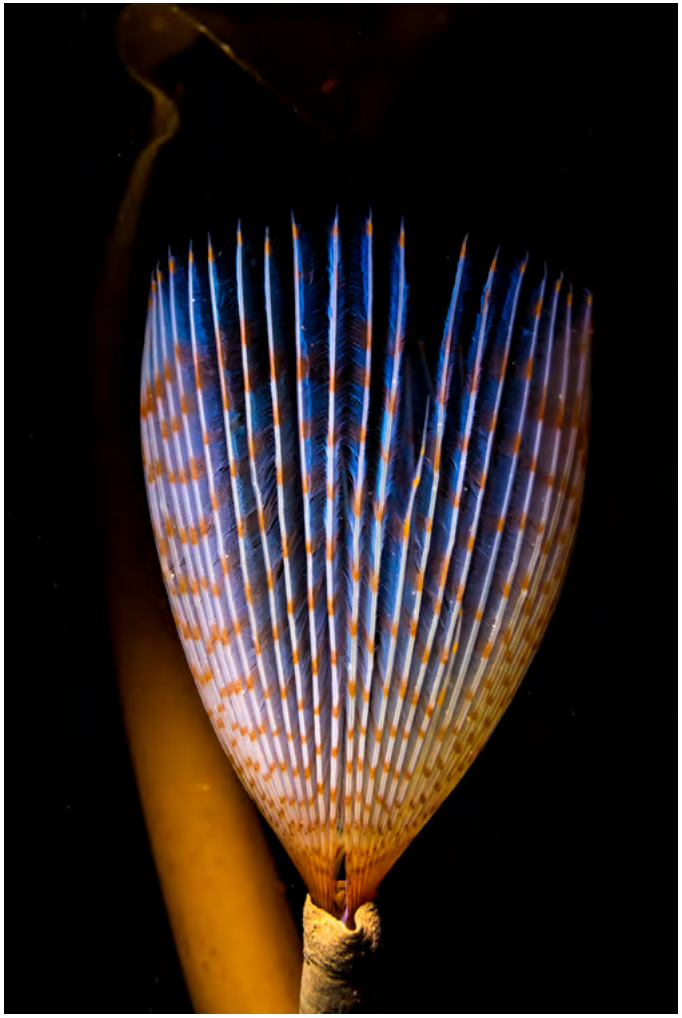

Photo 2
This beautiful peacock worm was not easily separated from the weed and rocks just behind it, and you can't get very close to these things so inward lighting wasn't an option… so the snoot made the image possible. Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 14-42mm @ 30mm, f/11, iso400, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

Photo 3
I started shooting this lobster with two strobes and I wasn't getting anything special. I decided to flip down my snoot, turn off one strobe, rotate the camera and get closer for a close-up portrait. What a difference the snoot made: the sense of engagement and intimacy in this image is very powerful. Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 60mm macro, f/9, iso500, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

Photo 4
It was hard to really get a feel for the menacing stance and spiny carapace of this tiny critter with two strobes – so down came the snoot and using just the one light-source meant I could bring a sense of something more to the scene with strong highlights and deep shadows.
Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 60mm macro, f/16, iso400, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

very close to these things so inward lighting wasn't an option… so the snoot made the image possible.

Strong directional light

This is an extension of the last technique, having a very strong single light-source can add a sense of menace, purpose, and texture to a scene. Harsh shadows aren't liked by everyone, nor do they suit every subject, but if you find the right use case it can make a dramatic difference.

I started shooting the lobster in photo 3 with two strobes and I wasn't getting anything special, certainly nothing I felt was doing justice to the experience of having this stunning individual mere inches away and completely relaxed with my presence. I decided to flip down my snoot, turn off one strobe, rotate the camera and get closer for a close-up portrait. What a difference the snoot made: the sense of engagement and intimacy in this image is very powerful.

The same was true for the amphipod on the sea pen in photo 4. It was hard to really get a feel for the menacing stance and spiny carapace of this tiny critter with two strobes – so down came the snoot and using just the one light-source meant I could bring a sense of something more to the scene with strong highlights and deep shadows.

Photo 5
Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 14 42mm @ 28mm, f/22, iso200, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

Photo 6
Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 30mm macro, f/13, iso400, ½ sec, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot, blue torch

Blending flash and ambient light

When I want to create a balanced light image I almost always reach for a snoot. I don't need to of course; unsnooted strobes would do just fine. But I find that the larger degree of control I have over which part of the scene is being artificially lit suits my style.

In the UK, where vis is often sub-optimal, it can also cut down on the light reflected from the water (not just back-scatter, but a general lighting of the water-column) which can give a less natural looking colour to the ambient light.

The nudibranch in photo 5 is shooting up using a snoot. It was very shallow and shooting into the sun which required a lot of strobe power.

Creativity

Snoots can open some different avenues for creativity too. I'm quite enjoying using a coloured torch and slow shutter combined with a narrow snoot to create images such as photo 6. It's not to everyone's liking, but I'm going experiment further. And you can reverse the effect too; by using a white light and colour filter on the snoot.

So back to the SOFT, I'd be remis if I didn't pass on my thoughts from having the privilege of using it for a month. Firstly a few in-use comments: yes you can use it with thick gloves, yes it is big and if you have it centred over your viewfinder you may struggle to get your eye in place (especially for 45-degree viewfinders, or on smaller-bodied housings). You may find that the most creative/productive method is to have it mounted on your strobe arms, but with your clamps quite loose so you can move it about freely; let's call that 'guided freestyling'.

The accuracy of the guide light is awesome, and don't be fooled in to thinking this is for macro work only. You can still shoot subjects 2-3m away, which is mightily helpful for shy critters or in low vis scenarios.

I have two very, very, small niggles – and really these are barely worth mentioning: firstly the supplied ball mount uses a differently sized

Allen key to the Dock, neither of which were supplied. Secondly, once you attach the ball-mount the SOFT won't fit into the foam-padding of the carry case. There is room for the space to be cut out, and if this were mine to keep I'd do that straight-away, but as supplied you can't keep the SOFT in the case with the ball mount attached.

My final word is a little bit off-task; having used this snoot with it's solid Dock/clamp mechanism that is amply up to the job of keeping a very firm grip, I'm actually excited about the possibilities of this 'universal Dock'. The same clamp is available for all of the most popular strobe bodies, and imagine what other gadgets could be added to the dock: diffusers, colour filters, shades, restrictors. I wonder if Marelux are planning a whole suite of accessories to spoil us with?

Marelux responded to Dan's feedback:

We will soon add a tool kit into the package and will look into the carrying case. Also yes, we are producing reflection bowl, and difusers for the dock and are also making an experimental floating device to provide buoyancy to SOFT, as you mentioned its weight.

Photo 7
Olympus OM-D E-M1, Olympus 60mm macro, f/11, iso100, 1/320th, Sea & Sea YS-D1 & snoot

Finally, photo 7 was taken using a snooted strobe as a backlight. It took a good deal of positioning of my arms to get it all lined up correctly, but I'm pleased with the result. There must be more subjects I can try this on…

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