

Paradoxical Blur

by Nick More

The definition of blur.fuzzy, indistinct, unclear.

Here's the rub.....this may sound like a paradox...BUT!! My blur shots are anything but blurred. (Stay with me on this).

The antonym of blurred, according to the Oxford languages, can be described as bright, clear, distinct, energised, full of life, illuminated, invigorated, lively. The perfect blend for a paradoxical image.

These shots are visually eye catching and stand out from more conventional images and allow the viewer to discover more in the frame than a simple image, the longer it is studied.

The main subject needs to be pin sharp, especially their eyes. The use of a slow shutter speed is a tool to imply movement and motion or used to create beautiful, dynamic and painterly backgrounds on which we position our protagonist, as we create our image.

Martin Edge taught us base settings of f/8 1/125th sec ISO 200 and be there!! For successful motion blur images, you need to commit to the technique, as it takes practice and honing of skill and your

understanding of light, both natural and artificial. I'd suggest 'jump' settings of f/18 1/8th sec ISO 100. These settings can then be tweaked depending on amount of available light either at the time of day and importantly, your orientation in relation to the sun.

The Theory

Natural light allows us to create blur patterns. Artificial light from our strobes 'freezes' our subject within the frame. Therefore if our strobe light is greater than the ambient light on our subject, then our protagonist will render sharp and the background due to the slow shutter will render

Lion Fish hunting glass fish inside the wreck of the Dunraven, Red Sea, Egypt. Nikon D850, Nauticam Housing, Nikon 28-70 @ 31mm & Nauticam WACP, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobes. F/22 1/2 sec ISO 100. Rear Curtain Sync

Caribbean Reef Shark, Nassau, The Bahamas. Nikon D7200, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm. Nauticam Housing, 2 x Inon Z240 Strobes. F/18 1/8th ses, ISO 200. Front Curtain Sync. & Accelerated Panning.





Cornish Blue. Nikon D500, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobes. F/16, 1/8 sec, ISO 100. Front Curtain Sync. & Accelerated Panning.

blurred. Therefore, key to successful motion blur photography is turning your strobes UP! And getting close to our subjects. This way our strobes' light is freezing our subject within the exposure. We then also use our 'curtain' to influence what happens.

When using Front Curtain Sync (FCS) combined with the use of accelerated panning or other 'intentional camera movements', we frame the subject for our intended composition, trigger the shutter and the flash fires. We then pan (move) the camera, slightly faster and in

the same direction as the subject is swimming. This continued movement of the camera after the flash has fired creates the motion blur effects. The big benefit of FCS is that we are fully in control of our composition.

Rear Curtain sync (RCS) is used when the camera is held stationary allowing the subject to swim through the frame. The flash fires at the end of the exposure. This technique allows the background to be a little sharper but still creating attractive blurring streaks caused by the subjects own movement. The downside to using



Sweetlips School, Raja Ampat, Indonesia. Nikon D500, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobes. F/16, 1/8 sec, ISO 100. Front Curtain Sync. & Accelerated Panning.

RCS is that we are not fully in control of our composition, as we are relying on our subject to swim where we expect across the frame, so can be unpredictable. These images though, have a more 'natural' feel and render the background with a silky / oily texture that can look very attractive.

Settings: YOU HAVE TO SHOOT IN MANUAL!!

Autofocus - For wide angle, I use continuous AF in combination with

Group-area AF. And for macro I use single Point AF in AF-C normally aimed at the subjects eye. Af is so good on modern cameras that I see no need to use anything else.

Strobes - Should be turned up, even shooting at full power. Remembering that flash must overpower the ambient light to freeze our subject. Strobe diffusers can be removed for extra power and even angled inwards to direct hard light onto the subject. Don't worry! The slow shutter speed and camera movements will render any



*Juvenils Harlequin Sweetlips, Lembeh, Indonesia.
Nikon D850, Nauticam Housing, Nikon 105VR & 2 x Inon Z330 Strobes.
F/18, 1/5 sec, ISO 100. Rear Curtain Sync.*

backscatter blurred and even as attractive 'streaks' across the frame giving an added implication of movement (think Millennium Falcon making the jump into hyperspace).

Aperture - as we are using such slow shutter speeds, we need to compensate for over-exposure by closing our aperture. This also has the effect of controlling our high power flash and also giving us good depth of field.

Shutter Speed - We can set our shutter speed anywhere from 1/15th sec to as slow as we can with

overexposing or rendering the entire image too blurry. The shutter speed is dependant on the amount of ambient light ie. the darker it is, the slower we can go but also the subject. Generally for motion blur sharks 1/8th sec is just perfect. For macro subjects, such as juv. Harlequin sweetlips 0.5 sec exposures can give fantastic blur trails in combination with RCS.

ISO - With modern camera we can use ISO to control our exposure. Again depending on the available light this can range from anywhere between ISO200 to ISO LOW(50)



*Oceanic White-Tip Shark, Big Brother Island, Red Sea, Egypt.
Nikon D500, Nauticam Housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 11.5mm, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobes. F/18,
1/8 sec, ISO 50. Front Curtain Sync. & Accelerated Panning.*

ND Filters - Shooting in bright conditions - can be tricky BUT the use of gel ND filters behind our fisheye lenses and the use of 67mm threaded ND filters on the front of our macro ports can control the excessive ambient light.

An example, is shooting the Oceanic white-tip Sharks in the southern Red Sea. These sharks typically swim at the surface and of course its always sunny in Egypt. The use of ND4 gel filter behind my fisheye lens allowed me to shoot these unique images of the OWT's, even

with the camera facing directly into the sun.

Subject Selection - The use of blur / slow-shutter should be justified, not just because we can or as a gimmick. We are using blur to add motion and dynamism to our pictures and to frame our subject to create operation from otherwise distracting and ugly backgrounds

Sharks are the obvious choice as they are themselves dynamic, mobile and dramatic, but not all subjects suit motion blur images. The contradiction is breaking the rules, which often



Razor fish. Nikon D850, Nauticam Housing, Nikon 60mm micro, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobos. F/18 1/8 sec ISO 100. Rear Curtain Sync

gives unexpected results creating arty, beautiful and uniquely eye-catching images. But it can be very hit and miss and the pictures can split opinion - such as this blue spotted stingray image taken in the Red Sea.

Schools of fish are also fantastic subjects, especially when tightly packed together. The effect helps to frame the fish, framing the school and isolating them from the background and so, giving power to the school.

The use of a slow shutter can also be used to create abstract images, such as swirls & zoom blurs. We use similar settings in combination with

FCS and rotate the camera create swirls of using a zoom lens and zooming the lens during the exposure to create zoom blur images.

Backgrounds - In my early years of shooting motion images, I would be looking to place subjects against clear water and creating blur streaks form the subject. These days, I'm in search of backgrounds, these can include sand, reef and even boats.

But my favourite background for wide-angle image is the surface and light/sun. Shooting up at the surface, usually using an ND filter renders the surface texture in a beautiful and



Blue Spot Stringray Abstract. Red Sea, Egypt. Nikon D500, Nauticam Housing, Nikon 10.5 Fisheye, 2 x Inon Z330 Strobos. F/22, 1/8 sec, ISO 50. Front Curtain Sync. & Accelerated Panning.

dramatic way, often managing to incorporate reflections.

The perfect storm.....successful motion blur images are a combination of subject, background and controlling artificial and ambient light. Sounds familiar? Its really the same principle of any wildlife photography, just using a different skillset to produce unique and standout pictures.

It takes practice and commitment to the technique, but once mastered becomes muscle

memory and is a predictable method of shooting. Give it a go.....

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