

Best behaviour

By Alexander Mustard

Many of us get into this game because we want a record of the marine life that we see during our dives. As beginners our goal is sharp, correctly exposed images; we judge our work a success when our images look like the ones we see in books and magazines. After a while, though, just reproducing what others have done before doesn't satisfy. We want our images to stand out from the crowd, have our stamp on them, be original. And this can be pretty tricky with coral reef subjects because almost every photogenic species has been photographed from just about every conceivable angle. So how can we take original wildlife shots?

A popular trend over the last 5-10 years has been to seek out the most diverse coral reefs, usually in SE Asia, and photograph species that few have seen before. Back in 1997 Greek photographer Constantinos Petrinou entered the Antibes Festival with a photograph of a tiny seahorse living camouflaged on a sea-fan. I remember staring in disbelief at his image and Constantinos walked off with one of the top awards. To this day, few divers have ever seen pygmy seahorses,

however it seems that the great majority of photographers have!

Several years ago, Peter Rowlands organised the Dive Sights 2001 photography competition and during the judging coined the phrase "Pygmy Seahorse Fatigue" - an ailment that results from having to judge yet another pygmy seahorse photo! So searching out new species and locales is a successful way to get original wildlife images, but it often doesn't take long for everyone else to catch up.

Furthermore, there is a finite number of photogenic reef species and an ever diminishing number of new locations - we need another strategy.

The solution I am advocating in this article is to not be content with just photographing the species, but to spice up our natural history images with some behaviour. An image showing even a common species actually doing something immediately stands out. We can see such everyday behaviour on every dive, at every dive site - coral reef life is always feeding, avoiding being eaten, living together, not getting on, cleaning etc. So how do we go about capturing it?



A pair of rock beauties spawning. A larger male rock beauty gently nudges a female, from his harem, during a spawning rise. Nikon F100 + 28-70mm. 2 x Subtronic Alphas on TTL. F13 @ 1/250th. Velvia.

Technically, taking a behavioural shot is pretty much the same as taking a normal fish portrait. The only difference is that our approach in water must be much more careful so that we do not influence the natural behaviour. Some of the most engaging fish portraits are made when a fish stares back at the camera, when it interacts with the photographer, and therefore the viewer when they see the image. This is not the goal of the behaviour photographer: we do not

want posed pictures, we are observers, we want candid images. Think of yourself as an underwater Henri Cartier-Bresson, observing life, recording life, but not interacting with it.

Patience is a great ally. We all know that underwater photographs must be taken close to the subject and to get in this zone we must play by the rules. Good buoyancy control, slow steady breathing and minimal flapping of arms or fins are essential.



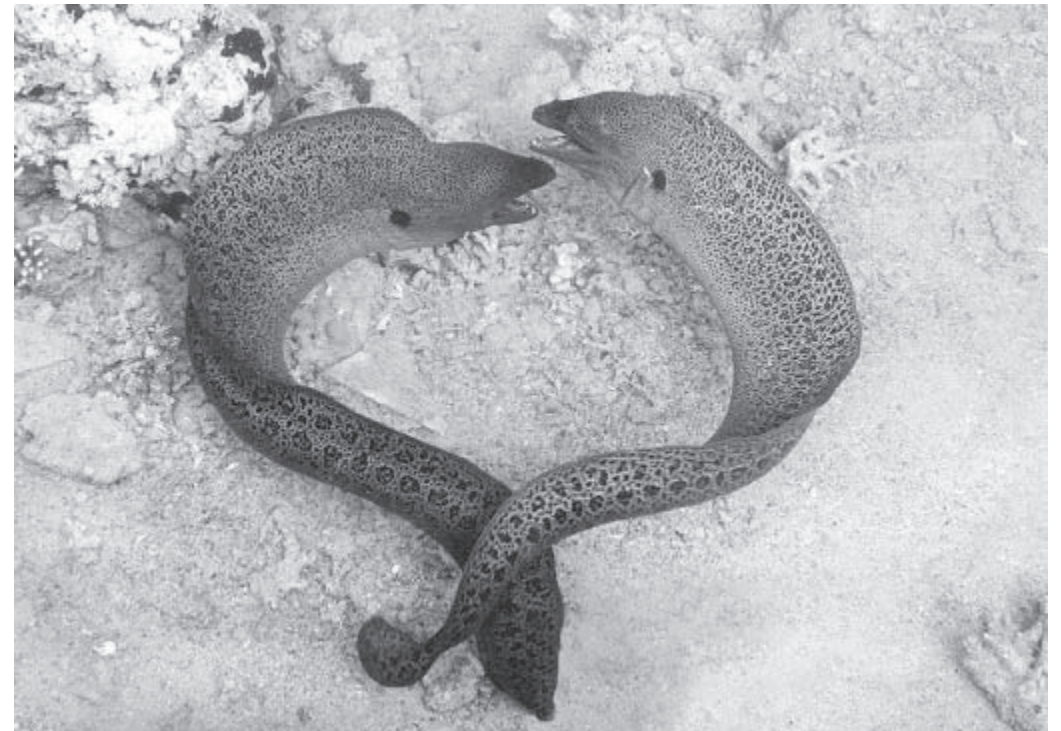
White bellied damselfish spawning. Benthic egg layers are probably the easiest fish to photograph spawning and are usually easier to get close to than broadcast spawners. Nikon F100 + 60mm. 2 x Subtronic Alphas on TTL. F22 @ 1/125th. Velvia.

Not having a buddy sitting right on our shoulder is also a bonus! Another great tip is not to rush to start shooting. There are two reasons for this: first, even if we have made the stealthiest approach the subject will still notice us and it needs time to settle back down to natural behaviour.

And second, experience has taught me that when I wait and watch I often see more than I originally thought was going on. I like to take a few minutes to appreciate the whole

picture and to think about the image I want. I also try to avoid staring at a subject. Ok, this maybe more of a superstition, but I find that subjects relax more quickly when I'm not looking directly at them.

Once we get set on a subject I recommend taking an early shot, so that there is a shot in the bag. However, we are trying to achieve a quality image and this quick snap shot is unlikely to capture the behaviour, be technically correct and be



Moray eels fighting. Even though photographs of natural behaviour should not show posed fish interacting with the camera this does not mean that strong composition is not still crucial to a successful image. Nikon D100 + 17-35mm. 2 x Subtronic Alphas on 1/2 power. F9.5 @ 1/60th.

pleasingly composed. This is the big difference between taking stills of behaviour and shooting video. The videographer is trying to build a sequence, while we are trying to produce a single image that captures the moment that tells the whole story. Of course if we want to publish a particular behavioural story we need a set of images, but as photographers our goal is always that single, definitive shot.

Having worked hard to spot the behaviour and get into place it is now important that we get THE shot. This is a good moment to glance around the camera to double check that the settings are right, the strobes are aimed correctly and nothing is flapping around in front of the lens. Then the fun part: watching the behaviour and pressing the shutter at THE moment. The ultimate nightmare is to shoot a fraction too

early and be waiting for our strobes to recharge while the action happens in front of us!

Composition is crucial. Just because we want our subjects to remain natural and unposed this does not mean we can get away with poorly composed images. It can be hard to remember to put effort into the composition of the image in the heat of the action. I have had to bin so many images that are technically correct and show the behaviour because they are not strong enough as images. I like to replace the exciting subject matter and, in my mind, replace it with the mundane and then judge if the image is still pleasing.

So what are the behaviours we should be looking out for, and how can we improve our chances of finding them? I suggest starting with easy to find behaviours like cleaning and symbiosis, before moving on to harder subjects such as spawning. Many people say that field experience is crucial and this just can't be bought. But I am not necessarily inclined to agree. There are many great naturalists and guides working in the dive industry, and their local knowledge is invaluable for this type of photography. The careful selection of the right dive centre or group trip is often the most important factor in getting behavioural shots. Books, magazines and the internet can also help us to educate ourselves to learn where and when to look for subjects.

I find behavioural photography particularly satisfying because not only does the final image tell a story, but there is usually quite a story behind the image. The more work I put in the more satisfaction I get out. My most pleasing images start with me searching through papers, books or emailing friends



Shrimp on crinoid. Symbiotic relationships are an easy way to start behavioural photography. Nikon F100 + 105mm. Sea and Sea YS120 and YS30 on TTL. F16 @ 1/250th. Velvia.



Anthias and young cleaner wrasse. Cleaning is an easy behaviour to find and approach. Larger predators can make dramatic subjects with small cleaner between their sharp teeth, but they are already well photographed. Look out for unusual species as cleaners and clients and characteristic postures. Nikon F100 + 105mm. Nikon SB80DX on TTL. F11 @ 1/250th. Velvia



Star coral spawning. Most photographs of coral spawning are macro shots because that is the easiest thing to do at night. So I was determined to try wide angle to make my images stand out. Nikon D100 + 17-35mm. 2 x Subtronic Alphas on 1/4 power. F914 @ 1/125th.

for information. A good example was photographing mass coral spawning. Corals are not really challenging subjects. They rarely run away. The problem of photographing them spawning was knowing when to be in the water to get the pictures - since the species I wanted to photograph only spawns on one night during the year and for only about 20 minutes.

The timing of spawning is controlled by annual cycles of temperature, lunar cycles of tides and

daily cycles of light. So I had to make my prediction, then the gamble on booking a holiday and flying across an ocean. And even if the corals actually spawned I would only have one shot to get the images. Thankfully everything went to plan, my spawning prediction was three minutes out. The resulting images are amongst my favourites because of all the work that went into them.

Finally, as a photographer of coral reefs I am always keen to avoid

disturbing the resident animals, leaving the reef as I found it. Being able to observe the natural behaviour of the animals is as good a measure as any that our presence in their home is not an intrusion.

I hope that on your next visit to a coral reef you spice up your wildlife images by recording the details of the everyday lives on the reef and enjoy the privilege of capturing the inhabitants on their best behaviour.

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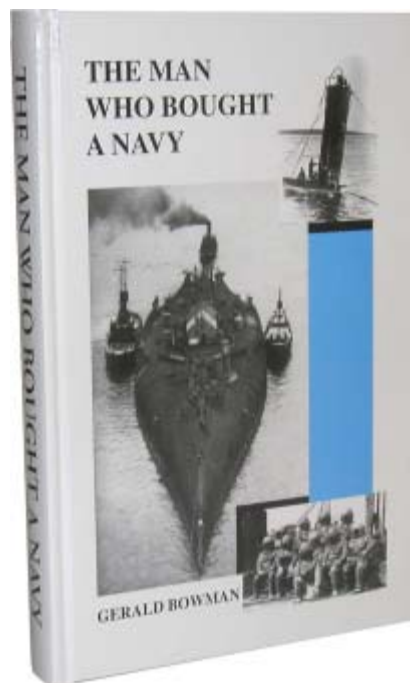
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