

Do your homework

How the Pro's get those stunning Macro Shots

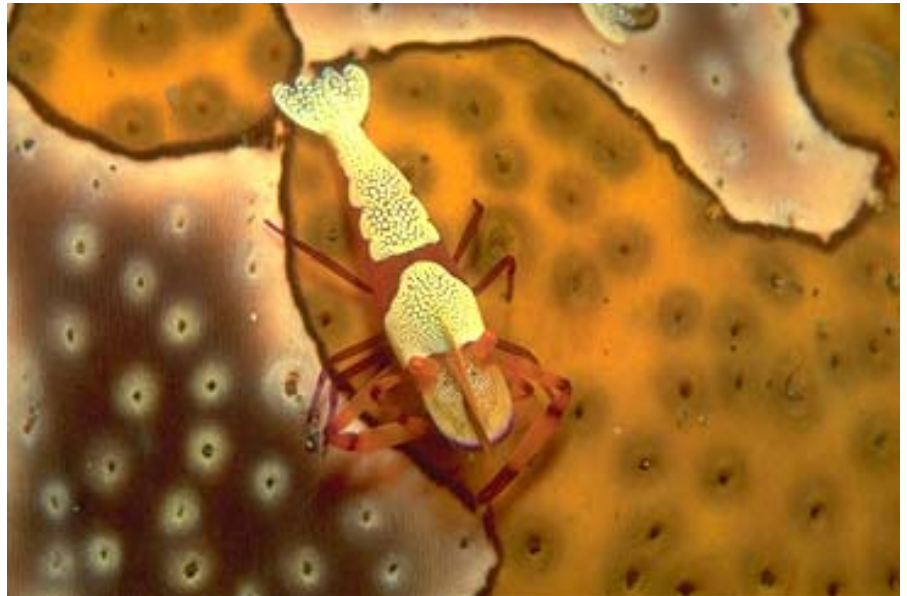
By Will Postlethwaite

The received wisdom is that macro photography underwater is easy so why is it that you can't get those stunning shots you see in the coffee table books and photo competitions? It does not take long to get to grips with focus and depth of field, aperture and strobe positioning for effect but if you are still struggling to get a shot with real impact then maybe you need to think more about your composition and, more importantly, choice of subject. This is where you need to do your homework.

Photo courses will start you visualising good composition by talking about the 'rule of thirds' and subject positioning within the frame. If you sort your shots out into two piles where the first pile follows the rule of thirds, diagonals and has the subject positioned well in the frame facing in the general direction of your lens and in the second pile the rest. Your best shots will be in the first pile.

Now you need to take pile one and look at the subjects. Are they interesting? Have you had to spend five minutes explaining to your Mum what they are and which end is the front? (We've all been there!) Do they have any impact in themselves or are they dull and lacking colour? Is the background messy or lacking colour or contrast with your subject? Do your friends all have pictures of the same things?

If, when you answered the last question, you came up with someone who gets pictures of stuff you never find that will be the same person who pours over the identification books with their evening beer. They will also be the person who is chatting to the dive



Nikon F90X in Subal housing, 60mm macro, Sea&Sea YS120 and YS90. TTL. Fuji Velvia 1/100 f32



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guide on the journey to the dive site. This person is on the way to being able to get macro shots with real impact. They are doing their homework and already have an idea, as they drop off the boat, of what they are looking for and how they are going to get the best shot.

The oceans are full of the most

amazingly beautiful tiny creatures but you have to know how to find them. It is a dangerous world down below and being small these guys have to hide or be eaten. Some hide in crevices and holes but more often than not they hitch a ride on something bigger. Animals that do this, called commensals, also get the



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added benefit of getting access to food by riding on their host.

In the Indo-Pacific the feather star or crinoid is a most accommodating host where all manner of shrimp, crabs and fish live. A careful examination with a keen eye over a few will usually reveal an elegant squat lobster as shown. The others are for you to find!

One species that shows the most variety of colours is the

shrimp *Periclimenes imperator*. It will hitch a ride on all manner of hosts and, like many commensals, adjusts its colour for camouflage. Two pictures here show the shrimp on two different sea cucumbers, a pink version lives in the gills of the Spanish Dancer.

Nudibranchs are colourful subjects in themselves but usually need a complimentary backdrop to make real impact. Fortunately they get some of their colour by recycling some of their food. Find out what they eat and they might be easier to find and somewhat more striking like the two shown here.

Not all nudibranchs are around all year and, like many sea creatures, are seasonal. Many creatures also have a certain depth range. A good subject in the UK illustrates this well.

Snakelocks anemones are a common shallow species around our shores. If you check around the base of these during the summer months you are very likely to find a little decorator crab hiding as shown.

Look in the books, find the charismatic creatures and learn how to find them. Show the picture in the book to your dive guide and ask him to find you one. If he looks blank get him to ask his pals and you might get a better guide! (Top photographers hunt out the top guides.) Once you know where they

are and what they look like, now think about how you want to construct the frame around your subjects. If they are commensal on something with complimentary colours then fill the backdrop with their host. If they live somewhere rather dull or messy then shoot so as to get clear water behind them and stop the aperture down or increase your shutter speed to black out the background. You can also blur out the background by opening up the aperture and narrowing your depth of field but beware of negative space.

Go out and invest in a small library of good identification books and read them. The outlay will pay dividends and it is true that the more you know how to spot things the more you will see. But the most important result will be that you will be focused and prepared before your dive and consequently more relaxed and in control when taking your shots which is probably the biggest contributor to getting pictures like the pro's.



Demelza & Will Postlethwaite are professional underwater photographers and travel writers. Their images and articles are widely published in scuba diving magazines.

They teach underwater photography at Cornish Diving, Bar Road, Flamouth, Cornwall TR11 4BN England
<http://www.cornishdiving.co.uk>