

Capturing Images of Nudibranch Behavior

by Nonoy Tan

With so many beautiful photographic subjects in the reef, I have been tempted in the past to press the camera shutter indiscriminately. While this had provided me a variety of images, I soon noticed that it lacked the distinctiveness or uniqueness that I was looking for. Consequently, I decided to specialize and pay closer attention to nudibranchs, which are locally abundant in my country, the Philippines. Bearing in mind the large number of species and varieties available, there was no shortage of subjects. Soon enough, my fascination for them had blossomed into an even more specialized level of interest, i.e. capturing images of nudibranch behavior.

Considering the slow locomotion of nudibranchs, I had previously assumed that it should be very easy taking photographs of their activities. But after several attempts, I realized that I was wrong. While most nudibranchs cannot crawl or swim away as fast as fish, they can be found in constant motion particularly when engaged in some type of

activity. Thus, being able to “capture the moment” can be a challenge. I learned that success was dependent on how well I can identify a photographic opportunity, and then how fast I could compose, focus and then press the shutter. Eventually, I had to change my slow focusing F70 to a camera body that could fast-focus with the 105mm lens – my lens of choice for getting most nudibranch shots, although I sometimes use the 60mm for larger slugs. I chose the F100 because of its price, rapid auto focus, feature that allows changing the focus area (great for off-center focusing), and lighter weight compared to the more expensive and robust Nikon professional SLRs (F4 or F5, while the F6 wasn't available in the market at that time). In order to keep things simple, I often kept the F100 at its fastest strobe synch speed of 1/250.

My choice for lighting is a couple of Ikelite 200 substrobes. Their fast-



A pair of Pteraeolidia ianthina engaged in a scuffle. Nexus housing, Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F22, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135

recycling times of 1.6 seconds and reliable focusing lights were right for the job. The modeling/focusing lights also provided illumination during night dives so I didn't have to use a separate torch. The older Ikelite 200 substrobes, however, had to undergo a compatibility adjustment for the F100. Ikelite accomplished this for a minor fee. The customization, which I did myself, was gluing positively buoyant rubber pads (floaters) on the strobes. This made the heavy strobes

neutral underwater and therefore easier to manage on a Nexus housing, especially during long dives where holding a negatively buoyant camera set-up can be tiring.

Apart from the change in equipment, my diving conduct also underwent alterations. Hunting for nudibranchs meant meticulously exploring every square foot of reef and covering less ground per dive. Instead of the normal sightseeing across the reefs, I would just stay in



(Above) A pair of mating *Risbecia tryoni*. Nexus housing, Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F25, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135



(Top right) *Hypselodoris bullocki* laying its eggs. Nexus housing, Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F16, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135

(Bottom right) A pair of *Chromodoris willani* at the moment of initial engagement. Nexus housing, Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F22, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135



one or several places during the entire dive, waiting for nudibranchs to do something. This may take an hour or more. I remember spending one of those 120-minute dives watching a group of *Pteraeolidia ianthina* in very shallow waters. My patience paid off when a scuffle ensued between a pair of *Pteraeolidia ianthina*. Using

its sucker, an aggressive *Pteraeolidia* pounced its hapless victim, while the latter violently shoved away its assailant in self-defense. I learned that this hostile action was not uncommon among this species, and began to capture this behavior on film in following dives.

Because there wasn't enough



Marionia sp. swallowing a Golden *Gymnodoris*. Nexus housing, Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F16, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135

literature on nudibranch behavior, I had to depend on information from very few experts; nonetheless I was largely relying on my first-hand observations. It was a process of self-training and gradually learned that it is sometimes possible to predict specific slug behavior depending on the circumstances. For example, the presence of two or more individuals of the same species in close proximity to each other increases the chances of a mating or an aggressive behavior. Also, the availability of food sources nearby (such as cnidarians and algae)

is certainly a condition for feeding. Apparently, knowledge gained through study and past observations has helped me identify good situations that are worth investigating. In the waters of Ligpo Island (near Anilao) for instance, I have observed that a certain species of fish always lays eggs on a specific piece of rock, and that the nudibranch *Hypselodoris krakatoa* is fond of feasting on those fish eggs. Thus, I inspect this piece of rock every time I am in search of the *Hypselodoris krakatoa*. There are however occasions when the



A *Nembrotha lineolata* stretches to feed. Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F16, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135

unexpected happens. This was the case when I took photographs of a nudibranch eating another slug. At first, I didn't know that this type of "cannibalism" was possible. After sending the images to a nudibranch expert, I was informed that the *Marionia* nudibranch was swallowing the slug, Golden *Gymnodoris*. This was a total surprise for two reasons. First, as far as present scientific knowledge is concerned, the *Marionia* feeds on soft corals and not slugs; and second, the Golden *Gymnodoris* being a predator of other slugs, ought to be

the one doing the feasting.

This brings me to another vital ingredient in photographing nudibranch behavior, which I would describe as "luck" – for the lack of any precise explanation. After having observed the *Marionia* eating a *Gymnodoris*, I subsequently endeavored to find something similar in the same vicinity. After subsequent dives, not only was I unable to see such behavior again, but also I couldn't even find a single *Marionia* or *Gymnodoris*. Apparently, the consistency of abundance or scarcity



Hypselodoris krakatoa feasting on fish eggs. Nikon F100 with 105 mm lens, 1/250, F16, twin Ikelite 200 substrobes, RVP135

of the Marionia (and other slugs with but a few exceptions) in the same location cannot be ascertained. Where they were once plenty, the same nudibranch species seem to vanish after sometime, and then inexplicably reappear. Thus as a matter of strategy, the way to increase the chances of getting those rare behavioral shots is for the underwater photographer to spend more and even more time underwater.

While capturing images of nudibranch behavior presents unique challenges, it can be enthralling and

addictive. After my first few images, I got hooked and slug activity had become the focus of ensuing dives. Undoubtedly, this quest has given me another reason to stay underwater.

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Nonoy Tan was born in Manila, Philippines. He started diving in 1997, and immediately took a keen interest in underwater photography. He is especially fond of capturing images of marine life behavior and critters found during endless muck dives. By profession, Nonoy is a development worker, and spends most of his time (when not underwater) in the poor, rural communities of Africa and Asia.

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