

Cuttlefish Conundrums

by Mark Webster

Spending long periods working away from home, in Angola currently in my case, makes the heart and mind yearn for a spot of UWP in temperate or tropical waters. I had been keenly anticipating a month at home in August with visions of brilliant summer sunshine and calm seas around the Atlantic coast of my home in Cornwall UK. Anyone who spent the month of August in the UK this year will know that this vision was shattered by high winds and heavy rain with scant opportunity to get into the water let alone concentrate on photography. The few times I ventured into the water I was faced with heavy swells and poor visibility due to freshwater run off and plankton blooms.

I was keen to play with my new digital toys and beginning to despair that I would produce any images let alone find interesting subjects. Living on the coast fortunately gives me the choice of choosing to dive as soon as the conditions allow and I am lucky enough to have a splendid beach dive just ten minutes from the front door. The area has a variety of reef and sand/gravel habitats and has been known for sightings of Atlantic trigger

fish and even spiny seahorses. In the summer small forests of boot lace seaweed reach towards the surface and are a good hunting ground for a variety of marine life, even when the visibility is poor.

A gap in the low pressure weather systems brought an opportunity to make a dive and I was in that water in a flash. Hoping for better visibility than I found, I had armed the D100 with an 18-35mm zoom, but the visibility transpired to be a murky 2m at best. I decided to explore the bootlace weed forest for thornback rays or grey Atlantic triggerfish, frequently seen here in late summer, and hope to get close enough for a clear picture. Moving slowly through the weed I encountered nothing of the sort, but when I stopped for few minutes I soon became aware that I was being watch by more than one pair of eyes.

Slowly through the gloom appeared one, then two, then four and then finally six cuttle fish ranging in size from 15cm to 30cm. Although they were showing a healthy interest in me initially they were staying on the limits of visibility, particularly the larger ones, which was no good for



Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 105mm macro, Inon quad flash, f8 @ 1/60, 200ASA



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photography. Eventually I decided to just move gently towards one of the smaller cuttle fish which seemed a little less wary than the others. Over many agonising minutes it eventually let me get within 30cm and I was able to fire off a couple of shots.

It soon became apparent that this cuttle fish wanted to co-operate and he (making a sexist assumption here) began to go through his camouflage and texture repertoire whilst apparently signalling to me with a number of arm movements. As this was progressing I also noticed that a number of sand gobies were hopping in closer to have a closer look at the

pair of us - big mistake on the sand gobies part! In an instant the cuttle fish struck, almost too fast to see but I did detect a change in colour and behaviour just before he made his move

He began to move off slowly across the weed and gravel obviously intent on finding further candidates to satisfy his appetite. It was plain that he did not object to my presence or close attention - I had my dome within 25cm (6") of the cuttle fish as I tracked him through the viewfinder. Using the 35mm end of the zoom gives the equivalent of a 50mm and a plus 4 diopter will get you very close indeed.



Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 18-35mm zoom, two Subtronic Mini TTL's, f8 @ 1/60 200ASA

I watched him strike a couple of more times and realised that there was a distinct behaviour pattern which indicated when he intended to strike and might enable me to capture the moment. Immediately after a strike he would remain motionless over an area of weed and attempt to match his colour to the surroundings whilst increasing the texture of his body to the classic warty appearance whilst raising and waving his two centre tentacles - at me? After a couple of minutes he would move off slowly aiming for a likely gravel patch which the sand gobies would favour. Hovering at the edge we would wait

patiently wait for a potential victim. It soon became obvious that this cuttle fish was not merely tolerating me, he had deduced that the gobies were coming closer to investigate me and so I was helping him with the hunt!

As one or two approached the cuttle fish would gradually lose his texture and extend his tentacles into a funnel. His colour would gradually fade more and more towards a pale beige colour and his head would extend slightly from his mantle. Next his 'striking arms' would just begin to emerge and I then knew that the strike would happen at any instant. This was the difficult part - predicting when he



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would strike and pressing the shutter at the precise moment to catch the action. Needless to say I had many failed attempts - but the joy of digital is of course that you have a huge number of frames to play with and of course you can see immediately if you have missed! If it is truly awful then just delete it and try again.

The D100 has an almost imperceptible shutter lag and in most instances it appears to be instantaneous. This in fact proved both a blessing and a disadvantage with some of my shots. The best turned out to be those that I managed to fire

just at the beginning of the strike and then the short delay caught the strike at the crucial moment. Many attempts produced perhaps three or four satisfying shots and whilst the cuttle fish was happy to carry on stalking, I was running low on air and needed to fin slowly back to the shore to clamber out over the rocks. However I was immensely pleased at having captured a behaviour I had rarely witnessed before.

Although cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) are very closely related to the octopus, the most obvious difference between them is that the

cuttlefish has maintained more of its mollusc ancestry with its substantial internal 'shell'. This is the cuttlebone which are often found washed up on the beach and used as a source of calcium carbonate for caged birds. The 'bone' is in fact a mass of porous cells which enables the cuttlefish to control its buoyancy without having to swim actively - rather like the buoyancy tanks of a submarine.

Cuttlefish hunt both during daylight and night hours and when resting are often found partially buried in the sand. During the spring and early summer months breeding cuttlefish are found together in groups 'courting' before mating. When they are engrossed in this, a close, but cautious approach can often be made to watch the males changing colour and pattern to attract a potential mate. Like the octopus a specially designed tentacle is used during mating, the eggs are then laid in clusters attached to seaweed and eel grass in the south west - these are sometimes referred to as 'sea raisins' due to their shape and dark colour.

The cuttlefish is a more efficient swimmer than the octopus using a combination of its siphon, skirt like fins and adjustable buoyancy. They normally prey on small crabs, prawns and fish and have two long 'striking' tentacles with sucker pads on their ends which are shot out in a fraction

of a second to snatch their prey. They also have remarkable eyesight and in fact can see both backwards and forwards, useful for hinting and avoiding predators.

Cuttlefish are most often found in Spring and early Summer on shallow reef areas where there are fine sand patches, or close to river estuaries where there may be sea grass beds. Once found their behaviour is difficult to predict. Some are very inquisitive and will emerge from a sandy burrow to touch and explore an extended hand whilst others will jet off immediately in a cloud of ink.

As with all motive subjects in underwater photography patience is the key to capturing natural behaviour. Sometimes you can be lucky with a chance encounter but for mostly you need to be prepared to try and stay motionless for long periods waiting to see what will happen. Occasionally it will pay off!

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'The Art and Technique of
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