

A Digital Diary - UK 2005

by Mark Webster

So just how much of a challenge is photography in British waters? I have many regular workshop clients who are not keen to find out but really they don't know what they are missing. There is no doubt that conditions can be more challenging than the tropics, and of course the water is a little colder, but now we have the instantaneous review that digital imaging offers there is no excuse for not perfecting lighting angles or removing errant backscatter if you have the patience in Photoshop.

2005 in the UK has, as always, offered a mixed bag of weather conditions, but when they have been good the diving and photographic opportunities have been great and there are many subjects to match or rival the tropical species. Macro is obviously the preferred technique when visibility is less than perfect and there have been plenty of striking subjects this year, in particular masses of different species of nudibranchs and numerous sea hares mating and laying eggs spirals. These attractive subjects are easy to photograph in classic poses but the additional imaging capacity we have with digital allows us to play with composition

and light to create hopefully different images – we are no longer constrained by 36 pictures on a film and the worry of saving a few just in case something unusual turns up at the end of the dive. Now we have 100 or more frames and the option to delete those we instantly dislike to make room for more.

I thought I would describe the high points for me this year in the hope of encouraging more of you to test the chilly waters next year.

Nudibranchs – Normally we see the greatest variety in early spring, but the water remained chilly until late in May and as a consequence there were still numerous species laying eggs on the kelp and on the reef well into July and August. UK species are small but also very colourful – a 105mm macro lens in the best tool with some additional magnification (wet lens, diopter, tele-converter). Be prepared to use manual focus or lock the lens at the desired magnification and then 'rock focus' to get the subject sharp. Depth of field is minimal and AF will drive you nuts as the lens hunts back and forth. A good focus light is a must for finding the subjects and for



Nudibranch laying egg spiral - Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 105mm micro, Nexus wet lens, Inon Quad, f8 @40

lighting them to focus properly.

Cuttlefish – I had hoped to catch the mass migration of cuttlefish into shallow water to mate and lay eggs, but work commitments and weather conspired against me and whilst I found many on the few dives I made, none were courting. Later in the summer we were able to return to the eel grass beds, where thousands of eggs had been laid, to hunt for the juvenile cuttlefish and were not



Juvenile cuttle fish- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, f8 @40, twin Subtronic Mini's

disappointed. Cuttlefish appear as miniature versions of the adults and grow extremely quickly – they are initially nervous but soon become extremely inquisitive and will even sit in your hand if you are patient – this makes for excellent picture opportunities. The best tool for these opportunities is a zoom lens, in my case a 12-24mm or 18-35mm for tighter shots. At the wide end you can include some of the environment and some balanced light techniques.



Thornback ray- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, f8 @40, twin Subtronic Mini's

Rays – many years ago thornback and blond rays in particular could be seen on almost any dive on a sand and gravel seabed, particularly close to estuaries. As with many commercial targeted species, encountering these graceful swimmers is becoming increasingly rare. That of course does not stop me looking and although many dives go unrewarded occasionally you will come across a ray resting or absorbed with feeding that allows you to get close enough for good images. Again a wide angle zoom is the best tool for this and I had invested in a Tokina 12-24mm zoom this year which was perfect when luck and patience paid off. This is a great lens, a cheaper alternative to the Nikorr, which I use behind a small Subal 20mm dome with a 40mm extension ring and +2 diopter. This may not be the optimal combination if you run the maths and optical equations but is extremely compact and I have found plenty sharp enough.

Bass – These fish are another species that are targeted relentlessly by both sports and commercial



Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, f8 @40, twin Subtronic Mini's

fishermen. They can also be very shy and difficult to approach for a good photograph. There are one or two reefs in my local shallow waters which seem to attract them and if you are prepared to wait long periods sitting in the kelp waiting you will eventually be rewarded with fish passing close enough to photograph. Mid to late summer seems to be best and they do like a bit of current to and the plankton it brings to feed in. Patience and a 60mm macro lens for portraits or the wide zoom to capture the small shoals of these attractive fish.

Conger Eels – This species are most often associated with wrecks, particularly by sports fishermen. However, they are also quite common on shallow water reefs and some large specimens can be found if you check all the holes in the reef carefully. I had quite a shock one day whilst waiting in the weed for bass to pass by when a large and an inquisitive conger started to weave between my legs. Having got over the surprise I found that it was fascinated by my dome port, presumably because



Free swimming conger eel- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, f16 @40, twin Subtronic Mini's

it could see a reflection, and so I was able to work very close to the beast whilst it came in and out of its hole in the reef. Firing the flash had no impact, but when I signaled to my buddy to take a look with his video camera he retreated as soon as the video light was turned on.

Fish portraits can be a challenge in any sea – fish are often nervous when we first approach the reef and it is only patience and application of suitable technique that will capture successful images. Again the advantage of digital is obvious – we can shoot three or four frames and then back off to review, delete and make adjustments to exposure and lighting before making another attempt. UK reefs abound with interesting and sometimes colourful fish which make excellent frame filling portraits or can be shot to show their environment or ability to camouflage. Small fish reef fish abound – three spot gobies, tom pot blennies, sand gobies,



Jewel anemones- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 105mm micro, Nexus wet lens, Inon Quad, f16 @125

black gobies, scorpion fish etc. – and a 60mm or 105mm will get you frame filling portraits if you have the patience. Wear a good thermal under-suit to keep you warm whilst you wait!

Jelly fish are abundant some years and not the next despite heavy plankton blooms. This year the dominant species was the compass jelly fish although we saw the occasional lion's mane. In previous years the much larger Rhyzostoma's



Ballan wrasse - Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 60mm micro, Inon Quad, f16 @125, twin Subtronic Mini's

have been abundant but whichever species you encounter they make great wide angle subjects, particularly if the sun is out.

Basking sharks – These glorious beasts show up with the first plankton blooms in May and June but you have to combine the right conditions with the right location and a dose of good luck to get close to them! I thought I had missed my opportunity in early summer until a more unusual encounter became perhaps the



Compass jelly fish – Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 18-35mm zoom, f8 @125, twin Subtronic Mini's

highlight of my year. I was diving with the local branch of the Wildlife Trust recording species in areas of eel grass close to Newlyn and Penzance. We came across a monofilament net strung over the seabed, most likely set to catch bass that feed in these shallow coastal waters. Quite by chance we found something far larger – a female basking shark that had totally trapped herself having swum into the net and then spun several times in her effort to escape. Initially we were convinced that she was dead,



Diver with lobster- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, f8 @40, twin Subtronic Mini's

but eye movement and then some tired body movement gave us hope of rescuing her. Having cut her free and then gently guided her for a few metres across the seabed she suddenly revived and swum off gracefully (and hopefully gratefully) into open water. A soft sandy seabed ensured that pictures taken were not perfect nor were they artistically composed, but they were good enough for the local paper and a very satisfying environmental tale.



Topknot flat fish- Nikon D100, LMI Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad, f16 @125

Mark's Ten Temperate Top Tips:

***** Get as close as possible to your subject – visibility is rarely stunning in the UK. Macro and extreme wide angle lenses allow you to reduce the water column between camera and subject.

***** Think small – many UK species are as colourful as their tropical cousins but a lot smaller,

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particularly the colourful nudibranchs. You may need to use increased magnification with a wet lens, diopters or telephoto converters to fill the frame.

***** Move slowly – don't try to cover huge areas in a dive. Settle in one spot, look carefully and wait for the fish population to accept you. Patience will pay off.

***** Get to know your patch – make multiple dives at the same location at different times of year. Sometimes the changes between seasons are dramatic and you will get to know where to find the critters you want to photograph.

***** Stay warm – we are all prepared to spend a small fortune on our camera kit and lenses, but it is worth investing in a good dry suit and high quality under suit with perhaps additional layers to stay warm. Find good quality gloves that fit well – titanium lined ones are much warmer.

***** Stay shallow – our green and often turbid waters soak up and scatter the available light – limit your depth to say 10m to make the most of it. Remember some interesting species are found just below the surface - e.g. those basking sharks and jelly fish.

***** Balance your light sources when shooting wide angle – use manual settings and get to know how to use the light meter in your camera – spot metering is often best if you have it. Remember that backscatter

will be less obvious against a pale background than a dark one shot at smaller apertures.

***** Don't forget to try silhouettes – if the sun is out but the vis is bad even kelp can produce a good image when shot against the sun.

***** Watch the weather forecasts on the internet and get familiar with wind directions and tide times etc. for your favoured spot – when conditions look right then go for it – our weather is fickle and the following week-end is never as good!

***** Don't lose heart – diving in the UK and getting good images is not simple and is something that you have to work at. Remember if you can improve the quality of your

photography at home then it will be a breeze when you spend hard earned cash on an expensive trip overseas.

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Mark is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' (Fountain Press) and 'Diving and Snorkeling Belize' (Lonely Planet) and hosts regular U/W photography workshops.

Underwater Photography Workshops with Mark Webster

Red Sea:
15-22 June 2006
5-12 October 2006

Thailand/Mergui:
28 Nov-7 Dec 2006

See websites for details:
www.photec.co.uk
www.oonasdivers.co.uk