

Wildlife Photographer of The Year 2005

Alex Mustard

In October I was lucky enough to pick up a category win and a runner up in the 2005 Wildlife Photographer Of The Year Competition. I say lucky, not through feigned modesty, but because any sane photographer knows that success in any competition requires more than a slice of fortune. Of course you need decent images to be in with a chance, but the difference between getting the winning nod or not even a placing is small and determined subjectively, not by fact. That said I am very pleased with the success. I had not entered this competition since I started shooting digital in 2002, but was encouraged to do so after Doug Perrine proved last year that there was no anti-digital bias in the judging!

Anyway, instead of repeating the standard sound bites that go out with the images, Peter asked me to write an article for UWP with a bit more background to the two images and what went into producing them. This is the point where wildlife photographers talk of the hardships of life in the field and endless patience to get the shot. I'm afraid I can't. These images were both taken at popular divesites, during normal

one or two week vacation diving, from standard dive boats. OK, in both cases I had organized my diving so that I was free to explore underwater without the restrictions of follow my leader group diving. And of course the timing of both trips and the dives was carefully targeted at the biology.

The first shot is *Bohar Snapper Portrait*, which won the "Animal Portraits" category. It was taken in 2004 at Shark Reef, Ras Mohammed in Egypt using a Nikon D100 + 105mm lens in a Subal Housing with Subtronic Strobes. Each year, in late June, Bohar snappers travel many miles to aggregate at Ras Mohammed, one of their traditional spawning sites in the Red Sea. Unfortunately, fishermen target many spawning aggregations around the world because the concentrations of fish provide rich pickings. The obvious consequence is that often

Winner of Animal Portraits. Nikon D100 + 105mm lens. Subal housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. 1/45th @ f13. Peter Rowlands calls this fish Travis, after Robert DeNiro's character in Taxi Driver!





Snappers school and diver. This picture gives a good impression of what the school of Bohar Snappers is like. Nikon D100 + 16mm. Subal Housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. 1/60th @ F6.7

fish are harvested (just) before they have had the chance to spawn, with serious repercussions for the continuation of the population. Thankfully Ras Mohammed is a Marine Park, which limits fishing, and protects spawning aggregations of Bigeye Jacks, Unicornfish, Emperors and several species of Snappers.

The schools make a stunning spectacle. Each snapper is about 70cm long and the whole

population is often packed together as a single massive school, easily the size of a house. Each year I go to the Red Sea at this time (the reason why the UWP Digital Techniques Workshop is also in June 2006) and I have shot the school of snappers many times. But while my more usual wide angle shots capture the grandeur of the scene they fail to get to personality of the fish.

So in 2004, I decided to try some longer lenses

on them: first the 28-70mm and for this picture the 105mm, using the telephoto technique I was developing at the time. Shooting a fish that is over two feet long with a 105mm lens (equivalent on the D100 to 160mm on a 35mm camera) does not sound like a sensible underwater photographic technique. But I considered the technique carefully and knew I could make it work with appropriate and highly unusual strobe placing (on long arms out way in front of the camera). I was also armed with the knowledge of what was possible in RAW conversion. This is a shot that I believe would have been impossible for me to have produced on slide film, unless Fuji were prepared to make film emulsions exactly to my specifications of colour temperature and contrast! But this is not a manipulated image, as the rules of competition do not allow them.

Peter Rowlands calls this fish Travis, after Robert DeNiro's character in Taxi Driver! For me the image is successful partly because of the Travis expression on the snapper, but also because the gang lurking behind. The long lens was crucial in generating this completely different perspective in this shot. Basically it enables me to isolate the main subject, by throwing the background out of focus, while at the same time pulling that background forward, towards the subject, so despite being out of focus it is still part of the story of the image. I couldn't have asked for a better vindication of this new technique than winning in this competition. I am always trying new ways of shooting underwater. Many end in failure, most produce images I could have got far more easily using standard techniques and even less end up producing strong images. I am very pleased that my telephoto technique has ended up being more than just an esoteric exercise and I



Runner Up in the Animal Behaviour (all other animals). Nikon D100 + 28-70mm lens. Subal Housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. 1/180th @ F16

proud that this image will now be seen round the world.

The second image of *Shy Hamlets Spawning* was Runner-Up in the awkwardly titled “Animal Behaviour (other animals)” category, and was taken a couple of months earlier in April 2004 near the Wreck of the Oro Verde in Grand Cayman. I again used a Nikon D100 in a Subal Housing with a Sigma 28-70mm lens and Subtronic Strobes. This image also gives me a lot of satisfaction because the hamlet spawning behaviour was not a behaviour I was shown, I had to go out and learn to

find it on my own. The effort involved amuses me now considering I find hamlet spawning every time I look these days! For clarity I should add that I didn’t discover this behaviour, it has been well documented by scientists, most notably in the PhD Thesis of Fischer in the 1970s, and these days is a text-book example of hermaphroditism for biology undergraduates. But seeing it in the wild has been the privilege of few.

Hamlets are certainly a weird group. Found solely in the Caribbean, these diminutive relatives of groupers are one of the few vertebrates that

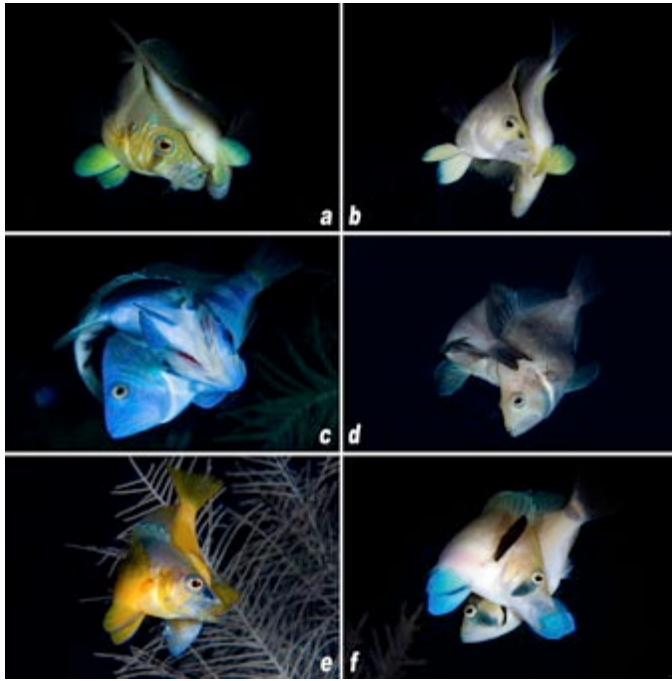


This shot taken minutes later shows the same pair spawning again, but this time the fish have reversed sexual roles (you can differentiate them by their slightly different blue markings on their faces). Nikon D100 + 28-70mm lens. Subal Housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. 1/180th @ F16

are true hermaphrodites. Sure, many fish change sex during their lives, but hamlets are both male and female at the same time, and each day will mate several times in each sexual role, swapping over within just a couple of minutes. Furthermore, it is hard to be certain whether the different colour varieties of hamlets are separate species or not because there are no morphological differences between them (apart from strikingly different colours) and even genetic techniques

fail to differentiate them. Most scientists agree that they are a separate species, as the different colour types are fairly stable and rarely interbred, and the lack of genetic differences is attributed to them being so recently differentiated from a common ancestor. In other words hamlets are right in the grip of evolution and don’t fit neatly into what we like to think of as a species!

As soon as I had found and photographed my first pair of



Just to prove it wasn't a fluke! Here are shots of the other hamlet species spawning: a) Barred Hamlet, b) Butter Hamlet, c) Indigo Hamlet, d) Black Hamlet, e) Yellowbelly Hamlet and f) Masked Hamlet. All Nikon D2X + 105mm. Subal Housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. All 1/250th @ F13 or F14

hamlets in the ocean I had this picture in mind. As a photographer I naturally wanted to target the prettiest hamlet species, which in my opinion is the Shy Hamlet. I also wanted to focus the camera on the male fish, which shows much more emotion and personality during spawning. The acting female, by comparison, looks pretty vacant throughout! It is something that I have learned in shooting a lot of fish behaviour is that my most popular images always have a strong element of emotion or personality. Even if it is not really there – I try and

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This image of a diver watching the spawning hamlets was certainly one of the hardest I have taken. Nikon D2X + 28-70mm @ 46mm. Subal Housing. 2 x Subtronic Alpha flashes. 1/80th @ F5

in my absence and able to shoot several hamlet species I had not see mating before (thanks to Patrick, Giles and John).

Actually the four of us have a little hamlet diving sub-culture going on at our favourite divesite on Cayman. Even without planning we often end up meeting up there because the timing of our dives has to be so precise. I have even developed an embarrassing reputation at the local bar for being teetotal, as we usually stop in for an evening drink before getting in the water!

As a final comment, I am pleased that these images reveal both the personality and complex behaviour of marine life. The ocean's wildlife is ravaged by over-fishing, and it is my hope that my images show that there is more to fish than tartar sauce!

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imply it by how I light and frame the subject.

Since taking this image, I have started to share the details of hamlet spawning more widely among my friends on Grand Cayman. So I guess I am happy to have received this award this year, before hamlet-spawning photos are as common as ones of Mandarinfish! At first I was a bit nervous about showing other photographers how to find the hamlets, but it has really paid off. This September when I went back to Cayman I was able to benefit from the knowledge that my friends have build up



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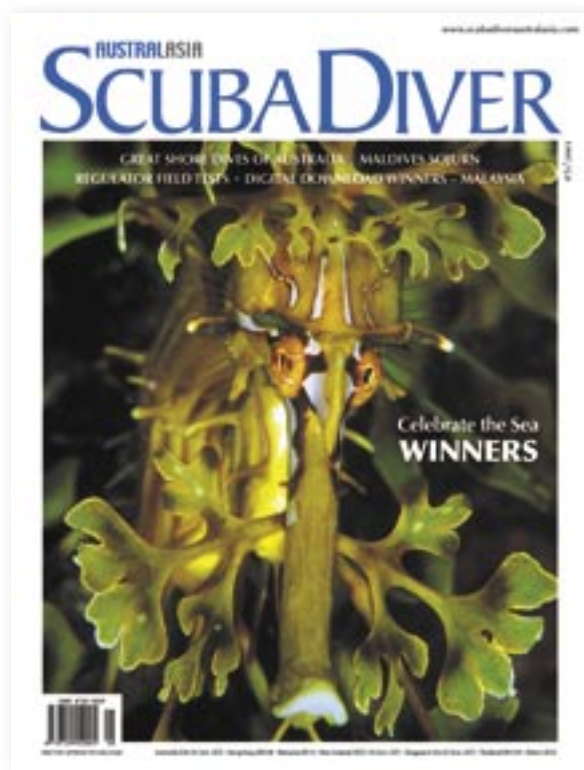


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