Finding Macro

By Cor Bosman

I can still remember the first pygmy seahorse I was shown. The guide swam up to a fan and immediately found the rice grain sized creature. I could not fathom how she did it. It must have taken years to perfect that skill and to be able to look at just the right piece of reef. I soon realized that by following some simple guidelines and learning a bit about the underwater life, finding these and other elusive creatures wasn't as difficult as I first thought.

A great way to start developing your spotting skills is having a mentor. During a liveaboard trip my wife and I discovered we had a lot in common with the managers, including a passion for macro photography. In those 10 days they helped us on our way by teaching us many of the tricks they use to find interesting critters. One of the methods they used was to point out an area where they knew a creature was hiding and letting us find it. Knowing something is actually there makes this tedious task a bit more manageable. When you find the critter it not only gives you a sense of accomplishment, it also makes finding the same creature again a bit easier. Seeing a specific pattern for the first time is often an eye-opener. We have used this method with success to teach divers and guides alike. One guide we met had never been able to find soft coral crabs. When we showed him the signs to look for on a soft coral, he immediately picked up on it. The next time you wonder how a guide finds a specific animal, just ask them. They'll probably be more than happy to show you.

I'm a lucky guy, my wife, an underwater photographer like myself, is my buddy and a second set of eyes. We are often in search of similar creatures and dive at the same pace. When she finds an interesting subject she makes sure I get to see and photograph it too. We have become each other's mentor along the way. Matching up with a buddy that shares similar interests can be a good way to increase your chances at finding nice creatures. You can share finds, help each other out, learn new tricks and make a photography dive more rewarding. If you travel alone, try and find a buddy at your destination that matches. Sharing the passion is half the fun. Unless you like to dive alone, a well matched buddy allows you to venture out together and practice your spotting skills. When choosing a dive destination we normally pick one that allows us to dive at our own pace and time.

Guides possess a lot of knowledge about the local dive sites. They are the best way to find interesting and specific opportunities. A seasoned guide will likely have a regular handful of critters that are consistently in the same area. Before you enter the water, talk to them and explain what you are after. A keen interest and enthusiasm will go a long way to motivate a guide to go the extra mile and even swim clear across the reef to show you the one critter you were after. Remember that

Crinoid shrimp on a crinoid.
The same crinoid was home to 2 clingfish and a squat lobster. Nikon D100 + 105mm lens, F40, 1/125s, manual focus, iso 200, 2 x YS90DX strobes

This emperor shrimp lives on a Spanish dancer nudibranch. They go where the nudibranch goes. Nikon D100 + 105mm lens. F11, 1/60s, manual focus, iso 100 (slide) 2 x YS90 strobes

most people are more interested in sharks, turtles and other larger animals, so this is their chance to show you their macro spotting skills. If you find something interesting share it with the guide so they in turn can share it with others; something everybody will appreciate.

Finding macro subjects requires patience and time. Following a group of divers can therefore be frustrating at times as the rest of the group may seem to be on a world record speed diving attempt. This is not how you find macro subjects; you need to slow down, and then slow down some more or even just stop for a bit. The coral head that seemed lifeless at first glance will come to life when you stop and let your eyes pick out movement and contrasting colors. Wait even longer and a lot of small critters will feel less threatened and come out of hiding. If they don't appear, go look for them.

Hippocampus denise is almost always found on the same species of fan. Once you recognize the fan, it's a lot easier to find the small seahorse. The seahorse itself is quite hard to spot as it blends in very well. A combination of movement and slight color variations betray its presence. Taken by Julie Edwards with a Nikon F100 + 105mm lens + 2x TC.

Check in holes, crevices, under ledges, in rubble and everywhere else a small creature can hide. Learn to spot the small differences in color and inspect them up close. A small light can help bring out the color that can be lost the deeper you go.

Not all animals will be as 'easy' to find. Some animals have perfected the art of camouflage and hiding. Searching the reef will most likely not reveal them unless you know exactly where to look. This is why you need to learn about habitats. Websites and ID books are a good place to start learning about the depth and habitat you can hope to find a specific creature. Knowing where to look for a critter will significantly increase your chances to find it. The guide that showed us our first pygmy seahorse knew where to look as it is always found on a specific species of fan.

What looked immensely difficult to us wasn't all that hard once we knew the trick.

Habitats can also be another living being, often a symbiotic relationship. The most well known one is the anemone fish and the anemone. They have a mutual relationship that provides defensive protection for one species and a basic food and cleaning service for the other. The same anemone is often home to different shrimp or crabs and similar arrangements can be found in many underwater habitats. Crabs and shrimp can be found living on sea cucumbers, nudibranchs, jellyfish, soft and hard corals, crinoids, and many other marine animals. If you learn about the different relationships, finding the critters becomes almost easy. I say almost because you still have to actually find the animal, which can be a challenge. Even when you know a soft coral holds a soft coral crab, finding it needs patience and perseverance.

Animals often manipulate their environment to their benefit. These changes can reveal their presence to the trained eye. Soft coral crabs usually pull a piece of soft coral on top of them themselves as camouflage. You can spot their presence by looking for a slightly discolored and bent piece of soft coral. Many fish and shrimp dig holes in the sand to hide and in some cases even collaborate and occupy the same hole. A jaw fish hole, for instance, is quite easy to see even from a distance. All that is left to do is check if anyone is home.

You can sometimes infer the presence of a

Depth can determine what you may find. Wire corals can be a home to different critters. In shallower water you may find wire coral shrimp seen above (taken by Cor Bosman with Nikon D100 and 105mm lens) while usually around 20 meters and deeper you can find the xeno crab seen below (taken by Julie Edwards with Nikon F100 and 105mm lens)

creature by something they left behind. You may be able to find certain nudibranchs by finding theirs eggs or you can look for eggs of some creatures after finding the parents. Eggs can actually make interesting photo subjects, especially if the embryo is visible inside the egg. Next time you see anemone fish, look around the anemone and see if you can find some eggs.

When you venture into the macro world, you'll soon discover that things look completely different up close. What may appear plain from a foot away can look stunning when photographed up close. Take a look through your lens (if possible) to see what you can find. A very dull looking blenny may reveal an explosion of color when looked at closely. Some hard and soft corals make excellent subjects as they are extremely intricate and detailed. If you can't find that pygmy ornate ghost frog fish you were after, just look through your lens and see what else you can find. You can create stunning photographs of brain coral detail, clam mantles and starfish, things that are often ignored.

It may also help to increase your magnification. We regularly dive with a 105mm lens + teleconverter + close up lens, which gives us anywhere from 5:1 to 7:1. This is a very specialized dive, but can be very rewarding.

You can do a lot to increase your chances of finding some nice photo opportunities; however there is always the element of luck. Sometimes the unexpected just happens in front of your lens. A predator may catch a prey, a cleaning shrimp may be cleaning a mantis shrimp, or something you weren't even looking for just happens to catch your eye. These moments often create the most interesting images and although you can't influence when they happen, you can increase your chances by diving as often as possible. Eventually you will run into something weird or amazing.

By following some of the suggestions from this article, luck should quickly be surpassed by skill. Go slow, read about the environments the animals are found in, find a matching buddy, and befriend the guides. Inspect everything that looks out of place, focus on a small area and let your eyes pick out movement and color. Don't get discouraged if vyou don't immediately find a rare species as it takes time to develop an eye for this kind of detail. Soon enough you'll be showing others how it's done.

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What links these sites?

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