

Shooting Fish

By Alexander Mustard

To start by stating the obvious: fish are certainly one of the most popular subjects for underwater pictures. Indeed, bringing back pix of the pretty fish that we see is one of the main reasons that many of us took up underwater photography in the first place. That said, shooting fish in the ocean is not as easy as the proverbial barrel. Fish are always on the move, darting in and out of focus, waiting for the exact moment we press the shutter to turn away and leave us snapping at their tails. Underwater fish can be everywhere, but good images can remain elusive. In this article I would like to discuss the kit, techniques and lighting of fish photography and also review some of the different ways of shooting fish.

Unfortunately not all underwater cameras are created equal when it comes to fish photography, and choosing the right equipment can make a big difference to your images. The best choice for fish photography are SLRs, either digital or film. SLRs have lighting-fast reactions; they can focus quickly and take pictures without delay. They also allow accurate framing of the subject, giving them a considerable advantage over viewfinder cameras such as the Nikonos and Motormarine.

Digital compacts offer accurate framing, but are held back by their shutter lag, although I should note that this delay between pressing the shutter and the picture being recorded has been reduced significantly on the latest models. The key to successful fish photography with compacts is subject selection. Compacts do a great job on



Fish schools look best when the whole school is contained within the frame. Nikon D2X + 17-35mm @ 17mm. Subal housing. F6.3 @ 1/60th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

stationary species (e.g. frogfish), slow moving species (e.g. lionfish) and site-attached species (e.g. clownfish). But if we try and shoot fast swimming species we will find it much more frustrating.

I am a great believer in autofocus and strongly recommend SLRs with excellent AF for fish photography. When choosing an SLR it is important to check its AF performance not only in bright

sunny conditions on land, but also in low light and in low contrast conditions. The other factor to consider with AF is not to treat it as an on off switch, that we can flick and everything will be in focus. Instead it is important to help the AF, by placing the AF sensor over an area of contrast on the subject.

It is also well worth investigating the various



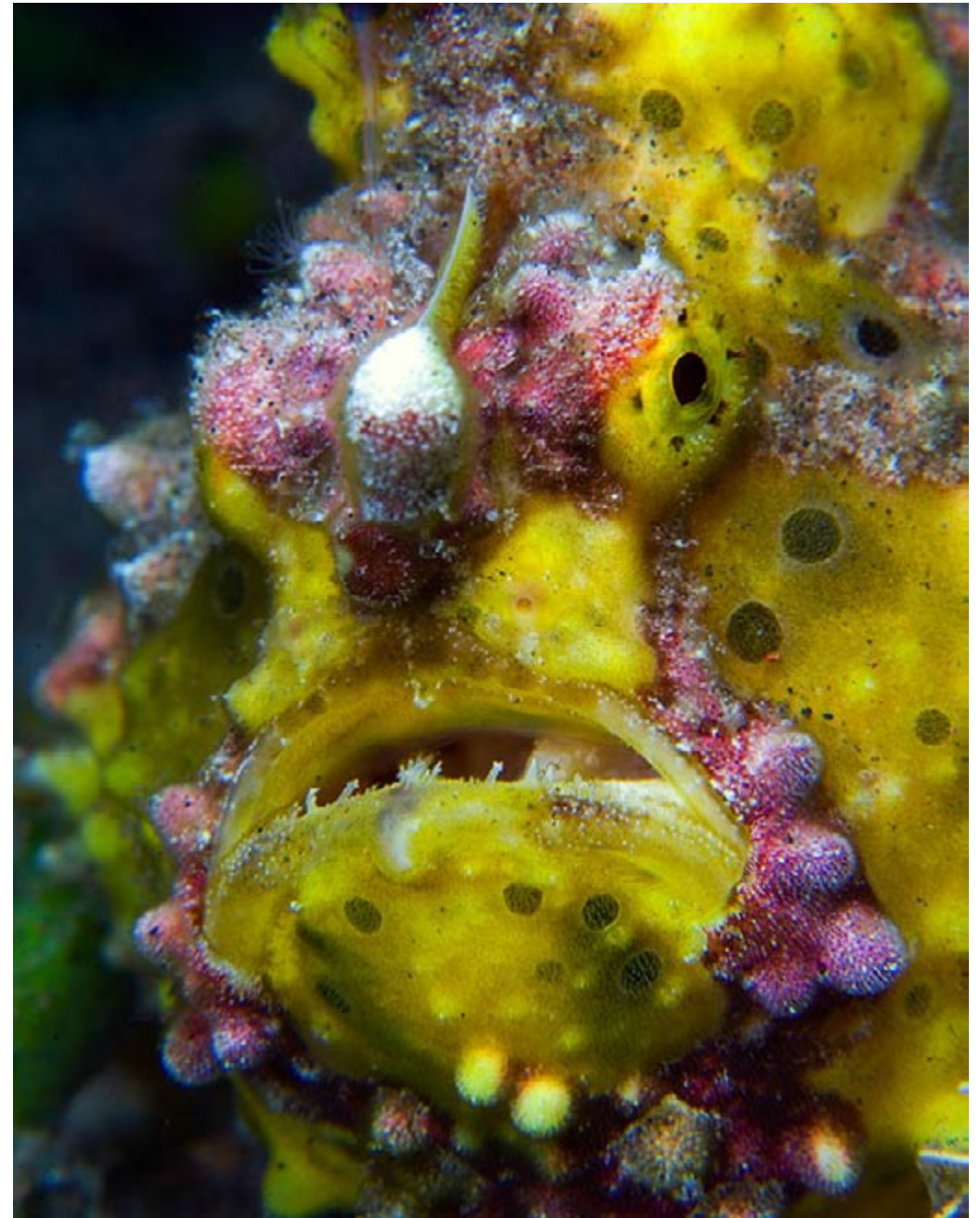
Behaviour adds extra interest to fish pictures. Here a larger male French Angelfish, faded in colour during courtship, nuzzles a female during their long spawning rise. Nikon D2X + 105mm. Subal housing. F9 @ 1/250th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

AF options on our cameras. These vary massively between models and makes, but to give you an example, I shoot fish mainly on continuous servo AF, with sensors grouped together and set on dynamic closest subject priority. I find having more sensors operational makes it easier for the camera to acquire focus and then the closest subject priority tends to keep the eye (at the front of the fish) in focus as the fish moves about the frame.

Nearly all lenses are good for fish photography, apart from ultra-

wide angles, although faster lenses generally give better AF performance. The best place to start is either with a short macro lens (50-60mm) or a standard zoom, I favour the 28-70mm. It is also well worth experimenting with other lenses, as longer and wider lenses offer different perspectives on our subjects.

There are two key aspects to technique of fish photography: stealth and patience. Good images require us to be up close and personal with the subject. It is essential to approach with slow movements and smooth



Tightly cropped faces work well with slow moving creatures full of character, like Frogfish. Nikon D2X + 105mm. Subal housing. F29 @ 1/250th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

steady breathing. Sudden exhalations or jerky movements always spook fish. They are like Jedi – they can feel our presence! If a fish is moving, we shouldn't approach it directly, but instead swim on course so we will intercept its path. Once we have successfully stalked our quarry it is crucial to stay composed and have the patience to wait for the subject to accept us. Once relaxed it will be a much more cooperative, and also these few moments also allow us to observe its routine, which help us predict its movements to plan a shot.

Light is essential in all photography. For fish photography I suggest keeping things relatively simple and front lighting the subject. For single flash shooters this means having the flash directly above the port, and for twin flash systems the flashes should be on either side and parallel to the port. I like to shoot fish in balanced light, as it gives more of a feeling of the environment, but I think that this is more of a personal choice than a guideline.

Finally probably the most important aspect of producing a successful fish image is to get on the eye level of the subject. Eye contact generates appealing images with a good communication between the subject and the viewer. And with a bit of luck we can catch an expression that implies some personality in the subject to make it more endearing. A lack of good eye contact is one of the most common reasons many of my fish images go straight in the trash!

So we have the kit and technique, heck, imagine we even have a cooperative subject. So what types of shots can we take?

1. The Standard ID shot. This classic type of picture generally shows the whole fish, somewhere between 3/4 and completely side on, invariably in a horizontal orientation. Fish photography maestro Roger Steene is the master of these images, letting



Face profiles often suit fish faces possibly anthropomorphising them. A long exposure was used to burn in the blue background. Nikon D100 + 105mm. Subal housing. F19 @ 1/30th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

the beauty of the subject speak for itself in simple, uncluttered compositions. Technique (focus, framing, exposure and lighting) must be flawless for these sorts of images to really stand out, and they often benefit from being shot in balanced light, otherwise the fish can look a bit lifeless, as



Head on shots of free swimming fish are a challenge to shoot, but always grab the attention of the viewer. I always wait for the pectoral fins to come forward before pressing the shutter. Nikon D2X + 105mm. Subal housing. F10 @ 1/100th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

if snapped on a fishmongers slab! Lens choice is dependant on subject size.

2. The Face Portrait. One of the best ways to get a high impact fish shots is to compose very tightly around the face of the subject, so that no, or very little, background is visible. These images



Taking pictures of fish is why many of us started taking underwater photographs in the first place. Nikon D2X + 10.5mm FE. Subal housing. F8 @ 1/40th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

are usually lit entirely with flash and are best shot with longer lenses such as 90-150mm macro lenses, for tight cropping. Non- or slow moving creatures are often the best for these sorts of shots, as they allow us to approach close enough. Fish well suited to this technique are Frogfish, Stargazers, Morays, Boxfish, Pufferfish and Scorpionfish.

3. The Face Profile. A variation of the face portrait, this is another well-used technique where we just show the face from the side, usually as a vertical. In England we have always called this the German composition,

as Teutonic photographers originated it. These images should be uncluttered compositions, with either blue water or black backgrounds. Certain fish tend to lend themselves to this framing, notably Bigeyes, Groupers, Hawkfish, Seahorses and Morays.

4. Head On. These shots generally have high impact with the fish coming right at the camera and look good with either blue or black backgrounds. Longer lenses are ideal for creating head on images of fish, although with tame or friendly species it is possible to get these shots with wider glass. Non- or slow moving



An alternative for fish schools is to photograph a section of the school with the fish running off all sides of the frame. Here I have used panning to add some movement texture. Nikon D2X + 17-35mm @ 28mm. Subal housing. F8 @ 1/50th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

species are easiest, but this type of image looks most impressive with free-swimming fish. A useful tip is to wait for the fish opens its pectoral fins before pressing the shutter.

5. Behaviour. Fish behaviour is a great way of adding extra interest to our fish photos. Things to look out for are cleaning, mating, feeding and defence. It is important to learn a bit about your subjects so you know when and where to look for behaviours and will recognise them when they happen and catch the key moment. I won't elaborate here, but

see UWP 17, where there is an entire article on this subject.

6. The Whole School. Schooling is a common fish behaviour. Probably the most pleasing way to photograph a school is with the whole pack entirely within the frame, which space on all sides. Symmetry is good: look for schools with the fish lined up and where the shape of the school forms a pleasing shape, such as a ball, a circle, a pillar or a spiral. Ideally the fish should be coming towards to camera. These images require wider lenses, but rarely ultra-wide angles.



To add some spice to this standard shot, I zoomed the lens during the exposure to create this exploding zoom effect. Nikon D100 + 28-70mm zoomed. Subal housing. F13 @ 1/15th. 2x Subtronic Alphas.

Good species for these types of shots are Snappers, Grunts, Sweetlips, Soldierfish, Goatfish and Fusiliers.

7. Wall To Wall Fish. The alternative approach with fish schools is to frame only part of the school so that our frame is wall to wall fish. These shots can either be side on, or taken with the fish head on, parting round the camera. This type of shot can also work as a Point Of View

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image, showing the perspective of being just another fish in the school. Side on shots work well as balanced light shots, and are a good opportunity to use longer exposures to add some movement blurring (see 8 below). Head on or POV images are best done with filters because they produce better colour throughout the image, and don't suffer flash fall off. Most schooling fish are suitable for these types of shots, and the best images tend to come from polarised, well organized schools.

8. Getting Creative. A final way to add some zip to fish shots is to get creative with the camera. Long exposures, rear curtain synch, panning and usual compositions can all transform an average fish shot into a fresh interpretation. It is up to us to get in the water and experiment.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that sometimes whatever we do it is clear that a fish does not want to be photographed. When this is the case it is important to recognise it and give up and move on! There will probably be a much more cooperative individual round the next corner. And remember there are plenty more fis... actually I can't bring myself to say it, but you know what I mean.

Alex Mustard

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