

Hunky Dory

by Mark Webster

One spin off from the seemingly constant treadmill of digital upgrades is the need to return to familiar subjects to shoot them again at a higher resolution. For me this is driven mostly by the desire to sell images through picture libraries or publishers who are often redefining their file size requirements to keep pace with the latest developments and additions to the DSLR market. Some may see this as a burden but it is also a spur to get into the water and try and improve on previous images, which has always been a good reason to take more photographs after all. Having recently upgraded to the D200 I am going through this process again both at home and overseas.

Diving in British waters is demanding at any time of year but does get easier as the summer months approach which is also the time when a number of the more unusual and sometimes challenging species begin to appear in our waters. I have always enjoyed the 'hunting' element of underwater photography, particularly trying to find those species that are well camouflaged or are wary of us as we make our clumsy approach. One such species is the John Dory (Zeus faber) or the St. Peter fish, which is common in the Atlantic further south from the UK and in the Mediterranean, but is mostly only seen in British waters in the late spring and summer when the water temperature rises.

There are a number of explanations for why this fish was christened "John Dory". The most popular is that it is a derivative of one of St. Peter's many titles in the Bible as the Janitore, or



(Above) Rocky foreshore at Pendennis Point, Falmouth Bay - shallow protected gullies are the best hunting ground for the underwater photographer. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom.

(Right) A classic John Dory pose is possible once you have the confidence of the fish. . Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/60th.

Doorkeeper, of the Kingdom of Heaven. Another is that it is an English corruption of the French name "jaune adorÉe" which translates as "the adorable or sacred yellow fish". However, according to legend, this is the fish that St. Peter caught when Christ told him to "go thou to the sea, and cast in a hook; and that fish which shall first come up, take: and when thou hast opened its mouth, thou shalt find a stater (silver coin) - take that and give it" to the Temple tax collectors (Mt. 17:26).

The John Dory has a large dark spot on each side of its body below the dorsal fin said to have been left by St. Peter when he held the fish to extract the coin from its mouth. Other legends claim that these are the marks of a coin. However,



regardless of which story appeals to you they are more likely to be 'false eyes' to distract potential predators.

The distribution of this fish is fairly wide and it has been seen in depths of 300m or more, but the habitat that we find them in is more likely to be the shallow coastal waters where the reefs and seabed are decorated with numerous varieties of sea weed. It is here that the John Dory can demonstrate the purpose of what seems to be a strange body design and colouring - it is in fact perfect camouflage for



Bootlace seaweed is a favourite hunting ground for the John Dory. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/40th.

this environment hiding the hunter from its prey but also hiding it from the underwater photographer who is so keen to capture its image!

I am fortunate enough to live near to the sea and can find a great variety of marine life close to the shore in only a few metres of water. The coastline is quite rugged and the foreshore comprises cliffs and rock outcrops that run straight into the sea forming numerous gullies with a variety of habitats. The experience of many years of diving here has revealed to me which areas are most likely to host particular species and I have found that in high summer that two gullies in particular are more likely to be home to the elusive John Dory.

These gullies are shallow running to no more than 10m (33ft) depth with the tops of the rock buttresses at 1m or 2m (3-6ft) depth. The bottom comprises heavy shingle or gravel with rock outcrops which as the summer progresses become increasingly covered in various species of seaweed.



Every John Dory has these distinctive dark spots on its flanks, said to be the finger prints of St. Peter. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/60th.

In the centre of the gullies there are normally thick stands of bootlace seaweed, which as its name suggests is thin and stringy and reaches towards the surface. The rocky gully sides are covered with thick kelp - this combination is ideal for the John Dory to blend with.

Summer also brings many juvenile species that spend their formative months sheltering in the weed or close to the top of the reef. In particular there are small schools of two spot gobies which congregate over the kelp fronds or close to the bottom - a tasty



When the John Dory is viewed head on you can see how its very thin dimensions enables it to 'disappear' and also see the distinctive line over the 'nose' of the fish which blends so well with the bootlace weed. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic

snack for the John Dory and always a good place to start the search.

I have found that the most productive time



Once you can get close enough remember to vary the composition and capture the character of the fish. . Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/60th.



Two spot goby, a tasty snack for a John Dory - Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, f20 @ 1/125

to search for these fish is early in the morning when the reef is beginning to come to life. There is all sorts of fish activity going on from feeding to cleaning - yes we have cleaning stations in UK waters as well, particularly for the larger species like Ballan wrasse, and the cleaners tend to be the smaller wrasse species such as the Goldsinney. So it is easy to get distracted, but to track down the John Dory's you have to be focussed on the task. I normally begin by looking for a small congregation of the three spot gobies near a thick stand of kelp or bootlace weed and then settle in and wait. The gobies soon accept you and will even get quite inquisitive and come very close - but you have



Goldsinney wrasse cleaning a ballan wrasse - cleaning occurs most frequently in early morning - fish wanting to be cleaned hang vertically at the cleaning station. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/60th.

to concentrate on the weed and look for signs of movement, particularly close to the sea bed. It never ceases to amaze me that I can have spent fifteen or twenty minutes scanning an area of weed seeing nothing and then suddenly there is a John Dory right in front of me! No doubt he has been close all the time, but it is just the slight change of position or a strike at the hapless gobies that gives him away.

Now the game begins. Mostly the John Dory will start by hanging motionless watching you to see if he has been noticed - your first movement of course is to lift the camera, and then he is sure that he has been seen! Occasionally you will encounter a bold fish that will just hold its ground, but more

often he will move away slowly to see how interested you are. Now you have to exercise great patience and concentration. Keep pace with the fish perhaps 2m behind, but don't chase hard, and try and keep your eyes pinned on him. They swim very slowly and will weave in and out of the weed occasionally stopping dead still to blend in to their surroundings to see if they can lose you.

Often the pursuit will take me up the side of the gulley and over the kelp line into 1m or 2m water depth and over the rock buttress into the neighbouring gulley. When this happens I can normally expect the fish to make a burst of speed as he descends into the next gulley - speed for a John Dory is not very fast and they tire quickly, however you have to watch carefully as this manoeuvre is generally followed by a final duck into the weed.

If you get this far the John Dory will normally remain motionless for a few minutes in the weed and I take the opportunity of taking a few shots just to get him used to the flash and check exposure. If you are lucky the fish will now accept you and after a while will begin to move off to recommence his hunt. At this stage I normally find that I can now move ahead of the John Dory and begin to compose shots more carefully and he will actually swim towards me and show



Various types of seaweed either grow or collect in the bottom of the gullies - often John Dories can be found right on the weed where they blend perfectly. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/40th.

some interest, particularly as you will find that small fish are also being inquisitive and the John Dory realises there is some synergy in the hunt.

The strands of bootlace weed seems to be a favourite hunting ground and you have to be certain that you keep your eye on the fish all the time as just a quick movement or change of orientation can make him



I am often asked (this time by the editor!) about the equipment and technique used for capturing a particular shot or series. Most of the shots of the John Dory are taken with a Nikon 18-35mm zoom which with the DX crop gives you an equivalent 'film' picture area of a 27-52mm - this is behind a Subal 20mm dome with a +2 diopter for correction. The range of this lens is ideal for fish portraiture and enables you to capture some of the habitat at the wide end as well. For lighting I use a pair of Subtronic Mini TTL flash guns in manual mode generally at ? or ? power at ISO100. These guns have quite a broad beam spread and with the turbid conditions we have in the UK

it is best to use a 'flat lighting' technique which lights the subject with the edge of the beam from both guns. As you get closer to the subject you may need to turn the guns a little away from the subject to maintain this effect. This avoids illuminating any suspended matter between the lens and the subject and minimises the dreaded backscatter. Arms are twin 8" Ultralight sections, with a buoyant section on each side to balance the rig in the water whilst retaining a slight negative buoyancy.



Occasionally the pursuit will take me from one gully to the next - watch out for a turn of speed and a quick dart into the weed as the John Dory tries to lose his 'predator'. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/60th.

all but invisible to you. If you look closely at the markings of the John Dory you will see a distinct dark line running down the face of the fish over his 'nose' which is perfectly matched to the colour and width of bootlace seaweed. When he faces you head on you will realise why their bodies are designed wafer thin as they are able to almost disappear in front of your eyes!

Although the fish move and stalk prey very slowly they are able to strike at amazing speed with a protrusible (extendable) mouth which is very similar to that of a frogfish. I have occasionally seen yawning or stretch their mouths just as frog fish and wrasse/groupers do and often seen them strike, but sadly never been quick enough myself to capture that image!

I have dived my 'favourite' gulley several times this summer and am convinced that I am



The top of the kelp growth is a congregation point for many small species of fish, including the goldsinney wrasse cleaners and the three spot gobies. John Dory's feed constantly on the smaller gobies but have been known to take fish almost as large as themselves. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Minis, ISO 100, f8 1/40th.

meeting the same John Dory regularly within a few metres of our first encounter. So I am assuming that they are territorial to a degree and this fish began to accept me more quickly with each encounter.

The size of these fish varies from 15-20cm in length up to 30-40cm - they are voracious feeders and grow quickly apparently and my particular friend got visibly larger over a few weeks. The ideal lens for this subject is an 18-35mm zoom which enable both tight portraits of the fish and slightly wider compositions to include the habitat. By late summer the sightings of these fish become less frequent and with the first detectable drop in water temperature they obviously head south again.

The John Dory is one of the more spectacular fish in British waters with terrific camouflage and is



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a real challenge to find and photograph. If you are like me and enjoy the hunt then I can thoroughly recommend the challenge, but be prepared to exercise bucket loads of patience to find them and get close enough for a good portrait.

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