

Capture the Character

by Mark Webster

The underwater world is blessed with a multitude of colourful and sometimes weird subjects to keep even the most avid of photographers happy. As wildlife photographers we shoot a lot of 'portraits' of marine life perhaps illustrating their habitat as well, or isolating them from the rest of the reef. An objective that we share with most land photographers is trying to capture the 'character' of a subject so that there is a sense of communication with the viewer. This can be a challenge with fish, but it can be done with certain subjects and judicious composition and often a large measure of patience. There are also other species on the reef which ooze natural character and some are only too willing to pose and perform for the camera.

It helps to begin by identifying the species that may be willing to cooperate, which are likely to be those that predominantly sessile or territorial. Many fish species are constantly on the move and whilst 'grab' shots do work sometimes you don't have the opportunity to get the confidence of your subject. Larger species like sharks can also produce good portrait shots, but mostly only

by baiting for them, but for me do not have the character or expression that the smaller species offer.

Knowing something about your subject and its habitat is the first step, but getting to know a dive site by visiting regularly is certainly a big advantage as you can identify potential subjects and encourage them to accept your presence. This of course is not something we can all practice unless you dive regularly in your home waters, but it is a procedure you can adopt on a trip if you have the opportunity to dive a site repeatedly. There are 'shore based' locations which offer a selection of local dive sites that you can dive repeatedly during your stay (Lembeh, Tulamben in Bali and Bonaire are good examples) and if you join a live aboard with a dedicated group you can

Pygmy seahorse – these little beasties are technically challenging to photograph as they are so small but they are a very appealing subject as they do ooze with cute character. Lembeh Straits, Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Inon wet lens, ISO200, f11 @ 1/15.



often dive a site three or four times during a trip.

Whichever subject you have chosen, the most important element of the composition will normally be 'eye contact' or at least the appearance that the subject is peering into the lens and connecting with the viewer. Some subjects seem to look interested or inquisitive whilst others may look haughty or dismissive but it is important that you have gained the attention of your subject to establish this relationship to produce a more powerful image.

Fish

There are numerous species of fish to target as portrait opportunities, but you will have most success with those that are territorial or are camouflage hunters or are just plain inquisitive. Many of the blenny species fall into the latter category and no matter where you are diving in the world there are going to be species of blenny that have bug eyes and often colourful markings, patterns and appendages which make them such appealing subjects.

In the UK it is the tom pot blenny that takes top spot as reef poser. These comical looking little fish can be found living in the same hole in a reef for years on end. I have one

on my local beach dive site that I have been visiting and photographing for more than 5 years. He (I am making a sexist assumption here) is now so accustomed to my visits that he will immediately adopt a pose at the front on his hole when I arrive – and if the hole is vacant will generally return within a couple of minutes whilst I wait. He is so tame now that if I offer a gloved finger he will nibble it to see if there is any food on offer.

These blennies have tropical cousins of course and one of the most striking is the leopard spotted blenny found in the Red Sea and in other Indo Pacific reef areas. These guys are very much more timid and are extremely difficult to spot as their pattern helps them blend with the shadows in the branching corals which is home to them. They also like the shallow elevations of the reef and are often found in 2-3m depth where swell motion makes them a real challenge to photograph. Having spotted one it is then a game of patience. They normally have a route mapped out on their piece of the reef and will appear in the same spot every minute or two to take a look at you. Pre-focusing on these spots gives you the best chance of capturing them and a longer macro lens will keep you out of their personal space.

Another of my shy Red Sea favourites are the lemon gobies. These



Tompot blenny – A common species in the UK and Mediterranean with a very comical and expressive face which makes them an excellent macro portrait subject.

(Top right) Leopard spotted blenny – A timid and sometimes hard to find species which needs a good deal of patience to get close to for a frame filling portrait.

(Right) Lemon goby – A nervous but very territorial fish found mostly on table corals often in small groups. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Sigma 180mm macro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f11 @ 1/30.



tiny little fish live in small groups on table corals and present another test of the photographer's patience. They also have a defined patrol area on their chosen coral and again are very sensitive to a close approach, but when they do stop to look in your direction they have a most appealing expression on a perfect vivid yellow face with delicate white and blue markings. A longer macro lens between 150-200mm is the ideal tool for a frame filling shot, although you can still get very good images with a 105mm if you have the patience. You are generally shooting between the branching layers of a table coral, so watching the position of your strobes is important so as not to cast shadows – ring flash is ideal in these situations.

Frog fish are a species often difficult to find and also difficult to photograph as then blend so well with the reef. Occasionally you will find them on the edge of the reef or gripping sponges in an elevated position which allows you to get a low approach and separate them from their background. Although nobody would describe these fish as attractive (although I do admit to a certain passion for them) they do have wonderful expressions and seem to stare into the lens fully convinced that no matter how close you approach they cannot be seen.

A species that I have only



Frog fish – Occasionally you will find a frog fish on a strongly contrasting background. This one definitely does not look pleased to have been found. Lembeh Straits, Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f11 @ 1/125.

encountered once in Belize is the short nosed batfish, which visually appears to be more closely related to frog fish or hand fish (of Tasmania) than the other Indo Pacific species of the same name. They are in fact found throughout the Caribbean and also in the Pacific, in Galapagos for example, but like all camouflaged species are



Short nosed bat fish – Perhaps one of the strangest looking fish in the sea most often seen in sandy areas in the Caribbean. Confident of their camouflage, they will hold a pose but you may need to dig in the sand a little to get a lower view point. Belize, Nikon F90X, Subal housing, Nikkor 60mm micro, Sea & Sea YS50 & YS30, Fuji Sensia, F11 @ 1/60.

very difficult to spot in their preferred habitat of shallow sand and rubble sea beds. Their face is like no other and they have the most striking pair of red lips in the marine world which appears to have been smeared on like child's lipstick! They have a very haughty expression and will look disdainfully at you down their nose



John Dory – A temperate and Mediterranean species that is well camouflaged amongst seaweeds. These need patient stalking to get close but make a terrific subject.

– there is also a 'long nosed' species which just has a longer nose as far as I can tell.

John Dory are a species that I have previously waxed about in these pages. Aside from the challenge of tracking them down they do seem to have that indefinable element of character once you have gained their

confidence and they begin to pose for the camera. Their striking gold/green colouration, spiky appendages and mournful expression make them one of my favourites particularly as a portrait composition.

Other common species which are often easily approached and can present a good toothy grin for the camera are groupers (many different species) and lone barracuda which are quite common and often almost tame on popular sites in the Caribbean.

Cephalopods

Possibly one of the most entertaining and responsive creatures on the reef is the octopus. They are not always easy to find being past masters at camouflage, but once found they are normally very inquisitive and often keen to interact. Changes of shape, texture and even expression make these guys excellent character portrait subjects. They are found everywhere around the world but are particularly abundant in certain areas.

Perhaps the most spectacular octopus behaviour comes from the mimic and wonderpus species. These are not often encountered by chance, as they spend much of their time in burrows in the sand. Dive guides in locations like Lembeh Straits are skilled at recognizing their burrows



or spotting a fleeting glimpse of eyes peeking out of the sand. They will then set to work to tempt the octopus out into the open by using a long steel pole which they tap the seabed with in front of the lair. This normally does the trick and soon has the octopus out and looking for an easy meal it seems. It is at this stage that they will begin the now famous repertoire of shapes and imitations (although not all marine biologists agree that this is really mimicking behaviour), but



Coconut octopus – I began shooting this octopus in his clam shell home when I noticed a second octopus joining us and trying to muscle in on the action. The second octopus was perhaps jealous of the attention to the first or coveted his neat home, as he tried to pull the shells apart to extract the resident! Lembeh Straits, Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f11 @ 1/60.

Wonderpus octopus – these octopus can be difficult to compose well as they are always on the move. They will stop occasionally to rise up and look at you which provides the opportunity for a ‘head and shoulders’ portrait. Lembeh Straits, Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200, f11 @ 1/60.

between transformations they will often stop and rise up on their legs to take a good look at a photographer and this is for me the best opportunity to take a portrait shot.

Octopus are extremely intelligent, but is it possible for them to feel jealousy? I have one experience in the Lembeh Straits which might demonstrate this – whilst photographing a coconut octopus in a pair of clam shells, another slowly approached and watched for a few



minutes before coming between the camera and my subject. I moved to continue taking pictures of the other one in its shells and eventually this octopus moved again to be between us. When I moved once more to get a better angle on my primary subject this second octopus moved swiftly to the other and tried to pry apart the shells in what I thought was an attempt to evict him – was this to gain my attention? I am not certain but I withdrew after watching the struggle

for a few minutes.

Cuttle fish are a member of the same family and they also display a number of similar characteristics as their long armed cousins. They are less territorial and once spotted it is best to display patience and perhaps feign disinterest which normally encourages them to become more inquisitive. They will come very close eventually and perform a number of display activities which may be a form of communication with us but nevertheless produce excellent imaging opportunities.

Cuttle fish are a common species in the UK between late spring and early autumn. In the spring time they are busy mating and laying eggs and are most often found in eel grass beds in my locale. They are very approachable when mating or laying eggs and will often ignore your approach – this applies in tropical locations as well when you will often find a group of males watching over perhaps one or two females placing their eggs in the coral. One very colourful small species of cuttlefish which displays no stage fright is the flambuoyant cuttle fish which is common throughout the Far East. These guys are a dull dark brown to black colour until approached or are in the act of hunting, when they display a vivid set of colours ranging from bright yellow, through orange to



Flambuoyant cuttle fish – these small cuttle fish look dull brown until they are disturbed or are hunting when they light up with this impressive display of colour. Cuttlefish (right)– once you have their confidence, cuttlefish often seem to be trying to tell you something and signaling with their centre arms is very common. You can encourage them to display colours and patterns by returning the signal with waved fingers – but I have no idea what you might be offering!

Nikon D200, Subal ND20, Nikkor 105mm micro (left) 60mm micro (right), Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f16 @ 1/60.

red and white. In the Lembah Straits you will often find their eggs in old coconut shells and on my last visit I witnessed one of these eggs hatching whilst photographing them. The tiny guy that emerged was no more than a few millimeters long but went immediately into its flambuoyant display – amazing!

Lens choice for portrait shots depends entirely on the size of your

subject and whether or not you are trying to include some habitat as well. Even the larger fish can be captured effectively in tight face portrait with a 50/60mm macro lens, so this is as always a good all round work horse. If you know the dive site well and the subject you are targeting then that will make lens choice a little simpler, but once under the water as always almost anything can turn up unexpectedly

so be prepared to be flexible! By concentrating on the communication with your subject you can turn an image of a common subject into a potential competition winner.

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