

Seasonal Selection

by Mark Webster

Those of us of a certain age will remember the days when our mother's used to plan the family menu based on the produce available during the prevailing season. Now of course we have global distribution and delivery of almost any food you can imagine at any time of year, which means that we can buy strawberries at Christmas time in the UK for example. Progress to be sure, but is it for the best? Despite the gloomy predictions of global warming the seasons do still prevail in the temperate seas around my home coastline of Cornwall in the UK. These changes provide an interesting variety of different photographic subjects to be pursued dependant on the time of year.

Although there are hundreds of excellent dive sites around this coastline, I find that I make many of my dives in two of the bays in this area – Falmouth Bay and Porthcurno Bay, which is close to Lands End. Both of these areas offer differing topographies and habitats and between them offer almost the whole selection of marine life you are likely to encounter elsewhere on this coast. The advantage of repetitive diving individual sites is of course familiarity with the marine life, but also the opportunity to observe the changes as the seasons progress.

January to March - Nudibranchs, Sea hares and Lumpsuckers

Depending on how cold the winter has been the nudibranchs begin to appear as early as January.



Like all nudibranchs Polycera quadrilineata are hermaphrodite and whenever they meet will begin to copulate. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 200 f16 1/30

The largest and most common species will be the sea lemons (Archidoris pseudoargus), which can be as long as 50mm (2") and are seen in a variety of colours. Their arrival is heralded by the appearance of rosettes of delicately coloured eggs on the reef and you may be lucky enough to find them in the act of laying or mating, but if not the animals will not be far from the egg masses although they can be remarkably well camouflaged. Other species include Polycera quadrilineata and Limacia clavigera which are white with bright yellow markings but much smaller and mostly found on kelp or the red lettuce seaweed they feed on. These little critters really need additional magnification, perhaps 2:1, to photograph effectively.

Sea hares are closely related to nudibranchs and are normally also common at the beginning of the year when they congregate in shallow water to breed. Although not as striking as the nudibranchs



Mating sea hares – unlike nudibranchs, sea hares appear to adopt a more traditional method of copulation. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 200 f11 1/60

they do come in a wide range of colour variations and patterns and average in size between 2cm to 12cm. At the end of 2007 we had an unusual event – an invasion of giant sea hares! The late summer and autumn had been very warm and unusually calm and in late October reports of sea hares as large as rugby balls began to surface. The exaggeration turned out to be only marginal and we soon discovered hundreds of the large (up to 30cm+) sub tropical species Aplysia depilans busy mating in pairs or in groups of five or six the shallows of Helford river and throughout Falmouth Bay. Whilst these monsters are not particularly colourful it was an impressive sight to see the seabed so well populated with them and their coils of colourful egg strings. The first big storm in late November soon chased them off.

One of the strangest looking spring visitors is the lumpsucker which looks a little like a cross

between a frog fish and a gurnard. Although the lumpsucker is quite common in our northern waters it is not often found in the warmer waters of Cornwall. Early to mid spring is the breeding period for these fish when the female will lay her eggs in shallow sheltered waters, often amongst the kelp stipes or in some fissure in the reef to protect them from heavy swells. She then abandons them to the tender care of her mate who will stay with the eggs to tend and guard them until they hatch. This incubation period normally lasts from two to four weeks and throughout this time the male lumpsucker will almost continuously oxygenate the developing eggs by puffing water over them through his mouth, whilst also seeing off predators seeking an easy meal. Throughout this period the male lumpsucker changes colour to a bright red to orange livery instead of his more normal and effective camouflage colours of drab brown and green. Whilst guarding the eggs they do not eat and gradually get weaker and are often covered in sea lice. When the eggs hatch it is often too late for the male and they rarely survive.

March to May - Nest Builders and Egg Watchers

One of the more common wrasse encountered on the reef is the corkwing which seems always to be on the move and can be difficult to photograph well. In the spring time the males are more concerned with building a nest in preparation for spawning and will be observed diving in and out of the kelp collecting loose bit of weed and debris from the sea bed. If you watch patiently for a while a pattern of movement will emerge and you can follow the fish cautiously back to the location on



A face only a mother could love – male lumpsuckers certainly have interesting facial features to produce a striking portrait in their bright orange breeding livery. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 60mm micro, Sea & Sea YS50 and YS30 flash, Fujichrome Velvia 50 ASA, f8 1/60



When the male corkwing wrasse is nest building they are constantly on the move. Follow them slowly until you see the nest site and then wait patiently for your opportunity. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Fujichrome Velvia 50 ASA, f8 1/60



Black gobies also guard their eggs during spring time and will firmly stand their ground even when a photographer gets close. His eggs are below the shell he is resting on. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 200 f11 1/180



Even though these sharks can be as much as 10 metres in length a fish eye lens is often too wide. A short range zoom is the best tool or a lens which gives you the equivalent of 20mm on a 35mm frame. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, ISO 200 f8 1/60

the reef where the nest is being built. During the nest construction and after spawning when the male is tending the egg mass the corkwing will remain close to the nest site and often settle on it for a few moments. These are the best opportunities to capture these strikingly patterned fish and if you are patient enough the male will soon relax and present good opportunities to get some close up shots.

During the same period there are other male species left to tend their developing offspring. Amongst these are common and black gobies, Butter fish or Gunnels, Tompot blennies and Shannies. The male Shanny changes

from its usual camouflage livery to dark grey or black with pale lips when guarding the eggs whilst, unusually, both the male and female Butter fish take turns to guard their eggs. All these species lay their eggs in small crevices on the reef or under stones and shells and will often be seen moving around them to flush water across the eggs and oxygenate them.

May to July - Basking Sharks

If you are keen on big animal action then it is difficult to beat the basking shark. The second biggest fish in the sea (after the whale shark)

is completely harmless to the intrepid photographer and it fact is now a protected species in the UK and throughout Europe. Recent years off the Cornish coast have seen significant numbers of sharks sighted, running into the hundreds, and also some not previously seen behaviour, notably breaching in a similar fashion to great whites, only in this case it is not associated with feeding.

Basking sharks are thought to be migratory, following the rich plankton blooms in temperate waters on which they feed. During the late winter the waters of the south west reach their lowest temperature which often results in the best visibility, but not a lot of fish activity due to the low food levels. As spring approaches the surface water temperature begins to warm slowly until the first period of extended sunshine, maybe only three or four days, which is the catalyst for an explosive growth of zooplankton. This generally occurs in early May and as soon as I hear complaints about the soupy visibility in the local dive shop I know that the first sharks will not be far behind. The first sightings are generally from the local cove boat

fishermen who often see them whilst hauling their pots.

You need to develop a good technique for getting close to the sharks and it helps to have done some training with your snorkel and wet suit – the chase can be hard work! Most encounters are brief. After you have spotted your target shark from the boat the best technique is to slip into the water ahead of it and watch the dorsal and tail fins swim towards you on the surface. You can then snorkel on an intercepting course until the shark bursts from the murk into your viewfinder. When feeding they will ignore you and veer off a metre or two away and at this point you will need to put on a burst of speed to stay alongside briefly for a few head and tail shots. The plankton will often break up into patches and you can observe individual sharks cruising around the edges as they consume their own personal banquet. This behaviour presents perhaps the best opportunity to position yourself on the edge and wait for the shark to swim by your time and again.

The best photographs will be taken using natural light only – forget

your flash as it will only produce monumental backscatter and be too unwieldy to move quickly on the surface. A wide angle lens is essential but a fish eye is generally too wide unless it is a film lens on a crop sensor. So for a crop sensor a 12-24mm zoom is ideal and for a full frame chip try either a 20mm or 17-35mm zoom.

Depending on sunlight choose ISO 100 or 200, set your shutter speed to 125th and meter the water below the surface and then perhaps open half a stop on the aperture – the sharks are grey and sometimes quite dark. Auto focus will often hunt on all the particles in the water, so fix your focus at a range that will fill the lens with shark, perhaps 1-1.5m, wait until the shark is sharp as it sweeps towards you and then shoot you four or five frames whilst beginning the swim to keep up!

June to September - Jelly Fish

The jelly fish season tends to follow the basking sharks but can sometimes overlap if the plankton bloom persists into the summer months. Although several species of jelly fish are reliably seen each year there is often an explosion of a certain species every couple of years. More often this is the large Rhysostoma (sometimes locally known as the



moon jelly) which can reach half a metre or more in diameter, but occasionally it will be the Compass jelly fish (*Chrysaora hysoscella*) or the Lion's Mane (*Cyanea capillata*). The Lion's Mane can have very long tendrils which can give you an unpleasant sting whilst the other two species are pretty much benign.

All three species are most often encountered in shallow water drifting with the tide but when numbers are high they will often be swept into sheltered bays to plague the swimmers but make easier photographic targets. Juvenile fish (horse mackerel??)

(Left) Compass jellyfish are another species that appear with the plankton blooms. The tentacles can give an unpleasant sting, so be cautious if working close under the jelly fish. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f11 1/80.

(Right) Cuttlefish begin to appear around April when they come into the shallows to mate and lay eggs. Eel grass beds are a good place to search and their amorous activities often distract them from your approach. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 60mm micro, Sea & Sea YS50 and YS30, Fujichrome Velvia 50ASA, f8 1/60



often join these jelly fish from their planktonic stage to seek protection from predators by hiding in the canopy or amongst the tendrils of the jelly fish, where they seem not to be bothered by the stinging cells. A zoom wide angle lens is best for these plus a touch of flash to light them up against the sun on the surface.

April to November - Cuttle Fish

You can normally see cuttle fish any time between April and November although activity is different over these months. Early in the year they

begin to appear in shallow water after the winter storms to mate and lay their eggs. The average size of an adult cuttle fish seen in our waters in 20-25cm long, but during the spring breeding season we often encounter much larger example of up to 60cm in length. Their preferred breeding ground is amongst the eel grass which can be found in several locations in the far south west. They are often very easy to approach whilst courting and laying their eggs, often at the base of the eel grass stalks or on kelp stipes.

But then these larger animals disappear and for the remainder of



Cuttlefish have amazing camouflage and colour change skills. They can either mimic their surroundings or as in this case display a bold pattern. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f8 1/60

the spring and summer we are back to the 'average' size but often in large numbers. They congregate in shallow sheltered bays and seem to prefer light gravel or heavy sand seabeds where there are thick growths of standing seaweeds (bootlace, Japweed etc.) to hide amongst.

In September and October we start to see the juveniles appearing ranging in size from 2cm to 10cm in length but possessing all the camouflage, pattern and texture skills that the adults have even down to miniature jets of ink as they scoot off

into the seaweeds. If you dive a site regularly over the season the resident cuttle fish will accept you and become bolder with each dive to the point where they will all but ignore you and continue to feed on the small fish that are also attracted by your presence.

September to November - Atlantic Trigger Fish

If, like me, your most memorable encounters with tropical trigger fish involve some nifty defensive swimming and repeated chewing of



Grey Atlantic trigger fish will generally pick a small reef area and remain close to it for several weeks late in the season. This seems to be associated with cleaning stations (by goldsinney wrasse) and the opportunity to school with bass and pollack. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f8 1/60

your fins by angry titan trigger fish, you might be less than delighted with the prospect of meeting a related species in temperate waters. In recent years we have been seeing increasing numbers of the Atlantic or grey trigger fish (*Balistes carolinensis*) which begins to appear in late summer, but fortunately has not developed a taste for fins yet.

These trigger fish are mostly shell fish diners and they will be often

be observed eating mussels from both reef and wreckage or picking winkles delicately from kelp fronds before spitting out the remains of the shell. Juveniles have not been reported so far and it seems unlikely that they spawn in our waters as this apparently commonly occurs in temperatures of 21°C or more. However, the temperatures off the Cornish coast rose to 19-21°C for two or three months this summer so it may only be



Red mullet are closely related to the Mediterranean and sub tropical goat fish and begin to appear in early summer as the water temperature increases. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f11 1/80.

a matter of time.

These trigger fish are obviously very happy with their temporary environment, although I have wondered on occasion if they may be suffering from a bit of an identity crisis. On many occasions they are seen in groups of five or six swimming amongst schools of bass or grey mullet and keeping up very well despite a very different swimming style. Whether this behaviour is for protection or amusement is difficult to tell, but with the exception of anglers I cannot imagine what would predate on the trigger fish in our waters.

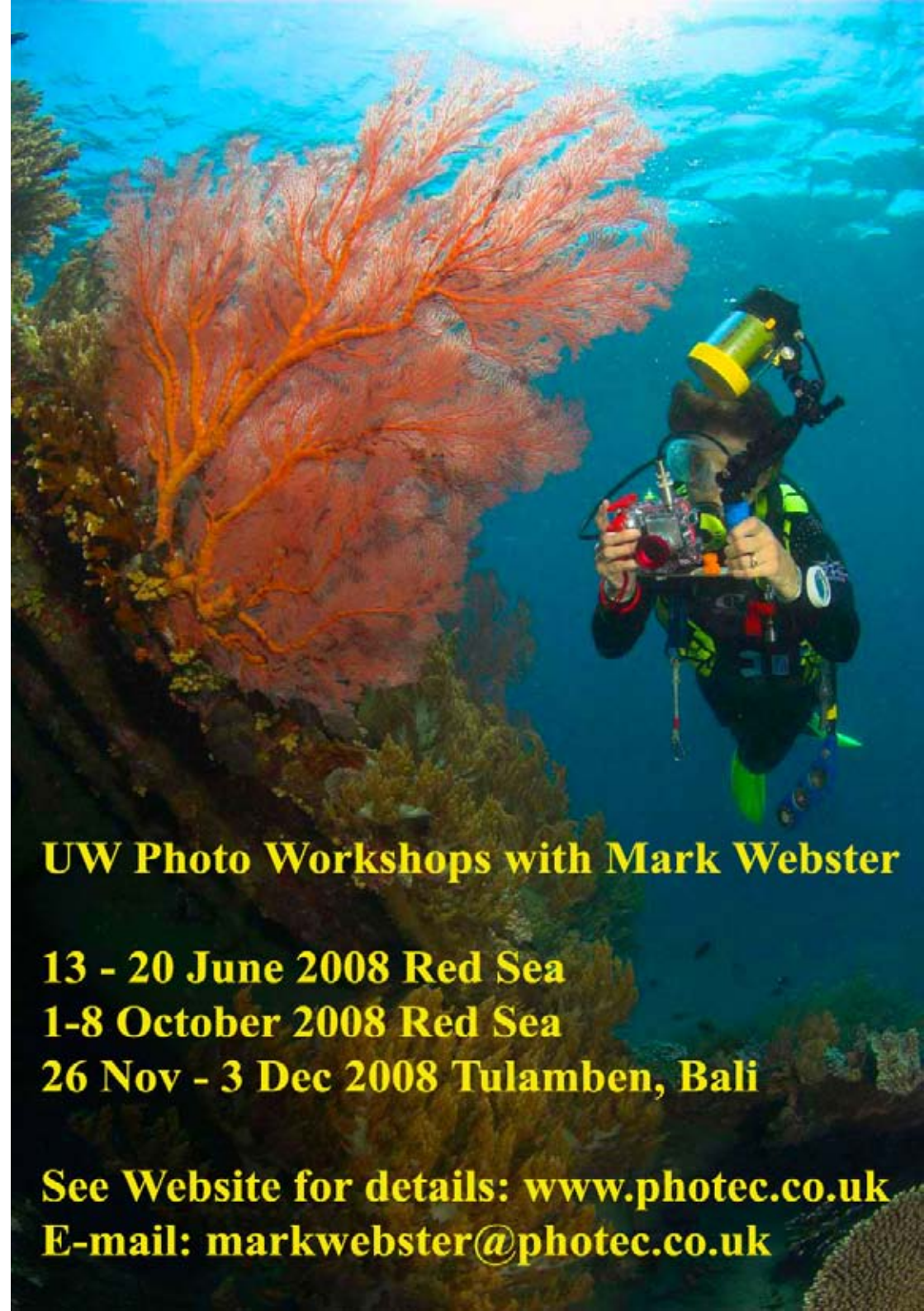
Another late summer visitor are two members of the red mullet family, closely related to the goat fish seen in sub tropical and tropical locations. There are slight differences between *Mullus surmuletus* and *Mullus barbatus*, but the latter is somewhat rarer and only seen in south west waters. These fish are generally seen in ones and twos sifting the sandy seabed for small crustaceans, but

occasionally you may see schools of up to twenty fish together, particularly juveniles.

All too soon the season comes to an end with the arrival of another winter. This for me is not a signal for me to hang up the dry suit for a few months. Although the winter can be stormy we often get periods of high pressure which bring calm seas and sunny days and an opportunity to investigate what is happening at local dive sites. In the chill of winter the visibility can reach as much as 30m and in these conditions a dive on the offshore reefs can be spectacular. Even if you are photographing familiar subjects it is an opportunity to play with new equipment, improve compositions, hone basic skills and perhaps experiment with new and unusual techniques.

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