

Muck, Glorious Muck

by Mark Webster

We can all understand the appeal of gin clear waters and the dazzling colours of the coral reef, but how many of us find the thought of a low viz excursion onto a dark sandy or muddy seabed in search of sea life enticing? Why would you, you might ask yourself, but this style of diving is becoming increasingly popular with those divers who have an interest in marine life or photography and they are willing to travel to the far flung corners of the world to pursue it. The big attraction is the diversity of fish and invertebrates to be discovered, many of which are small and very well camouflaged and so can present a real challenge to track down. Exotic locations such as the Lembeh Straits, Mabul and Tulamben are often referred to as the best by the connoisseurs, but do you really need to travel that far for a similar experience? I think not, and if you are prepared to explore some of our shallow river mouths and estuaries, perhaps as an alternative to begin with on a rough day, you might be surprised at what you can find.

The best topography to look for are the deeper estuaries which do not dry out at low water, offer shelter from poor weather and have a mixture of seabed conditions to include rock outcrops, gravel, sand and silt. My favourite spot on my own home patch is the Helford River estuary which offers a wide range of habitats and is conveniently positioned near some equally attractive après dive habitats, namely riverside pubs which are handy for post dive recovery. The topography is ideal and consists of a rocky foreshore of granite and shale, which extends as reef outcrops into the estuary, with small coves and beaches of pebbles and shingle which gradually degrades to a heavy grey granite sand. The sand line slowly pales and becomes finer at which point the first eel grass beds begin to appear. The Helford is one of the few locations in the UK where eel grass thrives and it provides a rich habitat for all manner of marine life. As the depth increases towards the centre of the estuary the sand becomes softer and more silty and is peppered with small reef outcrops. At high water the maximum depth generally ranges between 10-15m and the currents are negligible, but you do need to be aware of potential boat traffic in the centre of the river, particularly the silent ones driven by sail! Dives can be made from one of the small coves or by boat, but if you choose a beach dive, as I normally do, then this normally involves a bit of a trek with your kit, so small bottles are the order of the day.

The visibility in the estuary will vary with the



The shoreline at Durgan Beach provides easy entry following a few minutes walk from the road - Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal housing, Elitechrome EX, f8 @ 125th



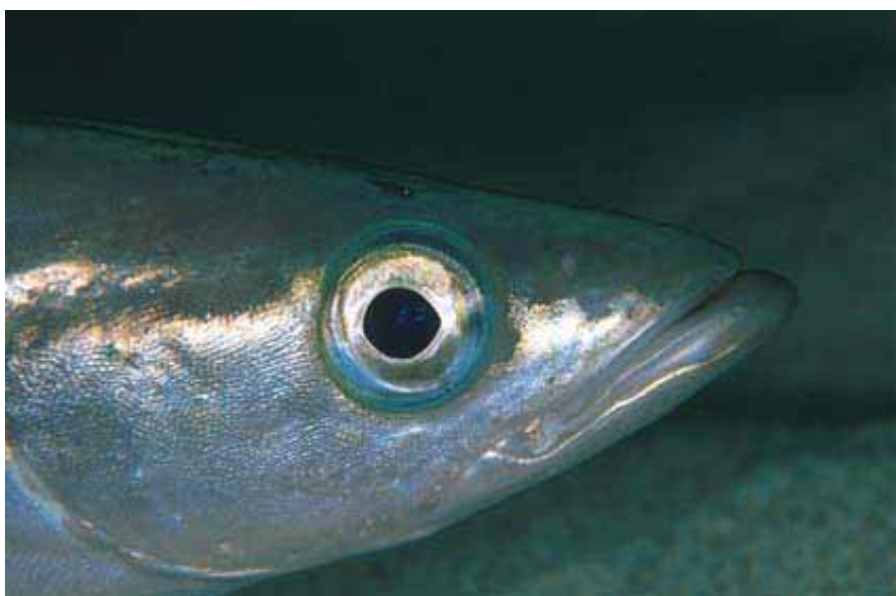
Nudibranch and eggs - There are a variety of nudibranchs to be found here, including some which are rarely seen on open water reefs. The early spring is the best time to find many species of nudibranchs and sea hares laying their spawn- Nikon F801, 60mm, Subal housing, YS50 + YS30, Velvia f11@ 60th



Tom pot blenny - The small outcrops of reef which are home to all the common rock pool species like this comical looking tom pot blenny- Nikon F801, 105mm, Subal housing, YS50 + YS30, Velvia f11@ 60th



John Dory - These elegant fish appear in high summer but are very difficult to spot in amongst the eel grass. Once you have spotted one be patient as they are naturally inquisitive and wil come to you eventually - Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal housing, Inon Quad flash, Velvia f11 @125th



Pollack - If you dive towards the mouth of the river you will find many reef fish feeding on small fry. Pollack are notoriously difficult to get close to, but using a ring flash seems to disturb them far less - Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal housing, Inon Quad flash, Velvia f11 @125th

level of rainfall, but on average will vary from 2-3m up to 10m during calm dry periods in the summer. When the waters appear murky it is best to dive on the flood tide which will push some of the brackish water up river and often produces better visibility under a surface layer of 2-3m. A beach dive gives you the opportunity to explore the changes of habitat as you progress deeper, but you must remember to move slowly to avoid disturbing the bottom and look carefully for small life to get the best from this experience.

On calm days at high water the shallows are a good place to spot grey mullet foraging amongst the shingle. These look approachable from the surface but

they are shy fish and it will require a great deal of patience to get close to them. It is best to decide on the habitat to be explored for each dive and concentrate your efforts rather than try to cover everything in one dive. Even at high water the eel grass beds are no more than 50m or so from the shore and begin in depths of only 6m. This is a good place to start your searches as these beds hide a wide variety of species. Much of the eel grass is decorated with small anemones and peacock worms which reach up to feed in the currents. Exploring the base of the grass stalks and in amongst the dead stalks and sand is most productive and you will soon discover all is not what it seems. There are numerous spindly decorator spider crabs which suspend themselves between stalks almost like spiders on a web and the detritus on the seabed will reveal numerous pipefish, sticklebacks and in late summer juvenile cuttle fish only 25-30cm long. There are a variety of juvenile fish sheltering in the beds and also reportedly mane sea horses although I have never been lucky enough to see one, but they have been photographed in the area this year.

There are also well camouflaged hunters within the eel grass preying on the small and juvenile species. Patient observation will reveal scorpion fish resting on the bottom, often almost covered by weed and debris, and the elegant john dory which weaves its way slowly between the vertical stalks. Less mobile residents include several species of nudibranchs and sea hares which are numerous in the early spring. A tell tale sign of both species are the intricate spirals and twirls of their spawn on the base of individual blades of eel grass which will often lead you to the perpetrator.

Moving beyond the eel grass beds towards the centre of the estuary brings you onto a sand and silt seabed which is home to a number of bottom dwellers. The most common are dragonets,



Topknot flat fish - Several species of flat fish are found on the sand, but topknots are most often found in fissures and shelves in the reef - Nikon F801, 60mm, Subal housing, YS50 + YS30, Velvia f11@ 60th



Decorator crab - Just like their tropical cousins these small crabs hide in the arms of snakelock

topknots, dabs, plaice and if you are lucky the occasional angler fish and thorn-back ray. In the spring and early summer there are also adult cuttle fish which come into the shallow waters to mate and lay their eggs in the eel grass beds. Diving closer to the mouth of the estuary will reveal small schools of pollack in search of sand eels or juvenile species to feed on.

There are a number of reef outcrops which host all the usual shallow water species of anemones,

sponges, wrack weeds and lettuce sea weeds. The shelves and fissures which dissect these rocks are home to edible crabs, velvet swimming crabs, prawns, squat lobsters and the occasional large common lobster who will boldly march out to meet your intrusion. In the summer months investigate the arms of the snakelock anemones which are often sheltering one or more decorator crabs which cover themselves in a fine cloak of sponge. Fish species include tom



Juvenile cuttle fish - Juvenile cuttle fish, no more than 30mm long, begin to appear in early autumn. They are often almost completely buried in the sand with just their eyes showing. When disturbed they will go through the whole cephalopod repertoire in miniature including colour and pattern changes and tiny puffs of ink - Nikon F801, 60mm, Subal housing, YS50 + YS30, Velvia f11 @ 60th



Pipe fish - Summer time is the best period to find pipefish, sticklebacks and if you are lucky, sea horses amongst the sea weeds. They are difficult to spot but will often lie motionless once found making them easy photographic subjects - Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal housing, Inon Quad flash, Velvia f11 @ 125th

pot blennies, black face blennies, leopard spotted gobies and shannies.

For photographers the best tool here is either a 60mm macro lens for the larger subjects or a 105mm macro lens if you are looking for the smaller shy subjects. The visibility is rarely good enough to use a wide angle lens, but on those rare days a 20mm will be useful for capturing the schools of fish or larger rays. Approach your subjects carefully so as to disturb as little sediment as possible and try to work into the tidal flow particularly if you have a buddy close by in order to minimise suspended particles. The shallow water depths means you can enjoy extended bottom times to adjust your eye to the terrain and track down those subjects hiding in it more successfully. Sites like these may never have the tropical appeal or the more flamboyant species of the far eastern destinations but they can be equally rewarding and produce some very satisfying photographic experiences.

How to find Durgan Beach:

Durgan beach is on the Helford River just a few miles from the harbour town of Falmouth. Follow signs from Falmouth for the village of Mawnan Smith and then signs for Glendurgan Gardens and Helford Passage. Approximately 1.5 miles out from Mawnan Smith turn left at a crossroads sign posted to Durgan. There is no parking on the narrow road above the beach or in the hamlet of Durgan itself. You will need to drop your equipment at the top of the steep path down to the beach and park your car in the National Trust car park a few hundred metres back up the hill.

Mark Webster

Mark Webster is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' (published by Fountain Press) and hosts regular workshops both overseas and in the UK. For further details visit Mark's website at www.photec.co.uk

