

The Appeal of Spring Time

by Mark Webster

My workshop clients often question the value of temperate or cold water diving, and indeed my sanity, when I extol its virtues. If you have been trained in warm tropical conditions then it may be difficult to imagine the attractions of cold and sometimes murky water diving, but the most likely misconception is that there is nothing to see or photograph. The issue of water temperature can be easily dealt with by using the correct equipment and a dry suit with a good thermal under suit is a must for photography. Suits and equipment feel bulkier and heavier than tropical equipment, but a little practise will soon familiarise you with the techniques required for comfortable diving. As for marine life subjects temperate waters can be every bit as rich and varied as tropical seas, but of course we need to be able to adapt our techniques to suit the (sometimes less than perfect) conditions. There is no shortage of subjects and these can vary during the year more than the tropics dependant on the prevailing season.

Spring normally comes early in the south west of the UK as winters

are generally mild, but this year saw one of the coldest winters for some time including several snow falls which is a rare event. Consequently, the breeding process in particular has been a little slower and we have had to wait until April and May for some real activity. It is often the smallest things which first catch your attention and a good example of this are the little rosettes and spiral trails of eggs which appear over the reef which indicate that the nudibranchs and sea hares have begun to breed. You will find some of the perpetrators on the reef itself, particularly the sea lemons which come in a variety of colour combinations from yellow and pink to brown and green or pure white to

(Right) Finding a sea hare grazing on a kelp frond gives the opportunity to shoot the subject with a natural light background. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/20.

(Far right) A mass of sea hare eggs in various colours which are derived from the food source during mating. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/60.



Pendennis Point in Falmouth offers some easy and challenging entry points to some excellent beach diving. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO100, programme mode.





Male Tompot blennies will be found guarding their egg masses but are still approachable for a close up image despite this. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/60.

match the colours of the sponges they feed on. For other species you should look closely at the kelp, sea lettuces, bryozoans and hydroids where you will often find various exotic looking examples in the process of mating or laying their eggs. In fact it is often the egg mass which you will spot first and only close inspection through the macro lens will reveal the well camouflaged nudibranch culprit.

This Spring the nudibranch activity has been joined by an explosion of sea hares (*Aplysiomorpha*). Most years we will find sea hares in the shallows for a few weeks, but every three or four years the population increases exponentially and you can barely move without seeing them in pairs or a mass orgy of copulation and egg laying. The sea hares can make attractive photographic subjects as they come in various hues and patterns (their colour changes dependant on the food source) and you can vary your technique to capture portraits, close ups and the breeding activity. They



Polycera quadrilineata laying eggs on a kelp frond after mating. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad Flash, ISO200 f16 1/20.

are most often found on the seaweeds that abound on the sea bed in springtime, but it is also worth checking out the kelp fronds on the reef as well. Where the subject is elevated on the kelp it may offer an opportunity to introduce some natural light behind the subject. This year the sea hares have varied in size from 60mm (2.5") to a quite large 120mm (5") although some years you might see the sub tropical species (*Aplysia depilans*) that can be 300mm (12") or more. A 60mm macro lens on DX or FX format is a good choice, whilst a wide angle lens can be used on the larger species.

Nudibranchs provide the most variety in both colouring and appearance. There are two major groups to watch out for; the Dorids, or sponge eaters, and the Aeolids which feed mostly on hydroids and bryozoans. The feature which is common to both of them is that their gills are external and located on their backs.

The most common of the Dorids is the 'sea



Coryphella browni preparing to mate on a kelp frond. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100 f14 1/20.

lemon', so called due to its often vivid yellow colouring and knobby texture which it has adopted to resemble its main food source, the common yellow sponge. Sea lemons do in fact come in a variety of colours and textures, from smooth grey to orange and purple, dependant on which species of sponge they feed upon (there are over 250 known species of sponge in the English Channel alone!), but they all rely on their camouflage as their first defence against predators. Size of this species varies enormously from a few millimetres to 12 centimetres (1/4" to 4") and all have a wide flat shape developed to firmly grip their sponge habitat.

The Aeolids adopt a different defensive strategy and aim to be seen as clearly as possible by their predators. They come in a quite staggering array of shapes and colours which advertise the fact that they are poisonous (some excrete sulphuric acid), sting or just taste unpleasant! This group feeds on bryozoans and hydroids especially,



Corkwing wrasse are busy building nests in April and May. Watch patiently to see where the nest is and then wait for the fish to return with materials and capture a close up. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f11 1/60.

which have their own stinging cell system. The nudibranch is able to ingest these and then store them in the tips of their cerata (the filaments on their backs) which they shed and regenerate if they are attacked. Some species are also able to graze upon the stinging cells of anemones to for the same purpose. These species are quite small normally, perhaps 10-25mm (1/3" to 1") so a 105mm macro lens with a wet or dry dioptre is the perfect tool to capture them.

Most nudibranchs, and sea hares, are hermaphrodite (both male and female at the same time) and breeding may vary from every month to once every twelve months. However, April and May appear to be very active months in the British Isles when the rocks will be peppered with the egg "rosettes" of nudibranchs which are normally pigmented with the dominant colour of the parent. When the young larva hatch they float to the surface



Shannies, closely related to the Tompot blenny, are found in shallow water and rock pools and will pose for the camera if you are patient. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/60.

to drift with the current during which time they reabsorb a small spiral shell that they start life with. After a few days they sink back to the seabed where their life cycle may only be as much as twelve months.

The fish are beginning to get frisky as well and this is often a good time to observe fish behaviour at close quarters when their minds are on other more natural activities. The male corkwing wrasse are not the boldest of reef residents, but now they may allow a closer approach as they are engrossed in nest building. You will normally spot them scavenging at the edge of the reef for bits of loose weed and other debris which they will pick up in their mouths and then transport to the nest site. Having found this you can then hover for a little while watching this determined toil and being largely ignored by the fish.

Other male species will be busy guarding



Black faced blenny's are frequently found under overhanging sections of reef and are both inquisitive and bold enough for a close up shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/60.

their fertilised eggs from predators until they hatch. These include the ever appealing Tompot blenny and perhaps the ugliest fish in UK waters, the Lumpsucker. The shanny, or common blenny, is normally shy and quite difficult to spot with his excellent camouflage, but during breeding his colour darkens to grey or black whilst the lips go white and he becomes more bold with his parental duties. The fact that these subjects stay in one place for days or weeks means that you can re-visit them and improve your images or try different techniques and lens combinations.

You may be lucky enough to spot one or two unusual species dependant on the water temperature. One of these is the Black-faced blenny (*Tripterygion delaisi*) which is normally found much further south in the Atlantic and is common in the Mediterranean. The name comes from the male's splendid breeding livery of bright yellow



Squid come inshore to lay their eggs during the night and the following day you may find a section of reef or wreckage in this case festooned with their egg cases. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100 f11 1/30.



Swimming crabs and velvet swimming crabs are often found in mating pairs with the male protecting the female in preparation for the duration of the mating period. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO200 f11 1/60.



Cuttle fish are another species that come into the shallows to mate and lay their eggs. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100 f11 1/30.

or orange and a very dark or black face. We seem to see the female more frequently which is a very attractive fish but is often hard to spot as they like to skip around on overhanging reef faces and blend quite well with the seaweeds, sponges and bryozoans. You often spot these fish simply through their movement initially, but they are quite bold and seem inquisitive when a focus light finds them. Again, a 60mm lens is perfect for all these blenny species.

Hidden amongst the kelp, weeds and sea grass you may find little clusters of dark 'sea grapes' or a clutch of white lozenge shaped egg sacks. These are evidence that both cuttle fish and squid are in the area mating. If you look carefully on the gravel bottom you will more than likely find some well camouflaged cuttle fish who will put on a fine display of pattern, colour and camouflage changes

if approached gently. Squid are occasionally seen during the day, but if you want a better chance of seeing them you need to return after dark and wait patiently with a powerful torch which may attracts a few fleeting visits.

Searching through the kelp stypes may also reveal several different species of starfish beginning their spawning behaviour at this time of year. Often the spiny starfish can be found climbing the kelp stypes to release its spawn into the water column to be carried away on the current. Others, like the brightly hued 'blood henry' will lay their brood directly onto the reef by raising its body up and seeming to stand on tip toe.

Back on the reef, investigating the various cracks and fissures you will find various species of crabs also preparing to mate. Male swimming crabs and cancer crabs clutch the recently moulted

Topknot flatfish are often missed due to their excellent camouflage but are normally convinced you cannot see them. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad Flash, ISO100 f16 1/60.





The biggest fish you may encounter in late spring is of course the basking shark. Even though they may appear in large numbers they do require some planning and patience to capture an image. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, ISO200 f11 1/60.

females to their chests to protect her whilst waiting until she is ready to mate. Following which she will carry her brood with her until they hatch. Spider crabs come inshore to breed as well and you may encounter small congregations of them waiting for the females to moult when the competition between the males for partners will begin.

The first mild sunny days of spring soon propagate the first phytoplankton or algae bloom which can quickly reduce visibility and turn the waters dark green both inshore and offshore. However, as usual nature has all this planned and this bloom is

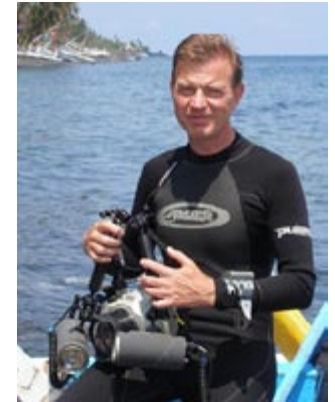
timed to coincide with the hatching of the millions of larvae from the various spawnings. These will feed on the algae as they develop and in turn create their own plankton bloom which will be fed on by others further up the food chain. At the end of this food chain is of course our largest fish species, the basking shark, which will appear in May or June and will provide some electric encounters for those patient enough to stalk them and forsake their diving kit for a snorkel.

You may have to look harder for some of the smaller subjects on temperate reefs but the capture of images is just as satisfying

and exciting as it tropical waters, particularly if you produce a good image in challenging conditions. Beach diving means that you can take your time and stay shallow, where the best available light prevails, and make solo dives if that appeals to you. Search your target area for rocky foreshores that allow an easy entry with a camera, but remember to time your dives to suit the height of the tide. I have one or two excellent dive sites that are only accessible one hour each side of high water, when the water falls too low you are stranded or have a long swim back to the beach! Make sure you can stay warm and

dry with the correct equipment and choose a lens to suit your subject and then take the plunge into those chilly waters!

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Underwater Photography Workshops with Mark Webster 2010



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