Review: MarineLife Keywords

by Alex Mustard

Keywords are the way that searches find our images. This can be the search engine within our own image catalogue, Google on the internet or the search facility in a stock photo agency. They all work with the same keywords, which are stored in the image metadata in a format that has been standardised since the early 1990s by the IPTC (International Press Telecommunications Council). It is a system that works well.

The only real downside is that there are few more laborious and mind-numbing tasks in underwater photography than typing in a series of keywords for a picture. Some metadata, like our camera settings are generated automatically by our camera, but keywords must be typed in manually. It may only take a minute for an individual shot, but it soon adds up. The most taxing keywords to do are the species names, which have to be checked letter by letter as we type them in and are probably the most important keyword of all.

Anybody who has ever keyworded images will be thrilled to hear that help is at hand courtesy of a new product MarineLife Keyword List (MLKL), developed by underwater photographers Marty Snyderman, Barry Guimbellot and Eric Cheng. It costs $99 USD and is available as a download from their website:

www.marinekeywords.com

MLKL is simply a list of common and species names for over 12,000 commonly photographed marine species that imports into our existing photo management software without adversely affecting the current keyword database. The names are there, ready and waiting, and we only have type the first few letters to find them. It saves a huge amount of typing species names and just an importantly checking their spelling. And even better the system makes it easy to add a more complete taxonomic listing. These, for example, are the keywords that were generated for an oceanic whitetip shark, all at the click of a mouse: Marine Life, Fishes, Cartilaginous Fishes: Chondrichthyes, Ground Sharks: Carcharhiniformes, Requiem Sharks: Carcharhindidae, oceanic whitetip shark: Carcharhinus longimanus.

A pair of mimic octopuses mating. The MarineLife Keyword List generated the following keyword list for this species: Marine Life, Invertebrates , Mollusks: Mollusca, Cephalopods: Cephalopoda, Octopus: Octopoda, mimic octopus: Thaumoctopus mimicus.
Nikon D700 + Nikon 60mm AFS. Subal housing. 2x Inon Z240 strobes. ISO 200.

Importantly this product is designed to plug straight into digital workflow software, such as Adobe's Lightroom and Apple's Aperture. Adding keywords directly at the RAW file stage means that the keywords remain part of the metadata and are carried on through all versions of the image. The software does not help you identify creatures, but with many subjects our gap in the knowledge is between the common name and the scientific name or in the correct spelling of that latin. MLKL is perfect in this regard. It is also an ideal tool in the field, where there is often a local expert to whiz you through the IDs.

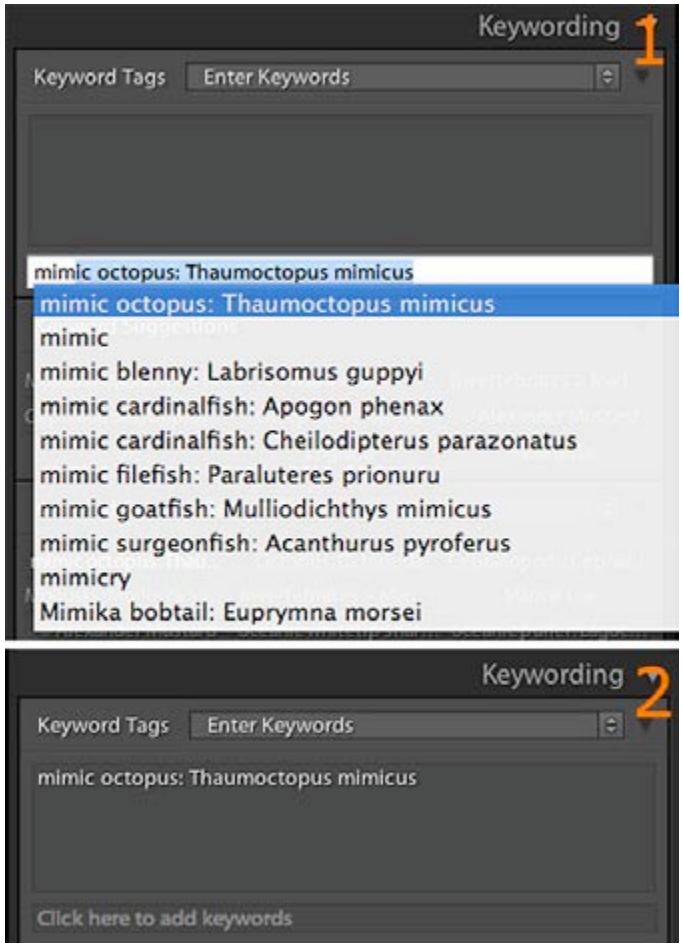
I have been using the software on Lightroom and it is perhaps easiest to demonstrate how it works with an example of my own workflow. When I initially import images into Lightroom, usually after a dive, I will add generic keywords for all

the images. These are usually location based, e.g. Red Sea, Egypt, Sinai, Ras Mohammed, but could include more generic keywords like ocean, underwater etc.

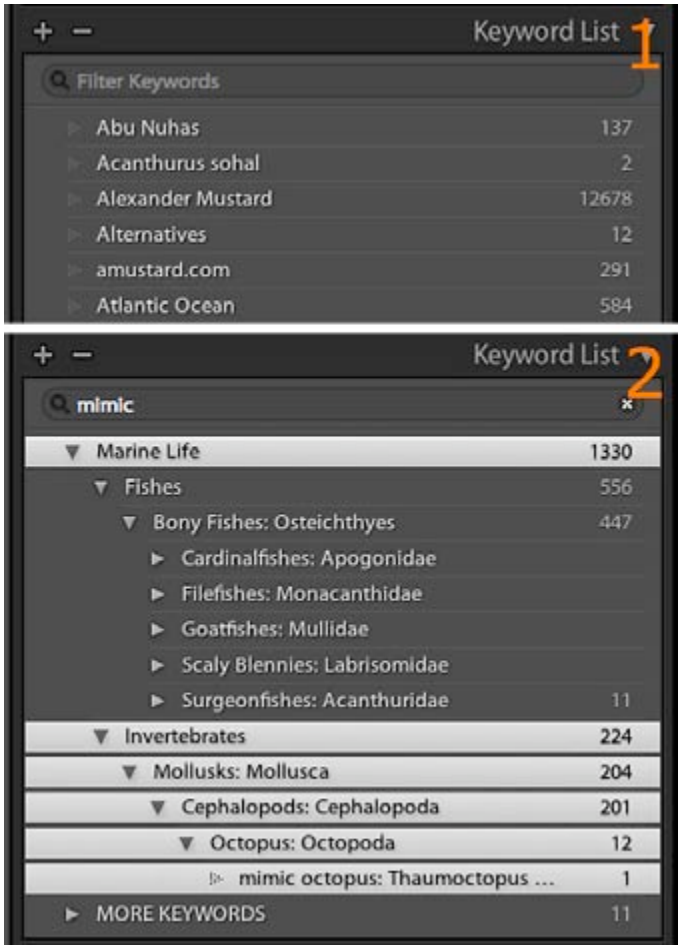
Once the images are imported, there are two main ways to add the marine life keywords in the Library mode of Lightroom. The quickest is under the Keywording menu on the right of the screen. In this menu there is a box labeled “Click here to add keywords”. When we click and type in the box it prompts the rest of the name. For example type “oceanic” and we get options of oceanic whitetip shark, oceanic triggerfish and oceanic pufferfish, all complete with their latin names. Just the letters “oc” will get you a list of 15 or so, which makes it even quicker. Select the one you want and press return and its added.

The matching under the Keywording menu in Lightroom is based on the first few letters, and since names are listed as “common name: Latin name” this method can only be used to find species by common names. This is fine most of the time, but common names can vary. A well-know photo of mine is of a bohar snapper (Lutjanus bohar) in the Red Sea. This species is not listed under bohar snapper, nor two spot snapper (the name used by Fishbase), nor the Australian name red bass, but on MLKL as red snapper. Most species are not so troublesome, but it does make the point that searching this way can cause problems.

I prefer to use the Keyword List menu, again on the right of the screen in the Library mode of Lightroom, instead. When we click and then type into the box labeled “Filter Keywords”, Lightroom searches for matches anywhere in the entry, so we can search with the whole or parts of either the common name or scientific name. This method,



The Keywording menu in Lightroom is the quickest way to prompt a species keyword entry. It works on the first few letters of the common name. Just click on the “Click here to add keywords” box and begin typing. Here (1) I typed “mim” and had a choice of species, I selected “mimic octopus” and clicked return and this was added to the keywords in (2).



The Keyword List menu is a slower way to add keywords, but allows searches to be made with any part of the species name and also makes it easy to add other taxonomic levels to the keyword list. I typed “mimic” (although it would have also worked had I typed “Thaumoctopus”) and then manually selected the levels in the classification that I wished to add to the keywords. Then I have to drag these over to the image or images and they are added.

Although there are many times more than 12000 species in the sea it is quite a challenge to find species that are not included. The main gap I have found in the list is in European Seas, unsurprising given the North American origin of the product. But it is easy to add entries yourself and even place them in the correct place in the list, so that the whole classification comes up. I added this tompot blenny to the list, filing it under Combtooth blennies. Its listing now comes up as: Marine Life, Fishes, Bony Fishes: Osteichthyes, Combtooth Blennies: Blenniidae, tompot blenny: Parablennius gattorugine.

is slightly slower, but also reveals the entire classification entry for the species, enabling us to add multiple taxonomic levels to the keyword list. Just click on the levels we want and drag them to the picture. The species entries in the MLKL have been listed under these taxonomic divisions, so this all comes up automatically when we search for a species. Also helpfully, the various levels remain selected when we click back across to the images, allowing us to select all the images in that folder with this species and then add the keywords to them all at once. The time saving is tremendous.

The list includes the genus and species of 12,000 species, including over 4000 fish, 4000 invertebrates, and all known marine turtles, rays, skates, sharks, marine reptiles and marine mammals. Of course, there are far more species in the oceans than this and like a red rag to a bull the first thing I did was to try and find any absentees. It is not easy. The coverage is fantastic in the Indo Pacific and Caribbean, I tested it on a recent Lembeh portfolio and MLKL covered everything that was identifiable! Impressed I then tested it at the other end of the scale, on images from a trip to Vancouver Island and again found all names I checked.

This summer, however, much of my diving has been closer to home and here I found a few gaps in the database. The list struggles with fish from around the UK coast, in Scandinavia and also in the Mediterranean. Curiously, invertebrates are usually covered. I also found many of the common, but endemic fish of the Red Sea were absent. I guess that this reflects the typical diving of the creators; all of whom are US based underwater photographers. Although the product is sold as a stand-alone with no guarantee of upgrades, I would not be surprised if an updated version appears in the future, plugging these small gaps.

My only other small gripe is that the level of phylogenetic detail is not consistent between species. For example identify a nudibranch and you get a long series of taxonomic levels: Marine Life, Invertebrates, Mollusks: Mollusca, Gastropods: Gastropoda, Opisthobranchs: Ophisthobranchia, Nudibranchs: Nudibranchia, Sea Slugs, Dorids: Doridina: Doridacea, Chromodorididae, Chromodoris magnifica, whereas identifying a fish gives a more concise result: Marine Life, Fishes Bony Fishes: Osteichthyes, Angelfishes: Pomacanthidae, flame angelfish: Centropyge loricula. Although it can be argued that how many image searches will really use the word Perciformes!

That said, MLKL is easily modified and the user can easily add additional species or more detailed taxonomic divisions, should they wish. I have added many of the common UK species to my database and may add a little bit more detail to fish phylogeny in the future.

We're often told that one of the great advantages of the digital photography age is that film is free and we can take as many pictures as we'd like. But it doesn't take long for hard drives to be bulging with 1000s of shots and finding the one you want, several years after you took it, can be a pain even in a well organised filing system. Keywords are the way we make sense of this chaos. Furthermore, keywording is an essential part of workflow for anyone who supplies their images to photo stock libraries. MLKL was built for these tasks and having tasted it I could never give it up.

It is often said that time is money. I can't think of many other products, designed for underwater photographers, which will save you as much time for so little money. A highly recommended purchase.

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