

Summer and Autumn

by Mark Webster

As a follow up to my earlier article on spring time diving in the south west of the UK, our revered editor suggested I should also pen something on summer, autumn and winter to complete the series. I thought this should not present too much of a problem, particularly as our Met office was predicting a long hot lazy summer which some would say is a benefit of global warming.

The reality has been a little different, with the wettest and windiest summer months on record which destroyed many of my planned diving days. Dive excursions had to be planned between advancing or retreating low pressure systems and as a result conditions were less than perfect and before I knew it the autumn months had arrived, so it made sense to actually combine the two seasons for this article as they have been almost seamless this year!

Despite the sometimes miserable and cool summer weather, we did manage some good diving when the windows of opportunity presented themselves. The water temperatures in the south west still continued to rise as the season progressed, no doubt helped by the Gulf Stream bringing

warmer water from the south.

These higher temperatures attract the occasional sub tropical visitor ranging from sunfish to leatherback turtles and even great white sharks according to some claims. For the first time this year I actually saw a sunfish underwater on a reef close to Land's End. We normally only see these fish on the surface and they quickly disappear if you enter the water. This one circled me a few times but sadly would not get close enough for a clear shot. This particular reef area is a cleaning station for several species and I wonder if the sunfish had been visiting for that reason.

Another species which has been seen at the same location in increasing numbers in recent years is the Atlantic or grey trigger fish (Balistes carolinensis). This fish is also appears in several other areas all along the south and west coasts of the UK in late summer. If, like me, your most memorable encounters with tropical trigger fish involve some nifty defensive swimming and repeated chewing of your fins by angry titan trigger fish, you might be less than delighted with the prospect of meeting a related species in our home waters.



Grey Atlantic trigger fish – this species comes into UK waters in late summer and early autumn when the water is at its warmest. It looks very similar to the tropical species of trigger fish, but thankfully does not have the temperament of a Titan trigger fish! Nikon F90X, Subal housing, Nikkor 18-35mm zoom, Sea & Sea YS120 and YS30 flash, Fuji Velvia 50, f8 1/30.

Rhizostoma jelly fish – these are the largest jelly fish that you will encounter, but surprisingly have no sting. They are sometimes seen in vast number for a few days with the late summer plankton bloom. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Sea & Sea YS120 and YS30 flash, Fuji Velvia 50, f16 1/125.



Atlantic trigger fish had been considered a rarity in our waters until recently, although reports do date back to the late 1890's along the south coast of England and Wales and as far north as Nova Scotia on the other side of the pond. Over the last ten years sightings and catches by both amateur and commercial fishermen have increased and it seems that our warmer summer waters now encourage a regular migration from semi-tropical waters.

They have normally been seen in small groups in shallow water around wreckage or piers and jetty's although there are several reports of schools of several hundred gathering off the south west coast of Wales in late autumn. These concentrations appear to be in preparation for a migration back to warmer southern waters as our own begin to cool off. When the autumn gales begin later in the year it is common to find dead fish on beaches, who have obviously left it too late, particularly on north facing coasts.

We have been seeing small groups of trigger fish on this reef schooling with bass and grey mullet. They can be seen feeding on mollusks amongst the kelp and also waiting for the ministrations of a group of rock cook cleaner wrasse – one end of this reef is the temperate equivalent of a cleaning station, more common in

tropical locations, and possibly the main attraction for the trigger fish here.

The trigger fish are cautious at first and we would normally see between four and six at a distance, but after 15-20 minutes they would cautiously come back individually onto the reef to feed off mollusks on the kelp or search in amongst the nooks and crannies in the reef for small crustaceans. Eventually they will begin ignore you will make a few inquisitive passes in front of the camera which give the best opportunities to shoot them with some natural light at the top of the kelp canopy. These trigger fish are obviously very happy with their temporary environment, although I am not sure why they swim with the other fish. 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 here.

Depending on how water temperatures vary we sometimes experience a second major plankton bloom in the south west in July or August. Whilst this does spoil visibility for a while it also often provides a second opportunity to see basking sharks which normally begin their migration up the west coast towards the Isle of Man and Scotland at this time. The plankton attracts



Basking shark – a late plankton bloom can also herald the return of the basking sharks providing us with a second opportunity to get close to these magnificent fish. Nikon D200, Subal ND2 housing, 12-24mm zoom, f8 1/30

them back to Sennen and Porthcurno coves where the plankton is held captive by the tide.

The plankton may also be accompanied by an increase in the number of jelly fish particularly the Rhyzostoma and Lions Mane species. Both of these are often accompanied by juvenile scad in their canopies which dart in and out to feed on the plankton. Mackerel are another species attracted by the plankton often in large shoals. It is very difficult to

encounter these fish underwater even when you see the surface of the water boiling with feeding activity. The best you can hope for is a fleeting glimpse in the water although watching from the surface further offshore may include the treat of seeing an attack by a pod of common dolphins, also notoriously camera shy under the water!

One of my favourite summer dives is the infamous Manacles Reef close to Lizard Point. The whole of

Manacles area offers excellent diving comprising a series of granite peaks and ledges rising sharply from depths of 60-70m to break the surface or lurk just 2m or 3m below the water. Many ships have met their fate here travelling to or from the port of Falmouth or simply hugging the coastline too closely when making for the Lizard peninsula. One of the best known wrecks here is the SS Mohegan - she was a 7000t liner which struck the Outer Voices rock on 14th October 1898 on only her second voyage to New York.

Although these reefs are spectacular they are also potentially hazardous and should only be dived when the conditions are right. Strong tides of up to 5 knots are experienced here with the current often continues to run during “slack” periods on a big spring tide, and sadly there have been several diving tragedies in the area. Much of the reef system is not surface breaking, so it is important to go with a boatman who knows the area and tides and has the right equipment to identify the sites

My personal favourite is Raglans Reef which is found on the eastern side of the Manacles and is therefore more exposed to the tide which produces a density of marine life that is often quite staggering.

The first indication of the topography is the impressive trace



Corkring wrasse are amongst the most colourful fish in the UK. They are easily found and approached around shallow reefs where you can watch them busily sifting the sand and gravel for food. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f16 1/125

on the echo sounder as the reef rises sheer from a depth of 50-60m, like a church spire, to within 3-4m of the surface. The shallows have a heavy growth of kelp with widely spaced stypes which are ideal for exploration at the end of your dive when you are decompressing or making a safety



Jewel anemones – offshore reefs like the Manacles are swathed in beds of jewel anemones in many vibrant colours. These make good close focus wide angle compositions. Nikon D200, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO100, f11 1/60

stop. My preferred route is to follow the series of vertical rock faces on the north east side of the pinnacle which are carpeted with sea fans, soft corals and plumose anemones in a variety of colours. Follow the wall to your target depth but bear in mind that you can easily find yourself in



Plumose anemones – you need to dive at the beginning or end of a tide to see them extended to feed. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO200, f11 1/60

45m to 50m depth before you see the surrounding seabed. If you start your dive just before full slack you can shelter behind promontories on the wall and watch schools of bass and pollack holding station and feeding in the current.

At depth you can choose to swim



Salp or comb jelly – when the jelly fish arrive with the second plankton bloom they are often accompanied by huge numbers of salps or comb jellies in various shapes. Whilst the jelly fish may remain for days or weeks, the salps disappear quite rapidly. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f11 1/60



Kelp and sea squirts – if the fish and critters fail to perform then turn your attention to the reef. The kelp itself may look dull to begin with but there is often a lot of colourful life either on the stipes or around the hold fasts. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 10.5mm FE, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO200, f11 1/60



Sea bass – they are often found on shallow reefs and the best approach is to stay still and let them come to you, although every shot is likely to be fleeting. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, Nikkor 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO200, f11 1/60

around the pinnacle either west or east dependant on which way any current may be flowing. As you make your way around towards the south face, gradually decreasing your depth, you will find that the shear rock faces

change to a series of large ledges and boulders with small sandy patches collected in the hollows. Stop and inspect these as you will often find large angler fish, dog fish or tope resting here. The decreasing depth will

(Right) Flabellina nudibranch – There are many nudibranch species to be found feeding on kelp, bryozoans and hydroids even in late summer and early autumn. Although smaller than tropical species, some are equally colourful. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom + 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO100, f16 1/30





Dog fish – although dog fish are seen year round, during October and November they are seen in much larger numbers in sheltered shallow waters when the breeding season starts. This year there were large populations in Falmouth Bay and in the Helford river estuary. Nikon D200, Subal ND2 housing, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO100, f8 1/60

also reveal more reef fish activity with ballan wrasse, goldsinney wrasse and the very bold and inquisitive cuckoo and corkwing wrasse approaching you to investigate. The rock surfaces just below the kelp line are swathed in iridescent jewel anemones in a variety of colours amongst beds of hydroids, masses of brittle stars and clouds of juvenile fish shoaling together to avoid the hunting scad and pollack. You can finish your dive with a safety stop investigating life in the kelp and

watch out for passing jellyfish and bass. If the tide is running as you leave the reef to surface then you will move quickly away into open water and it is important to be wary of boat traffic as you surface.

As the autumn progresses the kelp around the coast begins to look tired and starts dying off. Even so, it is worth checking the fronds for areas of sea mat and hydroids as some nudibranch species survive surprisingly well into September

and October and can still be found feeding. As the water temperature cools during October and November we normally see larger numbers of dog fish appear in shallow waters as they come inshore to mate. They normally head for sheltered waters and this year there have been numerous congregations of them in the eel grass beds of the Helford river and in the more sheltered coves. These small sharks are easily approached and are largely tolerant of photographers who may need time to perfect their exposure and composition!

With the first of the autumn equinox gales the kelp will be ripped

off the reef and deposited on the beaches and the reefs begin to look a little different between the storms. As the water begins to cool the visibility will also improve so it is worth getting in the water with a wide angle lens after a couple of calm days following a storm. Although the reefs and surrounding seabed begin to change with the approach of winter it is still worth diving even though the weather may offer fewer opportunities, but that will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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