

Dory Story

by Dan Bolt

It's 7pm on a still autumn evening and our breath hangs on the crisp air as we discuss final plans, exchange signals and descend into the inky blackness. I am in Torbay, south west UK, with my buddy Paul. Our dive has one aim: searching for the enigmatic John Dory.

My eyes scan the gloom straining for that distinctive profile, but almost before I've settled into the dive I see Paul's torch flashing in my direction. The beam dances frenetically and I know exactly what that means. Once again, he has spotted the first fish of tonight's dive. We can only come here for a couple of months towards the end of the year and with precious few weather windows I was concerned that we may have missed the action. I needn't have worried because this year's autumnal gathering is in full swing.

'Saint Peter's Fish' as they are sometimes known, can be seen all round the UK in both shallow and deep waters, happy to be around wrecks or in amongst the weed. With their upright dinner plate body shape and characterful face there is no mistaking their identity when you see one. Typically they tend not to allow



Canon 1000D, f/13, 1/200th, ISO100, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 18-55mm at 18mm

you to stay close for long and most encounters last for only a minute or two before the fish decide they've had enough. Unless you are very lucky...

It's 7:30pm now and I am finning slowly, scanning the site. We're doing well, Paul and I are already up to two fish each, but the real discovery is still to come. I stop to check my compass and spot the 5th John Dory of the dive. To see five individuals in one night is amazing enough but there is something different about this one. The fish is hardly swimming as



Canon 1000D, f/11, 1/200th, ISO200, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 18-55mm at 55mm

it slowly weaves towards me through the tall weed. As I edge closer it turns side-on and the reason for the behavioural change is clear: this fish has a scorpion spider crab clinging onto the side of its body which appears to be cleaning parasites off its skin. I only have a few seconds to take a couple of photos before the crab leaps back into the safety of the weed. But there were two of us to witness it and the moment was captured both by camera and indelibly in our minds. Wow!

To see 5, 6 or even 7 John Dories in one dive is highly unusual and to be able to repeat it consistently over an 8 week period is getting on for unique. But no matter how amazed we were at the size of the gathering, it was being overshadowed by the 'cleaning' activities we had seen on a number of the dives and we needed to clarify our ideas with an expert pair of eyes. Not knowing if this was a commonly reported behaviour I decided to enlist some help.

Putting my reputation on the line



Canon 1000D, f/11, 1/200th, ISO100, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Tokina 10-17mm at 13mm

I invited regular UWP contributor, photo-guru and marine biologist Alex Mustard to join us with the lure of a guaranteed encounter with a John Dory. Our first dive was during daylight and for over 80 long minutes we cover the exact area where all our sightings have been at least three times and don't see a single John Dory!

A little concerned that I was wasting Alex's time, we chatted in detail about the 'cleaning stations', hypothesising that, because the cleaning crabs only climbed up onto

the weeds at night, it made sense that we would only see the behaviour after dark. A night dive, a few hours later would put our theory to the test.

That evening, and now joined by Paul and his massively bright Halcyon torch, we set out again. Sadly the visibility is a poor 2m but it isn't long before I see the first signal coming from the gloom, which starts the action rolling. It is a fantastic dive; not only were we able to give Alex his first UK night dive, but his British John Dory count goes from zero to 7 specimens in less than an hour. Best



Canon 1000D, f/9, 1/200th, ISO200, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 18-55mm at 18mm

Canon 1000D, f/10, 1/200th, ISO200, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 60mm Macro

of all we saw two fish that were being cleaned by the spider crabs; further convincing us that this is the reason that they were coming into the bay in such large numbers.

To watch Alex formulating a plan to get the best out of the



atrocious visibility and making full use of the cooperative nature of the fish was like being in my own personal master-class. I made plenty of mental notes about strobe positioning and how to approach a subject from a different perspective than the one that immediately presents itself.

Photographically these dives were a real challenge. Not only was all the action happening after dark, but being quite a silty site the visibility was often only 1 or 2 metres and easily made worse by poor buoyancy/finning technique! Dealing with each of these problems in turn throws up its own challenge, but nothing insurmountable especially as I had a number of weeks to perfect my approach to this set of difficulties.

The biggest problem on these night dives was not getting the camera to focus. My Canon 1000D managed surprisingly well, but ensuring the focus was on the exact spot I wanted for the image was essential. Key to a successful critter or fish shot is to have the obvious focal point of the image in pin-sharp focus. Because I was trying to highlight the crab on the body of the fish this was to be the critical spot but getting it exactly right proved to be a little tricky. To help the camera to focus we used decent torches to illuminate the scene and these helped greatly to improve the speed and accuracy of the camera's



Canon 1000D, f/10, 1/200th, ISO200, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 60mm Macro

AF system. The HID lamps we used put out light with a different colour temperature to my strobes (Sea & Sea YS-110a, triggered optically) and can produce odd-looking images if both light sources are in the image. The self-quenching Fantasea Nano Focus Light I have is great for macro work but is simply not powerful enough to cut through a few metres of murky water.

In the end it was the John Dories themselves who presented the solution to this dual light source issue. Not only do they go into a kind of trance when the crab is providing its cleaning service but they also seem to be attracted and mesmerised by torch-light - think rabbit & headlight. With practice it was possible to attract a fish towards you with the torch, focus the shot, and just before pressing the shutter whip the torch away to take the photo. It takes some perfecting but was a surprisingly effective technique.

Another approach which proved useful if the fish wasn't being quite so co-operative was to close the aperture and raise the shutter speed to such an extent as to render the torch light ineffective on the CCD of the camera. This in turn required pretty



Canon 1000D, f/10, 1/200th, ISO100, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 18-55mm at 36mm

strong strobe output to light the scene and always we had to think about the terrific backscatter which was lurking out there when not positioned perfectly.

Working in the cool autumnal waters of the UK also meant that the strobe batteries didn't take too kindly to working so hard and the re-cycle time



Canon 1000D, f/11, 1/200th, ISO200, Epoque ERX-C1010, 2 x YS-110a strobes on manual, Canon EF-S 18-55mm at 55mm

on my YS-110a's dropped dramatically half-way through most dives. In fact I missed a couple of fabulous behavioural shots because of non-firing strobes but that is just part of the cold-water game I suppose.

Knowing that the fish would be around for a 6-8 week period meant that I could try out different lenses & really get the feel for which works best with these creatures. In such low vis conventional

wisdom dictates working with the widest possible lenses. For this my glass of choice was the Tokina 10-17mm fisheye which was great for taking 'Diver with fish' shots. But even after plenty of time trying different strobe positions I found lighting these images properly was a real challenge and I've got plenty of dud shots in my computer's recycle bin. We had lots of fun trying to position both the diver and fish for suitable photos, and on more than one occasion the camera got forgotten because it was just so amazing to be this close to a normally shy creature.

Following some very wise advice from Mr. Mustard to take images which would cover all aspects of the enfolding story, one evening I decided to take in the Canon EF-S 60mm Macro to get some images of the parasites - what a giggle that was! As many folks know this is a fantastic lens but taking macro shots of a moving fish in the dark and with

low vis was almost more than it could handle. Again getting enough light on the subject to allow fast and accurate focusing was an issue but when it did work I got the photos I wanted for the article, and some fabulous close-up shots of the John Dory's eyes and stunning skin patterns.

After a few dives it became apparent that the real star in my camera bag was actually the cheapo 'kit' lens that came with the 1000D. The trusty,

and now image-stabilised, Canon EF-S 18-55mm f/3.5/5.6 was the perfect tool for portrait work with these amazing creatures. Using it behind a flat port did give me some soft corners at 18mm, but nothing too drastic, and the low light and vis levels meant that there was often nothing of interest in that part of the image anyway! This lens isn't touted as having macro capabilities but its minimum focusing distance of 25cm from the focal plane meant that I could take real advantage of the close proximity I was enjoying with the fish. That said, there were plenty of occasions where the fish were simply too close to photograph, and one even let me scratch its chin after coming to investigate my torch.

The dives I had with these fish were amazing, and the 2010 gathering is something I am looking forward to very much. I just hope the location remains under-wraps because being such a delicate site it will suffer if too many photographers turn up!

Dan Bolt

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