

Low Lee Reef

By Mark Webster

Mounts Bay and the Penzance area of Cornwall has some excellent diving throughout the area, but one of the most popular sites with local dive clubs is just a mile or so offshore. Low Lee Reef or Low Lee Ledges rises from around 20m to less than 3m on a low water spring and lies on the main shipping approaches to both Penzance and Newlyn harbours. So the reef area is marked with an admiralty buoy which also makes it easy to find if you are a diver! The reef is spread over quite a large area and has a varied topography ranging from areas of gravel and shale to low reef outcrops rising to some substantial wall and ledge sections that top out on shallow reef plateaus. This variety also equates to numerous different habitats for marine life in a relatively small area which of course is the attraction for photographers.

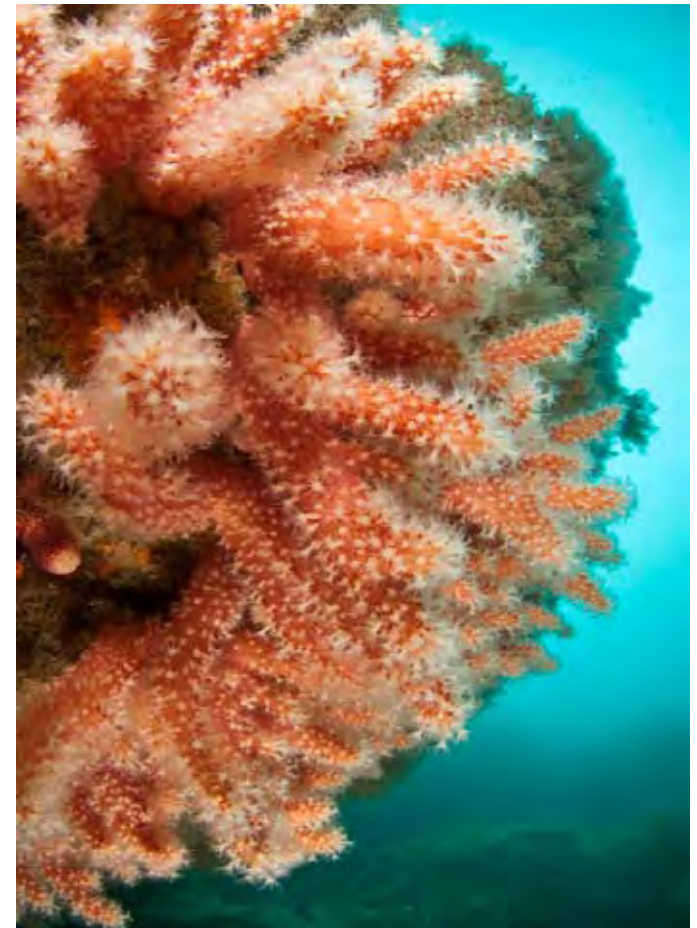
The habitats here also include more than one wreck. The major feature is the wreck of the SS Primrose which was a small 272 ton coaster that struck Low Lee Ledges in poor weather on 23 August, 1906 as she was approaching Newlyn with a cargo of coal. There are also parts of a steel trawler, the Dolphin, in three areas around the reef which had originally run aground and sunk outside the harbour entrance to Mousehole, another small fishing port a mile or so to the west. This wreck was partly salvaged and then cut up before being moved and dumped around the Low Lee reef to reduce the hazard to local shipping. The third wreck here is much older and is thought to be the remains of a Dutch East Indiaman wrecked in the 1700's



Wreckage from the trawler Dolphin is scattered around the reef and this large section lies right beside the wreck of the SS Primrose. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f8 1/30.

Cuckoo wrasse – Male cuckoo wrasse are perhaps the most colourful fish in UK waters and are very territorial. There are several around the reef and wreck which are very bold, often convinced there is an intruding male when they see their own reflection in the dome. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/25.

Red dead men's fingers – in addition to the common white species of soft corals there are many colonies of this much more colourful species which make a great wide angle of macro subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/30.





Common lobster – there are several lobster lairs on the wreck but the number of lobsters seen does rise and fall with the fishing activity in the area. Take pictures only! Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/30.

although there is little to see of this now except a couple of iron cannons.

The local dive club in Penzance installed a guided nature trail here some years ago to help visiting divers find their way around the site. This comprises a network of ropes that lead you to the major features of the



Tompot blenny – Tompots are like clown fish for most photographers, often very bold and irresistible as a subject for almost any lens combination. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X TC, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO100, f16 1/80.

site, although the text on the tags is difficult to read now it is still very useful if you are on your first visit. More information on the nature trail can be found on the Penzance dive club website (<http://www.penzancedivers.co.uk/lowleeroute.htm>). I normally start my dive on the



Squid eggs – squid come inshore to lay their eggs in late spring which take three to four weeks to hatch. They produce thousands of miniscule but perfectly formed squid which then join the plankton soup to mature. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/30.

wreck of the Primrose which is often buoyed on the bow during the summer months. The depth here is around 16-18m dependant on the tide so is close to the maximum for your dive profile and the nature trail ropes are easily found from here. The wreck itself has begun to collapse a little more in the past couple of years but there are still many recognisable features and substantial pieces of wreckage. The wreck is home to a resident school of bib or pouting, who are both

inquisitive and co-operative if you are patient, and several cuckoo wrasse with one dominant male amongst them who will keep coming in to chase off his own reflection in your dome port. There are all sorts of holes and tubes in the wreckage which are home to tom pot blennies and at least one resident conger eel. A few yards from the main wreck lies a portion of the trawler which is also worth investigating as it attracts wrasse, topknots, cuttlefish and the occasional



Conger eel – There are resident conger eels on the wreck and the reef at Low Lee. They can look threatening but are generally gentle and often shy. Nikon D100, Light and Motion Titan housing, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

angler fish. In fact the gravel seabed around the wreck is a favourite resting spot for cuttle fish who will bury themselves almost completely and convince themselves they cannot be seen until you get very close. Octopus are also often seen on the wreck (not by me though!) and squid also leave their egg pouches here each spring, so it can be very productive.

The Primrose wreck also has fond memories for me as the place where I took my first proper images of a lumpsucker. Although I had seen them occasionally over the years it was generally at the end of a dive when I had no film left or the wrong lens fitted. These weird fish are unusual if not rare in Cornish waters but after a cold winter we occasionally find them inshore in early spring when they come in from deep water to spawn and



Mating spider crabs – There is a mass migration of spider crabs in to shallower water in early summer to mate. Once they have paired off the males are very protective and will threaten even a large photographer. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/30.

the male is left to tend the egg mass. Once you have found a male guarding and tending his eggs you can expect to find the fish on the nest for up to four weeks until the eggs hatch. Local divers had told me that there was lumpsucker resident on the wreck of the Primrose, but nearly two weeks had passed since the last sighting and I feared I might be too late. But my luck was in and I made several dives on one day to record the fish with various lenses. One of the images, taken with a fish eye lens of the lumpsucker defending his eggs against determined wrasse, went on to get placed in several competitions including the Wildlife Photographer of the Year and so I always remember this whenever I dive here, although I have not seen a lumpsucker here since.

Moving off the wreck to the west you will come to the main reef area which has some quite



Lumpsucker – Lumpsuckers are a rare sight in Cornish waters which are normally too warm for them. But occasionally after a cold winter they do arrive in the shallow coastal waters to breed and the male is left guarding the eggs. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 16mm FE, Subatec S100 flash, Fuji Velvia 50, f8 1/60.



Sea hare – Sea hares are abundant in early spring when you may encounter literally hundreds amongst the kelp feeding and mating. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100, f16 1/30.



Cuttle fish – these cephalopods are commonly seen on the gravelly seabed around the wreck and are often very inquisitive if you wait for them to come to you. Nikon D300, Subal ND20 housing, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/30.



Basking shark – some years bring large numbers of basking sharks when the plankton arrives and it is not unusual to see these huge sharks all the way from Mounts Bay to Lands End. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 12-24mm zoom, ISO200, f8 1/30.

substantial mini walls which as you rise up toward 10m are mostly free of kelp. On these vertical faces you will find healthy colonies of soft corals (dead men's fingers) both the more common white variety and the red species and occasionally a vivid yellow colour. These make great wide angle and macro compositions and if you are using a macro lens look closely at the white ones as you will occasionally find cowries feeding on them. Amongst the soft corals are beds of hydroids, daisy anemones and jewel anemones where you are likely to find several species of nudibranch feeding in the spring and early summer. The purple flabellina species is quite spectacular and will often be found feeding on the oaten pipe hydroids or purple calcified seaweeds, but due to their small size you will most likely need some additional magnification for a full frame

image.

Following the nature trail rope will take you through several more deep gullies to another area of overhanging walls where in addition to the soft corals you will also find small sea fans (gorgonian) which are also worth a much closer and detailed look for a species of nudibranch that lives exclusively on the fan and mimics the polyps and another species of cowrie that feed on the polyps. A branch rope from the main trail will also take you to one of the iron cannon remaining from the Dutch East Indiaman. This area was excavated by a local wreck archaeological group a few years ago but despite some interesting artefacts being found they were unable to positively identify the wreck. You can continue to explore in this area which has many large reef blocks interspersed with patches

of sand and gravel where there is a good chance of encountering angler fish, dog fish and occasionally tope. Most of these blocks top out at around 10-12m so have little in the way of kelp on top, but plenty of soft corals, anemones, sea urchins and sea cucumbers. There are goldsinney, ballan, corkwing and more cuckoo wrasse to be found here along with cruising Pollack and the occasional school of bass and sand eels.

As your bottom time depletes you can then retrace your fin strokes back towards the wreck and the main reef to begin to explore the shallower elevations. Moving up the shear wall sections you will come to numerous small plateaus and gullies cut into the reef which divides into two main peaks as it rises towards the surface. The kelp gets thicker, but it is worth making a slow ascent and exploring



John Dory – These spectacular looking fish are quite common in late summer but difficult to spot amongst the sea weeds due to their excellent camouflage. Nikon D200, Subal ND20 housing, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO100, f11 1/60.

your dome.

In amongst the kelp stypes there several different species of sponge and you will continue to see the colonies of daisy and jewel anemones. Take your time exploring here and you should encounter perfectly camouflaged scorpion fish, pipefish, topknots and in early spring sea lemon nudibranchs feeding on the sponges and laying their attractive rosettes of eggs. The fronds of the kelp are often covered with sea mats (bryozoans) which in the late spring and summer time attract *Polycera quadrilineata* and *Polycera faeroensis* nudibranchs to feed and mate leaving their neat coils of eggs. You will also find the pink species of *Coryphella gracilis* nudibranch on the kelp as well and perhaps the occasional cling fish all of which will keep you busy with a macro lens for a whole dive if you want to stay shallow. The anemones, sponges and ascidians all provide opportunities for macro or abstract shots and you might also encounter

spider crabs picking their way through the stypes looking for something to feed on.

As you finish your dive and emerge on to the top of the kelp canopy to make a safety stop it is worth watching the open water particularly if there is a little current running. When there is plankton about there are often jelly fish riding the current and feeding and in late spring and early summer there is always the chance of basking sharks. In fact it was within sight of Low Lee that I was involved in a rescue of a basking shark from a gill net a few years ago.

So this site is good for a whole range of subjects, lenses

and techniques and is the perfect combination of depths for repetitive diving if you want to return to a particular subject. Being just a short run from Penzance harbour it is also close to good facilities and makes a good shuttle dive location if you are visiting with a club. There are many excellent sites in this area of Mounts Bay but Low Lee endures as one of my favourites.

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carefully between the stypes. As you approach the kelp line look out for John Dory's in the late summer months. These masters of camouflage are occasionally seen on the wreck but they much prefer the cover provided by the weed on the reef for hunting smaller fish species. In spring time you will also find numerous spider crabs on the edge of the kelp line looking for a mate and often locked in an embrace with a member of the opposite gender. The males will become quite defensive if you get close, but I am not sure if this is a threat display to the photographer or to the reflection of another crab in





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