

Gone fishing

with Mark Webster

For most divers who are tempted to take up underwater photography perhaps the most attractive subject are the fish that we find in both temperate and tropical waters. This attraction endures as we gain more experience, but although we may conquer the technicalities of capturing an image, fish persist in being one of the most challenging and often frustrating subjects to master. Although fish are perhaps the most plentiful subject available they can also be the most uncooperative, wary and just plain difficult to compose well. But as with most subjects underwater you can improve your results by the combination of correct equipment choice, techniques and of course a great deal of patience!

You can use almost any camera system and lens combination to shoot fish in a variety of ways, but if you want to get close up and personal and seize the character of individual fish then you really need to work with a housed SLR system. The attraction of these cameras is not just the reflex viewing but also the tremendous flexibility of the macro lenses available which enable you to shoot subjects from infinity all the way down to reproduction ratios of 1:2 and 1:1. The other essential advantage is the absence of prods and framers which will distress most subjects. Dependant on the subject you are pursuing, there are three specific focal length groups to choose from - 50-60mm, 90-105mm and 180-200mm. There is also a 70-180mm macro zoom available from Nikon which covers all three groups in one lens, but is also the most expensive option both for the lens and the purpose built port to match it. The shorter focal lengths are best suited to images of whole fish within their habitat, groups of fish



Rock beauty - territorial species may well swim off initially, but if you settle on the sand and wait their curiosity will get the better of them. Have your camera and flash set up to go as each visit may be fleeting. Nikon F90X, 60mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 60th.



Pork fish and grunts - the 60mm macro lens is perfect for most fish photography. You can capture a small school of fish like this, zoom in on a single fish or get closer still for a detail shot or a macro species. Nikon F90X, 60mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 60th.

or perhaps part of a shoal or even larger fish at a distance. A 50/60mm macro lens can also be used at close quarters for portraits or detail shots but you may often find that you get too close for the comfort of your

subject at higher magnifications. If your desire is to shoot fish portraits or small shy reef fish then the workhorse lens will be a 90/105mm or perhaps a 180/200mm for really awkward subjects. The longer focal



John Dory - this species appears in our coastal waters in the early summer. If you don't rush your approach they will often pose patiently. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.



Big eye Squirrel fish - a classic fish portrait which also shows something of the reef habitat. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 60th.

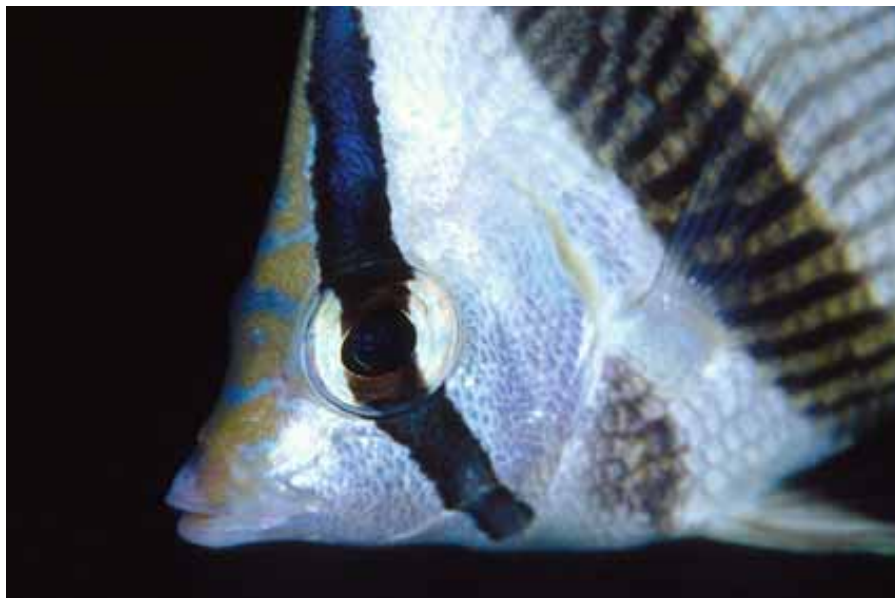
length of these lenses allows you to maintain a greater working distance from your subject which often keeps you out of the very sensitive personal space parameters which many fish possess.

Auto focus can be a real asset in fish photography as it allows you to concentrate on your approach and composition of the image. However, you must be aware of the point of focus and central point of interest within the image. This is more often than not the eye of the fish and it is essential to focus on this initially before you recompose the shot. The latest cameras available (F5, F100, F80) have the option of selecting the point of focus within the frame, which can offer significant advantages particularly where the subject is static. For users of older

technology (F4, F90X, F801) which have a centre weighted auto focus sensor you must become adept at using the single servo AF function or AF lock, both of which allow you to 'lock' the lens after initially focussing on the subject whilst you recompose for the perfect shot.

TTL flash works reliably with fish photography as the subject will mostly dominate the frame and present reasonably even contrast. However, there are circumstances which can fool even the most complex systems, which include very reflective silvery fish and those that inhabit pale sandy sea beds. These situations can cause your flash to underexpose the scene and where experience tells you this may occur it is time to resort to manual flash exposure or apply some

exposure compensation using the camera's controls. You don't need big wide angle strobes for this style of photography, although you will need a reasonable amount of power (perhaps an u/w GN of 28-33) for shooting fish from a distance with the longer macro lenses. One or two flash guns can be used effectively on easily adjusted ball joint or flexi arms - positioning will depend largely on the location of the subject although you may want to extend your guns forward of the housing for longer shots. Some photographers are turning to ring flash for macro subjects using the 105/200mm lenses, but these specialist guns can also be very effective for stand off shots of fish from surprising distances without incurring backscatter. Guns like the



Three band butterfly fish - coral fish are great subjects. Brightly coloured, boldly patterned and territorial. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

Nurse shark - unless there is food about sharks will not often stay for more than one or two frames. Having the camera set up with 'standard settings' at the beginning of the dive will help you capture a chance shot. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 60th.

Inon quad flash have a guide number of f11 at a metre (100ASA UWGN 33) and being port mounted will always be close to the subject. The other less obvious attribute is that fish are apparently less nervous when approached by a ring flash than they are by one or more strobes looming above them which they may see as a predator.

Obviously if you are setting your sights on particularly large subjects in shallow water, such as basking sharks, mantas or whales, you will need to use a combination of wide angle lens and natural light. You can let your camera calculate exposure for you in aperture or shutter priority mode, although my preference is to set the camera manually and use spot metering to read the light accurately throughout the image area.

Whatever lens, flash or film you have chosen, we are all faced with the same problem - how to get close enough to your subject? Firstly you must try to imagine what the fish makes of your appearance - this large noisy marine predator, making a determined approach probably with the intent of consuming you! So the first objective is to demonstrate that you pose no threat to your subject by making very slow calm movements looking for signs of distress and being prepared to stop and remain static in one position for long



periods or retreat if needs be. The noise from your bubbles can also distress some fish so it helps to breath very slowly and regularly with steady exhalations. By adopting a slow and very patient approach you will eventually be accepted as a part of the reef scene and overcome the natural fear of the subject and perhaps even earn some co-operation.

Fish are naturally curious and often territorial and will respond to this gentle approach by becoming increasingly inquisitive by making repeated passes and even posing for the camera. If you are able to visit a site regularly then you will find your subjects will become increasingly co-operative and some fish will appear as soon as you arrive to apparently greet you.

Initially you can concentrate on approaching the more sessile and stationary species of the reef such as topknots, scorpion fish, tom pot blennies or in the tropics perhaps moray eels and clown fish. These fish are either so convinced of their camouflage that they will let you make a very close approach, or they make their home in a fixed location and whilst may act defensively they will rarely move far from it.

Researching your target species to get familiar with their behavioural characteristics and habitats can also pay dividends. Busy tropical reefs are excellent for fish photography, not least due to the number and variety of brightly hued subjects. The density of the reef population means that many of it's residents are distracted by



Whip coral goby - small fish require macro techniques and knowing where to find a particular species will make spotting them much easier. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

defending their territory or watching for their natural predators that they will sometimes totally ignore the diver. So next you can begin to concentrate on the territorial species on the reef which may appear to move randomly at first, but careful observation will reveal the limits of their reef patch and often a repetitive 'patrol route' which will enable you to position yourself for one or more passes. Another example is cleaning stations which are a great place to encounter all sorts of species, or you might choose to concentrate on a specific habitat such as black corals or gorgonians in search of long nosed hawk fish. Certain very shy species are often associated with specific corals such as lemon gobies in table corals or the very elusive leopard spotted blennies in acropora corals.

Having practised your techniques on these species you can move on to the more challenging schooling varieties. Although it is most comfortable to dive in slack water conditions, you will often find that schooling fish, particularly plankton feeders, prefer areas where there is a current running. In these situations you will often find that these fish will tolerate a closer approach but this will involve either swimming



Lemon goby - these little fish are shy but very territorial and will repeatedly return to the same perch on their table coral. Pre focus on this spot and wait patiently. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

steadily against the current yourself or where possible using the shelter of the reef to make a close approach.

There are locations where there are resident schools of fish or the fish have become so accustomed to divers that they show no fear or may have been taught to expect an easy meal. The ultimate example of this are the organised shark feeds which are so popular in the Caribbean - you will certainly get your pictures in these situations but for me a part of the challenge is missing if your subject is performing for a reward.

Many experienced photographers prefer to dive solo and there is no doubt that the best fish pictures are taken when diving on your own or well separated from your buddy. Diving operators are becoming more liberated in their approach to solo diving, but you would be well advised to check before booking an expensive trip if this is your aim. There are occasions when a buddy is useful to either interact with your subject or perhaps encourage a school towards your lens, but generally two divers will spook your fish especially if the other one is a non photographer circling impatiently in the background!

Taking good fish photographs is not easy but getting the shot you want after that long wait is very rewarding. Once you have the co-operation of your subject don't be afraid to use film, perhaps an entire roll, as you never know when the right circumstances will prevail again for that particular species.

There is no magic formula but patient persistence will normally pay off and whilst you wait you will often find that other fish will show an interest in being photographed which could be a bonus or even a golden opportunity.

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