

An Alternate View in the UK

by Mark Webster

I am returning to the theme of familiarity and alternate views but this time with your local dive site in mind. Although for many of us just having the opportunity to get into the water and explore the reef may be enough itself, if you have gone to the trouble of preparing your camera and choosing a lens for the dive you might feel disappointed if no new or interesting subjects turn up. In order to keep our photography fresh we need to consider photographing familiar subjects in different ways or perhaps look for opportunities to photograph these subjects in different situations or habitats.

To achieve this we need to consider some alternatives. Firstly think of the subjects you are likely to encounter and select the same lens you would normally use, but plan for a different approach with exposure and lighting. Another option to consider is to simply try and capture a subject in a more unusual pose or position which may require an element of luck but mostly a good deal of patience. The third option is to try and capture your subject with a different lens or optical combination to introduce new imaging

opportunities. There are all sorts of ways to interpret this approach, but here are a few examples which I hope will encourage you to see common subjects in a new light (excuse the pun!).

Nudibranchs

I think that most photographers will appreciate that there is a difference between a technically good shot and a well composed shot taken at the right moment. Sometimes this is referred to the peak of the action, but where nudibranchs are concerned the word action is a little misleading as most species move very slowly. So can you capture a nudibranch at the peak of the action?

Well, hopefully these two images will demonstrate that you can. This species of nudibranch (*Flabellina lineata*) is fairly common on my local dive site in early spring time and is often found feeding on the kelp torn from the reef after a storm which has collected in gullies on the sea bed. The first image is probably a fairly typical presentation of the subject and the temptation for me was simply to move on and try and find other perhaps more exciting subjects.



(Above) Flabellina lineata nudibranch - in this image the composition is fairly straight forward and is a reasonable species ID shot, but looking at the shape of the kelp and the direction of travel there were better compositions available. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f18 1/200.

(Right) Flabellina lineata nudibranch - waiting patiently paid off and the nudibranch eventually stretched around the curve in the kelp and a soft background. Worth the long cold wait! Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f18 1/200.



However, I noticed that the shape of this particular kelp frond included a number of swirls and scallops along its edge and it occurred to me that this nudibranch would eventually find its way to these locations offering an opportunity for a much improved composition.

The water was cold and the nudibranch was definitely taking its time so I made several forays further along the reef returning every ten minutes or so to observe its progress and take a few more images. On the first couple of curves it did not quite reach the edge of the kelp or the curve was not extreme enough for the shot I had in mind. But eventually, perhaps through me telepathically urging it on as I got colder, the little guy finally started to move around a tighter curve and right on the edge which produced the final shot which I felt was far a more pleasing composition. So, yes you can capture a nudibranch at the peak of the action, but you must be prepared to slow your mind and expectations to the speed of time that exists in the sea slug world!



Polycera quadrilineata nudibranchs - With a macro lens it is easy to capture these nudibranchs in pairs or small groups but you have to move too far away from the subject to capture a larger group which decreases definition, saturation and increases the chance of backscatter. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f18 1/200.

The second example is another common species (*Polycera quadrilineata*) that congregates on kelp fronds in early summer both to feed on encrusting sea mats (bryozoans) and to mate and lay their egg spirals. There are always small groups found together or in pairs, but for a few days there can be very dense congregations of these sea slugs which is very striking and contrasts well with the green/brown

colour of the kelp. We would normally shoot a subject like this with a macro lens which can produce good results, but it is difficult to get a large number of the nudibranchs in the frame and retain both perspective and depth of field.

Like many other photographers I am using a combination of fish eye zoom and teleconverter for close focus shots which is ideal for this type of subject. This technique has its roots in



Polycera quadrilineata nudibranchs - Using the combination of fish eye zoom and teleconverter allows a very close approach to the subject whilst retaining a wide view. This wider shot illustrates the congregation of the species which is difficult to capture with a macro lens. Once you have the focus and exposure correct you can play with the zoom to adjust the background and capture some open water and even a sun burst. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO200 f16 1/30.

terrestrial nature photography and had seen some action in the film days of yore. We used to make these sort of compositions using a Nikonos 15mm plus extension tube which I think first saw presented by Valerie Taylor at Brighton '83 (yes a long time ago!), but of course was much more difficult to get focus and framing spot on as

you had to compose without a viewfinder. Now I use my Tokina 10-17mm zoom with a 2X teleconverter which allows me to capture a wide range of subjects down to true macro.

Using this combination allows true macro magnification with a much greater depth of field which has produced image which



Sea hare (Anaspidea sp) - Here again this macro shot illustrates the species well enough but the background is dark and can be improved with a different approach. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/125.

I think illustrates the almost frantic (well for a nudibranch anyway...) activity on the kelp whilst including the open water and sunburst as negative space.

Sea hares

Sea hares (Anaspidea sp) are another very common species on inshore dives in the early spring time and can appear in their hundreds over a small area when they congregate to mate. They are found on several species of seaweed both feeding and mating and are relatively simple to photograph. But for something a little different in terms of composition and impact we need to separate the subject from the sometimes busy background negative space. As with the nudibranch species it is the kelp on the reef top which offers the best opportunities.

You can improve on the standard composition



Sea hare (Anaspidea sp) - With patience I eventually found a sea hare that was feeding on a kelp frond and could see that it would eventually reach the edge of the kelp and strike a more attractive pose. I made a few test shots to be ready for the moment and was then able to take two or three exposures as the sea hare moved from one side to the other. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f16 1/25.

by capturing the sea hare against open water in order to improve the subject separation. To achieve this we need a compromise between an adequate aperture to maintain a reasonable depth of field with your macro lens and a slow shutter speed in order to expose the open water behind the subject. Boosting the ISO will also help and using ISO 200 or even 400 will make life easier but you need to search patiently to find a kelp frond with a sea hare grazing on it in a suitable position. You may suffer another long wait and several attempts before the sea hare will finally begin to crawl over the edge of the kelp and perhaps produce a better image.



Tompots are naturally inquisitive and this one was fascinated by its reflection in the dome port and even rubbed his/her head against it....perhaps it was love?! Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO200 f16 1/125

Tompot Blenny

If you are familiar with UK diving then you are bound to have encountered a tom pot blenny which is an irresistible subject much like a clown fish - i.e. it is very difficult to swim past one without being tempted to take a picture! On my local beach dive I have a couple of resident tom pot blennies which have occupied the same holes for several years and are now quite familiar with my attentions as well as a few other photographers in the area.

My aim with this shot was to capture the whole of the tom pot and some of its habitat which is difficult to achieve with a macro lens without moving too far away from the subject. So I selected the combination of fish eye zoom and teleconverter once again for this shot which allowed me to get very close and also to control the field of view



Topknot flatfish - these flatfish are very common on inshore dives and are frequently found on the reef edge where it meets the sea bed or on flat ledges and in fissures on the reef. They are normally a patient subject convinced of their camouflage and this would be a typical head and shoulder portrait with a macro lens. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/25.

with the zoom. This lens combination produces a dramatic change in perspective when compared with a straight macro image taken with a 105mm lens. In fact the tom pot was so fascinated by its reflection in the small dome port that it happily came out of its hole to perch on the reef in front of the camera. The lens combination does of course introduce some forced perspective distortion to the subject, but I feel that this actually enhances the comical expression of the tom pot - that is open to debate of course!

Topknot Flatfish

Sometimes simply capturing a common subject in an unusual pose or environment is enough to



In this shot the topknot had begun to shuffle along the ledge preparing for take off and I was able to get low enough to include a distant sun burst. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 60mm micro, Sea & Sea YS50 & YS30 flash, Fuji Velvia 50, f11 1/30.

make an image stand out a little. Topknots are a common flatfish reef species which are frequently seen at the edge of the reef or on any flat reef surface often just peering out of a crack. They have very good camouflage but once spotted they are normally convinced that you cannot actually see them which allows a close approach.

Occasionally you will encounter them swimming over the reef from one resting spot to the next and it is these movements that often give you the opportunity to capture a different image. Again it is a game of patience once you have found your subject. When you have your cooperative topknot you can spend some time capturing the standard shot and perhaps a few portrait shots in a vertical format whilst you wait for some movement. If you wait long enough the topknot will take off

with an undulating motion through the kelp along the reef, quite slowly and often pausing every couple of metres for a rest. These pauses are the best opportunity to capture an image with a more unusual background or pose. They will often rest on a blade of kelp and peer inquisitively at the camera which is time enough to get two or three exposures if you are prepared. If you are very lucky they will settle on a ledge allowing you get a very low approach and include an open water background. This has only happened once for me long enough to capture an image way back in the film days, but I have included it here in the sequence to prove that it can happen!

Snoots and Double Exposures

In many ways underwater photography is a little like fashion and we often see the resurgence of tools and techniques which go through another period of popularity. Snoots and directional lighting were an essential tool in the film days particularly in photosub competitions in the 1980's and 90's where you would see an elaborate array of snoots and funnels as photographers chased the perfect double exposure for the creative category. Directional lighting is making a come back and the latest variation is the fibre optic snoot which will direct your light more accurately to your subject, well in theory anyway. This latest tool has encouraged me to try snooting again and I have acquired a pair for the Inon Z240 from Ken Sullivan in the UK. This version uses large single fibre optics housed in Loc-Line arms which are more flexible than a bundle of fine fibres and (according to Ken) not hydroscopic like some of the fine fibre optic fibres. (you can contact Ken through his website: www.kensunderwaterphotography.com).



Snoot lit scorpion fish - when visibility is poor you can use a snoot to reduce backscatter by selectively lighting a subject and keeping the background black. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash with fibre optic snoot, ISO100 f8 1/250.

My attempts with this kit are still in the early experimental stages and the first observation I would make is that you need some way of helping to aim the light as the beam is quite narrow. I have added a pair of Pelican Mitylites which has helped, but so far I have only managed a couple of dives in my cold home waters. If you are



Snoot lit nudibranch - you can isolate a small subject like this nudibranch in a pool of light with a narrow beam snoot. Pale colours contrast well with the black background. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash with fibre optic snoot, ISO100 f11 1/25.

using a traditional snoot you can often use the flash focus light to good effect to help with aiming.

Snoots allow you to isolate a subject with a surrounding black background, introduce deep shadowing and textures with strong side lighting and perhaps play with double exposures if your camera



Fibre optic snoots (www.kensunderwaterphotography.com) mounted on an Inon Z240 with Pelican Mitylites for aiming.

allows image overlay. This is still work in progress for me but I have included a sample image.

So whilst I am sure that we all yearn for that next tropical trip and a variety of new subjects, try not to ignore the opportunities we have on our own door steps. The subjects may be common and photographed frequently but with a little imagination and a large dose of patience we can produce slightly different and pleasing images. The added benefit is of course keeping your creative and technical skills honed for that next overseas trip which means you can be productive from the first day.

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