

Weedy Wanderings

by Mark Webster

If you live near and dive in the temperate areas around the globe you will be familiar with the sight of sometimes dense seaweed particularly in shallow waters. Giant kelp is a well known example found off the coast of California which grows in deeper water and has an appealing reputation amongst underwater photographers as it is relatively easy to penetrate and explore. But in the UK and other northern European locations many divers just regard seaweeds as a nuisance that have to be negotiated on the way to a better dive site. This of course may be a suitable attitude for a hardened wreckie or deep diver, but for discerning photographers these seaweeds offer another habitat to explore for subjects and if you have ignored them until now you are missing out on some excellent imaging opportunities.

It is much easier to swim over or around weedy areas particularly when faced with dense kelp. So you need to first adjust your mindset to dealing with slow progress and accepting that you will not move very far during your dive. Slow movements and patient threading of both body

and equipment through the weed will pay dividends as you will begin to see more detail and not alarm any potential subjects. Sometimes you will become frustrated with progress and often when I reach this point I force myself to relax and concentrate and often will be surprised by a subject like a scorpion fish or tiny nudibranch which has been right in front of me!

In my locality we have seaweeds year round although much of the growth will be destroyed by winter storms and end up on the beaches. The most abundant time of year is the spring and early summer when growth can become extremely rapid with just a small increase in water temperature. We have three quite distinct habitats which all offer something a little different. The first and perhaps most obvious is the hardy kelp species which grows in dense forest like communities and clings to the reef top and is clearly visible from the surface particularly at low tide. The second group of what may be regarded as floating or buoyant weeds can also form impressive forests. These are normally rooted in the gravel and sand sea bed in the shallows and comprise



the Jap weeds, thong, boot lace and buoyant bladder wrack species. The third are the weed species that congregate on the sea bed and shallow reefs and rock pools which include the lettuce weeds in various hues, toothed wracks, sugar kelp, wire weed and calcified weeds.

You can shoot macro or wide angle in weed, but you will want to make your system as compact as possible and keep flash arms short and folded in to the housing until you find a suitable subject. Your flash position might then be dictated by the weed and stipes around you, so look out for elements that can block your flash and cast shadows.

In the spring time as the Jap weed and boot lace forests begin to grow and thicken they provide protection for numerous juvenile species that are also beginning to appear. Schools of tiny three spot gobies and sand eels will look like backscatter in your pictures, but as the summer approaches they will attract predators which are much more attractive subjects. For me the apex predator of the weed world is the John Dory which has the profile of an emaciated super model and almost perfect camouflage. These fish thread their way through the weed and strike at their prey with fantastic speed using an extendible jaw very similar to a frog fish. Even when you are looking hard for them they are incredibly difficult to spot and they will often suddenly appear briefly as they turn to stalk prey. I find that they are very sensitive to eye contact and if they think they have been spotted they will begin to move off and you will find that they have an impressive turn of speed if chased. It is better to keep your distance for a while and move in parallel to the John Dory until it becomes absorbed with the hunt again and then begin to make a slow approach. Occasionally you will find an inquisitive example



A photographer contemplates a mixture of sea weeds before beginning a search. Be prepared to move slowly and carefully and use your lens magnification to examine potential small subjects. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 strobes, ISO 200 f8 1/60

that will pose and you should then make the most of the opportunity.

The weed on the sea bed and the lower elevations of the Jap weed are attractive spots for amorous trysts between sea hares. Sometimes the breeding population runs into thousands and often you will find positive orgies of sea hares in tight knots containing up to a dozen. Apparently each can act as male or female when mating in these groups but it looks pretty confusing for the participants. When the activity is less frantic you will find pairs gently mating on the weed and up in the branches of the Jap weed where they will weave their colourful egg strings.

When looking for sea hares you will also begin to find a number of nudibranch species. Most of these are very small, perhaps only 10mm in length



The John Dory is perhaps the apex predator in the weed world. They have fantastic camouflage and are difficult to spot as they are easily spooked. When you find one you need to watch them for a while before making a slow approach. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/60.



The Jap weed forests attract a wide range of species including sea hares which congregate in the branches to lay their egg spirals clear of the sea bed. Although this pair seems to contrast well with the weed, without artificial light they blend extremely well. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/60.

and so you need to look patiently and also use a macro lens with high magnification or add a wet lens or teleconverter to capture the detail. You may spot fine trails of eggs first so then concentrate your search in a small area around carefully lifting bits of weed and eventually you will come across the perpetrator. Some are brightly coloured and contrast well with the weed, whilst others will blend well and so are more challenging to isolate from the background.

The seabed weeds are also home to common pipe fish species – the greater pipe fish and snake pipe fish. Both species like to weave their way through the weeds whilst feeding and will appear every now and then seemingly to have a look at you. They are quite fearless and will hold a pose for



This fifteen spined stickle back behaves a little like the pipefish remaining in the weed for most of the time but emerging from time to time to investigate an intruding photographer. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/60.

some time, but it is often difficult to get more than a head and shoulders image with a macro lens without pulling back too far. These fish are also joined by ballan wrasse feeding and also corkwing wrasse which are often looking for small bits of weed and debris to build a nest. These bigger fish can be more skittish but a patient approach will eventually pay dividends when you subject makes a pass for a closer look at you.

Lifting weed carefully may also reveal one or two bottom feeders such as flounders, plaice, hermit crabs and the occasional stickle back and sleepy dog fish. Whilst on the seabed also look at the purple calcified sea weeds which often have the purple flabellina pedata nudibranch feeding on them, but can be difficult to spot as their colouring and the



Lobsters are usually seen peering out of a hole in the reef, but they do venture out during the day under the protection of the kelp. They will often approach close enough to reach out with their feelers and touch the camera housing. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/60.

white tips to their cerata match the seaweed very well.

Venturing into the kelp is a little more challenging, dependant on the spacing of the stipes. You can either start from the reef edge and work your way in slowly, or swim over the kelp looking for a small opening and then just dive in. If the kelp stipes are particularly dense then the latter may be the only option and you can then just explore a small area at a time before emerging and moving to a new patch. Inside the kelp forest lies a very rich mixture of marine life including numerous sponges, anemones, hydroids and ascidians or sea squirts to name just a few. These subjects are predominantly for your macro lens but there may also be wide angle opportunities and I often encounter sea



Ballan wrasse love to forage in the gravel and sand under the weed beds and if you are patient you will be rewarded with a curious approach which permits at least a couple of frames before the subject moves on. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/60.



The UK has its own species of anemone crab – the Leach's spider crab that lives symbiotically with the snakelock anemone. The anemones are commonly found clinging to kelp fronds at the top of the canopy together with their resident crabs. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f18 1/60.

urchins, spider, edible crabs and the occasional lobster out from the protection of its lair.

The holdfasts are the root system of the kelp and between the roots you will find other invertebrates species filling the gaps, such as sponges and anemones including the pretty daisy and jewel varieties. Small hydroid beds also thrive in the shelter of the kelp and are a favourite meal for several species of nudibranch

will remain with the nest for perhaps three weeks, but it may be a challenge to find the same patch of kelp twice!

On the way in and out of the kelp don't forget to check the kelp fronds for subjects as well. Snakelock anemones commonly attach to kelp fronds and provide a symbiotic shelter for the attractive Leach's spider crab. You will also find other species of nudibranchs feeding on bryozoans and laying their eggs, together with

particularly the exotic looking Janolus cristatus which also lays its eggs here. Small sessile fish also enjoy the shelter of the kelp and you will commonly find scorpion fish, two spot gobies, butter fish, black faced blennies and the occasional tompot blenny exploring outside the safety of its refuge in the reef. Early in the year you might be lucky to find a lumpsucker nesting between the holdfasts nursing his eggs. These fish

more sea hares and if you are very lucky tiny juvenile lumpsuckers clinging on for dear life in the swell. Finding a subject like a nudibranch high up on the fronds may also give the opportunity to practice your macro and balanced light skills if there is not too much water movement. Try a slightly faster ISO and slow shutter speed to record the ambient light behind the subject.

When you plan to emerge from



(Left) There are many floating species such as this thong weed that can make attractive wide angle compositions on their own with a touch of Snell's window to add to the negative space. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/60.

(Top right) Moving through the kelp can be awkward and frustrating and I often stop just to re-focus my mind on the task. Frequently I find that I have been almost on top of a subject like this golden coloured scorpion fish that was inches from my hand. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f25 1/125.

(Bottom right) Dog fish are night hunters that like to rest during the day and will often move under the weed to remain hidden. They are normally very patient and approachable and will just stare you out until you are finished. Nikon D200, Subal ND20, 12-24mm zoom, Subtronic Mini strobes, ISO 100 f11 1/30.

the kelp look above you carefully first as there are often bass, pouting or pollack cruising close by which are less nervous than when you make a free swimming approach. Jelly fish are another potential subject in the summer and during some years there can be high numbers of these in the shallows. Look out for the lions mane species which may host juvenile fish in the mantle, but also have long fine tentacles that can give you a nasty sting!

You may not move far during your weedy wanderings but it is satisfying to track down some subjects that are hidden from view or that you

may not encounter on the reef edge. Exploring the weed is perhaps another way of adding variety and challenge to your photography and will improve your stalking skills and encourage you to exercise the patience required to find the less obvious subjects. The weed season is at its best in spring and summer but is worth exploring at any time of year.

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Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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