

Fish Faces

by Ángel Cegarra

Sometime after we have completed our first diving certification and with not many dives in our logbook, we soon start to feel more and more comfortable with the equipment and spend less energy in our underwater experience.

We are able to enjoy the fascinating world that opens its door to ourselves and start to discover hundreds of new creatures that appear in front of our diving mask. Probably we will get one of those uw identification guide books for marine life. There is a strong desire to understand how the fishes and marine invertebrates live and interact with each other.

Looking at the pictures in the book we recognize the body of the fishes we watched diving, the colors are the same and the shape of the animal matches with the mental image we made. Those are flat pictures, taken from a lateral point of view and are very useful to identify the animal and learn its scientific name. This type of photograph only gives us classification information which places ourselves in a somewhat insipid and aseptic position far away from our protagonist. When reading this book we are receiving only knowledge.

But there is another type of fish's photographs which get us closer to the creature, in those the scientific characteristics retreat in a second position for the picture to reach a dramatic dimension. The fish appears as "somebody" who shows "feelings" and catch our eyes. The position of his body, fins, eyes and face tell us he is happy, sad, angry or just feeling indifference. We can locate him into



a history and in his own natural environment and even be able to feel his mood.

It is relatively easy to catch expressiveness taking pictures of marine mammals or big size fishes like sharks, either because of their closer evolved biology or just for their big size. With sea lions or seals the expressiveness is guaranteed. There is a trend in underwater photographers to focus on big size marine animals, like sharks



(Left) Clownfish . 1/125 sec at f/11. ISO 100 . Canon EOS 400D . Sigma EF 50 mm f/2.8 Compact Macro . Sea&Sea DX-350D . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode .

(Above) Hawk fish on rock and coral . 1/160 sec at f/14. ISO 100 . Canon EOS 400D . Canon EF 100 mm f/2.8 Macro USM . Sea&Sea DX-350D . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode .

and whales, and in very small ones, like cleaning shrimps. Both the very little creatures, difficult to see at a glance, and the big ones, are always striking; the first ones for their capacity to surprise and the second for their size.

But we can show a lot of expressiveness in pictures of simple small reef fishes if we have enough patience and if we apply the skills and techniques needed. The golden rule of shooting

up and from a beneath the creature's eyes level is definitely a huge advantage here, although we can get a nice result from above provided the fish is looking at us.

A nice idea that works well is to imagine the fish as a photographic model who poses for us. Working with models, I prefer neither to have the divers very close to the main subject nor to have them as the protagonist of the scene. With marine invertebrates or fishes my preference is to use them as the main actors that catch our eyes. It is funny and inspiring to imagine them as cartoon characters with their own personality that want to express themselves and talk to us.

A gently physical approach is critical to avoid spooking the fish and see how he swims away from our side. Although many times, surprisingly, we can note that the same fish that left some minutes ago is back and swimming around us. Many of the non pelagic fishes are very territorial and often we will found ourselves invading their own activity area, so it is natural that they want to come back and recover the lost space.

Before the approach it is useful to decide about the picture we want to obtain. In this case we want a fish portrait with the fish as the very first protagonist of the scene. We do not want extra actors to distract ourselves like very small fishes swimming close or coral branches hovering around; the main actor will always appear in the foreground. In order to emphasize our subject is nice to get a uniform uncluttered background, which can be achieved with the following techniques:

1- Angle the strobes facing downwards or even a little bit of pointing backwards in order to create shadows that give relief to the subject, also reducing the amount of light which reaches the reef



located behind the fish. The darker the background the better the fish will be shown in the foreground. Please see the picture of the clownfish in shadows within his anemone.

2- Use of wide apertures to reduce the depth of field creates a deliberately blurred background. This can cause to have some parts of the subject to be out of focus, but anyway the photo will work if the eyes of the creature are sharp. We need to practice



(Left) *Mediterranean cardinalfish with eggs* . . 1/250 sec at f/4.5. ISO 200 . Canon EOS 400D . Canon EF 100 mm f/2.8 Macro USM . Sea&Sea DX-350D . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode.

(Above) *Anthias anthias in front of a red sponge (Mediterranean fish)* . 1/250 sec at f/5.6. ISO 200 . Canon EOS 400D . Canon EF 100 mm f/2.8 Macro USM . Sea&Sea DX-350D . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode .



Triggerfish . 1/125 sec at f/8. ISO 100 . Canon EOS 400D . Sigma EF 50 mm f/2.8 Compact Macro . Sea&Sea DX-350D . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode.



Mediterranean Blenny . 1/250 sec f/14. ISO 200 . Canon EOS 400D . Canon 100 mm f/2.8 Macro USM . Sea&Sea DX-350D+ Nexus woody's diopter . Two Sea&Sea YS-250 on manual mode

in advance in order to get familiar with the results using this technique, because when “hunting” for our fish we will not have time to check the LCD.

3- Taking the shot when the fish is swimming out of the reef so a uniform blue color background will increase its presence. With the aperture fixed accordingly to the

flashes power settings, depending on the shutter speed chosen, we will get a more intense blue or a soft pastel blue color.

The precise moment of the shot has a very big importance in this type of photography. It probably will decide whenever we got a wow picture or just another average one. We have always heard about the “peak

of the action” and it is very applicable to our approach. In order to get that moment of expressiveness it is useful to play to “capture” the fish. This means to follow its way of swimming and analyze the movements through our viewfinder to “predict” the “next pose”, then wait some seconds and press down the shutter exactly at the right moment and keep doing this until we are satisfied with the obtained picture. As said before, during the process we do not have time check the LCD after each shot, so remember to keep the same flash to subject distance to avoid over or underexposed pictures.

Please note it is very important not to make any quick movement ourselves during this “follow the fish” time. To follow its position with our camera must not imply to chase the creature.

As an example please look at the picture of the triggerfish. I was around 20 minutes stopped on the sand, near a reef pinnacle where he was swimming around. Since he is a very territorial species (as are most of non pelagic fishes) was hovering around myself turning back close frequently. I was shooting him trying to get a nice upwards front angle but the most of the shots I got were taken from a side view. He kept doing this and turned around the pinnacle again following an upward trajectory so it was

possible to guess in which direction he was going to appear later. I moved my housing to focus the corals located in that position and locked the shutter pressing down a little bit, after some seconds the triggerfish was showing a very nice mouth open presence in the expected place. It was a mix of luck and patience.

With this approach to catch the peak of the action we will dedicate more time to take the picture than it is “usually required” for a standard shot. This implies that, after the dive, we will end up with a lot of pictures from a few subjects instead of a few pictures of many subjects. I believe it is a good compromise if we look for a special photograph.

As a conclusion I would like to highlight that, as with other areas of underwater photography, the practice and patience are our best friends to get a satisfactory picture. When diving, If you do not feel happy with your last shot, I encourage yourself to spend more time to improve it. For sure you will lose opportunities with other subjects in the same dive but you can always come back. The more you practice, the better results you will achieve.

Ángel Cegarra

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