

South West Ramblings

from Mark Webster

Regular readers of this much revered periodical will know that I have enormous enthusiasm for UK diving and, although I spend a large part of my year working away from home, I am fortunate enough to live in an area that offers fantastic diving. I thought it might be useful to start a series of short articles discussing dives sites, finding subjects, equipment choice and techniques used to capture particular images. As a confirmed Luddite I would be horrified to think I was writing a blog, so I will describe this as an occasional diary of events and observations, but maybe that is the same thing in the modern parlance? I will leave you to judge that for yourselves.

Little and Large

At the mega fauna end of the scale this year has been another poor one for basking sharks in the south west, which may have been around in larger numbers but have been difficult to spot due to rougher seas. At the macro end of the scale it has been a good year again for nudibranchs, although strangely there have been very few sea hares around. The weed beds have been very productive again for nudibranchs but we have been unable to capture the colourful vistas of the weeds with wide angle due to reduced visibility caused by constant storms and relentless rain - a classic British summer! We have seen all the usual species plus a few more unusual ones like *Aegires punctilucens*,



Tritonia nilsodhneri nudibranchs are only found on sea fans where they feed and breed. Vary your exposure to record both a black and ambient background but be patient when working at slow shutter speeds. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 F16 1/20

Rostanga rubra and *Eubranchius farrani*. I also saw the greatest concentration I have ever seen of the *Tritonia nilsodhneri* nudibranch which is only found on orange gorgonians (*Eunicella verrucosa*) at a site near Plymouth regularly visited by Magic Charters (note the subtle plug for our revered editor...).

The *Tritonia nilsodhneri* nudibranch is normally (in my experience) hard to find and I have only seen single specimens on a sea fan previously. In Plymouth Sound there is the remains of a steel tubular structure in perhaps 10-12m depth at high tide which is exposed to tidal current and has a very healthy colony of *Eunicella verrucosa* sea fans growing on it – between 15 and 20 individual fans. These are normally found in greater depths



Aegires punctilucens nudibranch – a tiny species which is not often seen and requires additional magnification to capture the textured detail of this critter. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 F16 1/20.

but the often gloomy visibility and high nutrient levels in the sound must promote growth here. We were surprised and pleased to find that each fan had at least two, and some more, of the elusive nudibranchs busy feeding and mating leaving delicate egg spirals over the polyps. In these situations I try to shoot a variety of compositions and angles to gather a broad portfolio of the species. Mixing the classic black background with a longer balanced green water exposure was tough as the sea fans are constantly vibrating in the current. But persevere as there are lulls in the flow and the fan will cease oscillation long enough for a couple of sharp images!

Another rarely seen species of nudibranch is *Aegires punctilucens* which apparently spends most of its life burrowed into the sponges and sea quirts it feeds on. Occasionally these very small (perhaps 12mm) but elaborate sea slugs can be seen when moving to a new feeding site but I have only spotted one on two previous occasions. This year I was lucky enough to find one traversing a piece of kelp surprisingly quickly although he seemed to be lost as he kept traversing both the front and the back of the kelp frond. Referring to a nudibranch as a he may of course be sexist as they are hemaphrodites.....but his constant wanderings gave me a number of opportunities to vary my composition and background. These guys are extremely small and need 2:1 magnification (although if you have a D800 you can crop successfully!) and are covered with textured tubercles and blue spots so make a very attractive subject, if nudibranchs are your thing of course!

Year of the Black face blenny

I have spent many years photographing what I assumed to be female black blennies (*Tripterygion delaisi*) which sport a predominantly brown camouflaged livery. Although I had seen images of the male in its splendid black and vivid yellow livery I had never seen one in the wild. This year we have had a very extended spring temperature period due to the poor weather and so I think many species have continued breeding for several weeks due to the lower water temperature. So this year when I have visited the sites I regularly spot these fish I have seen numerous males in full conjugal livery strutting around their reef estate to attract a mate. The females I have observed with the males are indeed much drabber in colour but also much

Black faced blennies (*Tripterygion delaisi*) are a stunning looking fish but are difficult to spot despite their bright colours. However, they are patient subjects if you approach cautiously. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 F16 1/125

smaller. Now that I have observed the various colour change stages of the males I realise that the fish I assumed were females are in fact males in their normal colours! When you see the males at the peak of their mating period the contrast between the jet black face and vivid canary yellow is stunning.

The black face is a species of triple fin blenny and each of the males seems to have a piece of reef real estate that is around 1-1.5m square which they will be seen vigorously defending if a neighbouring male comes too close. They tend to favour overhanging reef edges which are clear of kelp and heavy weed growth, but you will occasionally see them on the reef top. I have observed one or two smaller females in each estate and the males will often be seen flitting around the female and posing lifting his dorsal fin which has a fine bright blue edging. There seems to be a distinct pattern to these movements and I have read that they follow a figure of eight movement around the patch but I could not swear to that.

Once spotted these are incredibly bold fish that will hold a pose for the camera for extended periods as you work closer and closer for the perfect portrait. For a tight head and shoulders portrait you will need a 105mm macro lens or similar or a 60mm macro lens if you want the whole fish and some environment in the image. As they favour overhanging ledges you will often find yourself



photographing with the image or perhaps camera upside down and you will need to consider your flash positioning to create the correct lighting effect.

Micro dome for WAM

Those of you who have tried the technique of wide angle macro will know that you need a small dome port to allow you to get close to your subject and also to be able to light it effectively. Even with the current crop of mini domes available from various manufacturers there is not a perfect dome

solution and you may end up using different combinations for different subjects and situations. I often find that I want to work very close with quite small foreground subjects like nudibranchs and quite often the shade on a small dome will not allow me to light the subject without shadows. The solution for me was to look for an even smaller dome port without a shade which allows me to light subjects potentially touching the dome without shadows.

If you are a vintage photographer, like me, with a good memory you may recall that when the first housings from Subal appeared for the F801 there was no fish eye dome available. We all made our own home engineered solutions but one that was briefly commercially available came from that fine emporium of UWP retail Ocean Optics, which of course in those days was run by our own revered editor. The dome was designed for the 16mm Nikkor fish eye which is a relatively short lens that barely reaches the throat of the port hole in the Subal housing, so the dome needed to sit flush with the edge of the throat. The dome itself is a section of a 4" (100mm) compass dome mounted in an aluminium bayonet that seats level with the edge of the throat. Because the dome is so small (and due to the minimum focus distance of the 16mm) the Nikkor fish



Selection of mini domes – Subal DP-54B (for 20mm Nikkor); 3" dome originally for Sea & Sea 12mm Nikonos fish eye; Ocean Optics fish eye mini dome originally for Nikkor 16mm FE

eye required a +2 diopter installed on the back of the lens to enable it to focus on the virtual image.

Fast forward to today and the combination of 10-17mm fish eye and 2X teleconverter that I favour does not need a dioptre of course as it focuses well into the macro range right down to the dome surface. The smaller shadeless dome allows more flexible lighting without shadows, but of course needs extra care in use as it is very exposed to contact and scratches with rocks or corals. However being perspex you are able to polish out the minor indiscretions. I don't know if our RE has any more of these available but there are a number of engineers and retailers in the UWP



The fish eye zoom and teleconverter can be used to capture true macro subjects such as these nudibranchs with some open water and a sunburst to complete the image. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE + 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/125

market that could make up something similar if you wanted to experiment with a smaller dome.

So at the 17mm end of the lens combination you have true macro capability and can still capture some background in the image or the surface and a sunburst. Getting close to inquisitive fish with this small dome also produces interesting results as the subject can see its reflection – tompot blennies, black face blennies and scorpion fish are good examples

of those that are either fascinated with their reflections or assume that it is a competitor.

Quad flash - an old war horse dies.

I suffered a heart stopping drama at the end of 2011 when my Inon Quad flash failed just before I left for Sipadan and the Lembeh Strait. This wonderful piece of kit has been working very hard for me since I bought it back in 2001 (in



Inon Quad flash mounted on Subal ND20 housing. Inon wet lens designed for quad flash installed

Variable blenny – the quad flash or a similar ring flash is an ideal tool for lighting a subject in a hole or tube like this. This little fella was living in the end of a piece of pipe work on a boiler and the quad flash has provided even lighting around the subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 F16 1/125

those almost forgotten celluloid days) so I should not have been surprised that it had finally worn out, but it led to desperate thoughts of life without it! There followed a flurry of e-mails with Inon who confirmed that although the quad is no longer manufactured they could replace the electronics module, for a price of course. I had almost committed to this when lady luck struck and Steve



Warren at Ocean Optics said he had a very lightly used second hand quad flash....was I interested? I bit his hand off of course and now I am a happy photographer again in macro mode and hoping this unit will last just as long. The original can still be repaired of course!

Not everyone likes the lighting in ring flash photography but I love it and can thoroughly recommend it if you are considering one of the current alternatives. Generally speaking you can light anything that you can see through the lens and the perfect lens for this is the 105mm micro (on DX

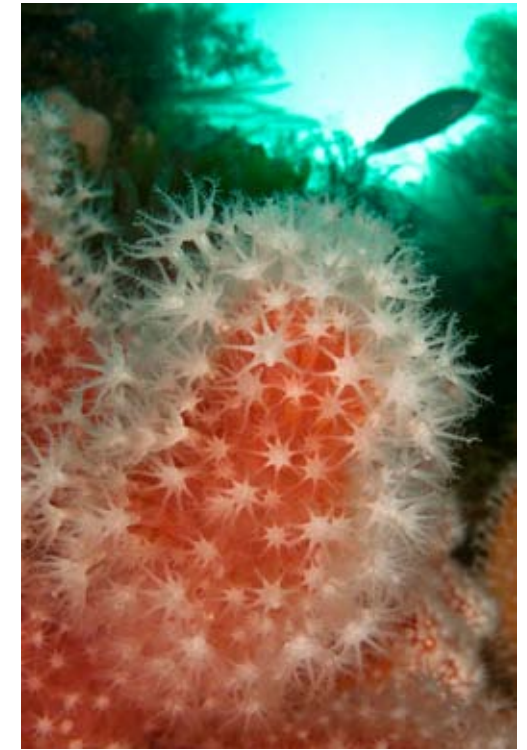


Red gurnard blend perfectly with a dull or grey seabed until you add artificial light and the character of the subject changes instantly. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE + 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30

or FX) although I also use it with both my 60mm micro and a Sigma 180mm macro. With the 60mm you have to watch your subject distance as 1:1 reproduction often puts the flash too close to light a subject without shadows. One quirk I am convinced of is that nervous fish are more approachable with a ring flash as your rig lacks those two large eye shaped objects looming from above which perhaps resembles a large predator.

Seeing Red

You don't have to be involved in underwater photography for very



Red dead men's fingers are a true cold water soft coral. The strong red colour make a good wide angle macro image and allows you to capture the fine detail of the polyps and also include some background detail. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE + 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125

long before hearing the old adage that finding a red coloured subject or at least including a splash of red in your composition will make an image pop. This is a good guideline to follow when you can and of course is easy in



There are several anemone species that have a vibrant red colour in the UK. The strawberry anemone is one of them which creates an interesting abstract composition when closed. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 F16 1/250

tropical waters where there are many vivid red corals and fish but can we apply the same rule in UK temperate waters?

Whilst the UK does not have the same abundance of red subjects as the tropics, there are many opportunities if you do a little research, look carefully and perhaps make use of a spotting torch to check if apparently drab colours are in fact red. There are some species of fish that are almost completely red or feature a

high percentage of red in their livery, although this may not be obvious without additional lighting, and so they are worth seeking out and planning specific compositions.

Red gurnard, scorpion fish and Corkwing wrasse all come to mind as examples of fish which can be entirely red or feature red in their patterns. They are also very appealing subjects and it can be an interesting challenge to capture them with different lens or lighting combinations to show

the fish in a portrait or environment composition. There are a number of anemones that sport a red hue with beadlets, dahlia and the strawberry being the most common but it is often hard to include them in a larger composition due to their size and normal positioning on the reef in nooks and cracks or under overhangs.

At the macro level it is worth seeking out red seaweeds and looking for contrasting subjects which may feed on them. There are numerous species of nudibranch and sea hares that graze on these weeds and can produce a dramatic contrast with a red background. We also crustaceans that sport red in their livery or perhaps

have red eyes in an otherwise drab colouring. If you are shooting wide angle then seek out the colonies of red dead men's finger soft corals which really do have a tropical feel to them.

So hopefully you have found one or two of the subjects engaging in this first tranche of ramblings, there will be more to follow at irregular intervals!

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk



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