Pooling Resources

by Mark Webster

I am sure we have all experienced the disappointment of arriving at a dive site full of anticipation only to find that the weather forecast was not correct after all or somebody got the tide times wrong. Often the temptation is to simply give up and find the nearest pub to drown your disappointment. But this is not always the only option, although it is very attractive! My wife has often said that I would dive in a muddy puddle if I thought there was a subject there, but you don't have to resort to this when there is a plethora of fascinating life to be found in rock pools. You may be tempted to roll your eyes at this suggestion and declare that you gave up rock pooling when you were perhaps six or eight years old, but don't dismiss the idea too quickly as there are plenty of imaging possibilities available in rock pools.

In fact a number of competition winning shots have also been taken in rock pools. One good example of this is the BSoUP Splash In (British Society of Underwater Photographers) which used Fort Bovisand in Plymouth as a venue for many years and has also been infamous as an event with changeable weather conditions! There is a large rock pool on the foreshore here and it was not uncommon to see a queue of photographers waiting for their turn in the rock pool at low water when the weather conditions were poor. Excellent winning pictures, including the winner of the 2011 competition, have been captured in rock pool environments.

Rock pools vary dramatically in size and depth and this of course has an impact on the marine life you are likely to encounter. You will also discover that the marine life will vary with the seasons and from one tide

Even adults enjoy exploring rock pools. Some are far larger than others so you can fully submerge and the marine life is like a mini reef aquarium. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO 200 programme mode.

Once you have the angle and exposure correct for Snell's window try introducing a model on the edge of the pool. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

Reflections work very well in rock pools and the surface is often mirror calm. Use the opportunity to practice the angles which produce the best reflections. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

to another. The regular inhabitants can often be joined by unexpected or exotic visitors that may get trapped temporarily by the falling tide, so it is well worth revisiting a productive rock pool more than once.

Photographic techniques will vary dependant on the size and depth of the rock pool. For the shallower pools you can view and find your subjects by looking from the surface and make images by just dipping your camera housing into the water. The bigger deeper pools are usually more productive and have a wider variety of marine life. Some are knee or waist deep whilst others are deep enough to fully submerge and you can use a snorkel or scuba. A wet suit is best and no fins as you will want to be stable and move as little as possible. Once you have disturbed the visibility in a rock pool it will take a long time to settle and you may have to wait until the next tide for conditions to clear.

Timing your rock pool excursions also needs some thought

Shrimps and prawns will be found in the pools so be sure to examine all likely crevices and cracks in the rocks. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

particularly if it is located on a busy beach popular with tourists and locals. Low tide is of course essential, but some of the better pools are only exposed on bigger tides and full spring tides and are therefore only open for a short period. When working in a pool close to the tide line you need to be aware of the state of

Some species like these tom pot blennies are not frequent rock pool inhabitants but occasionally will get trapped between tides. They will then seek the security of cracks and fissures in the rock so it is well worth looking in any likely bolt hole. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.

the tide particularly if you have had to traverse a wide expanse of rocky foreshore to reach the pool - you don't want to be cut off by the tide! So arriving early for the tide and leaving early is the mantra and this can also apply to areas popular with

There are many species of anemone found in the rock pools and the snake locks is amongst the most colourful. In the summer they often also be host to small Leach's spider crabs which live symbiotically with the anemone. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/125.

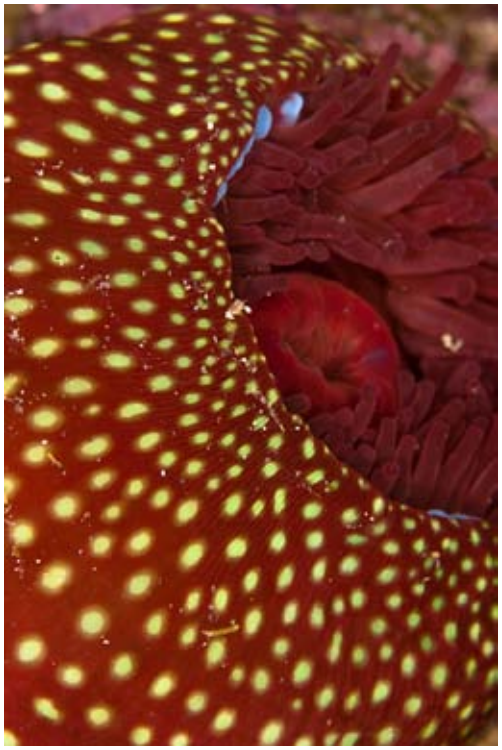
other beach goers. Large accessible rock pools are popular with children and are also often used by locals as swimming pools. I normally plan a visit to a popular pool on a low tide early in the morning to avoid disturbance.

A well populated rock pool is like a mini aquarium with many juvenile species and some adults that spend their entire lives in the same pool. Many species from the intertidal zone which are sometimes skittish when encountered in open water close to the shore are much more approachable in a rock pool. It is almost as if they do not expect to see a predator between the tides and you will often find that shannies, blennies and scorpion fish for example will become very inquisitive and come very close to you so you will have plenty of time to experiment with composition and lighting.

You will also find a variety of molluscs and crustaceans in

There are several species of sea hare to be found but these tiny ones are normally found on Bifurcaria bifurcata sea weed and will need additional magnification for a frame filling image. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

rock pools including sea hares and colourful nudibranchs. This year we have seen very few sea hares on the reefs in open water, which is unusual, but several large rock pools have contained dozens if not hundreds. These were generally 5-8cm in length,



One of the most striking anemones to be found in the rock pools is the strawberry anemone. They are often closed up between the tides with the tentacles covered by a colourful mantle which gives the species its common name. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

although there has also been a much smaller species found in abundance on brown Bifurcaria bifurcata sea weed. You will find nudibranchs amongst the seaweeds and also often under flat stones in the bottom of the

Snell's window can be very striking in shallow water and the calm conditions of a rock pool are ideal for experimenting with compositions. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm fish eye zoom, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

Cowries are a more unusual find in a rock pool but only because they are so small. Carefully lift pieces of sea weed, particularly the red varieties, and you will often be surprised. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

Nudibranchs are hard to find in rock pools but will mostly be found grazing on sea weed. So lift weeds carefully and look closely for these tiny gems particularly between tides on a calm day when they will not have been disturbed by wave action. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

pools possibly waiting for the tide to return. Always remember to return any disturbed stones to their original positions.

Rock pools are also a very good environment to practice techniques as the conditions are generally controlled. Split shots or half and half are a good example as you can rely on the surface remaining calm and the water depth will allow you to stabilize yourself. Stable conditions means that you can repeat a shot with differing exposure settings until you find the correct combination using only natural light and then perhaps adding fill flash for the below surface element. One of the big problems with most split shots is the difference in exposure between the wet and dry halves so you often need to find a happy balance which will respond well in post processing or determine flash positioning and output to balance the exposure below the surface. You can use rock pool life as a foreground subject or introduce your own subject matter dependant on the final objective.

Calm surface conditions are also a prerequisite for good reflection shots also. Shallow pools full of life offer an abundance of subjects for simple and complex reflection compositions. You can also introduce your own subject matter in the form of a fellow photographers or snorkeler or another object. But the opportunity to practice the angles of approach and lighting required for a good reflection means that you will be well prepared when an opportunity arises in open water.

When you are working on your reflection shots particularly with a fish eye lens it won't be long before you start to see the optical phenomenon of Snell's window beginning to appear. Refracted light creates an apparent circle of light on the surface

Three spot gobies are commonly seen schooling above kelp and sea weeds on the reef, but will also be found possibly stranded in rock pools between the tides. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f20 1/125.

Juvenile star fish like this cushion star are found in abundance. They are only a few millimetres across and so are a true macro subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

Shannies are bold rock pool inhabitants and are very inquisitive when an unexpected visitor turns up. However, they will always have a bolt hole to retreat to and you just need a little patience to wait for a cheeky face to appear. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 60mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f16 1/125.

of the water which can create some interesting and dramatic compositions and the addition of a sunburst or perhaps a person at the waters edge will create a striking image. You can see the effects of Snell's window through the viewfinder but it is often more exaggerated when you view the image on screen so it is worth adjusting your compositions and bracketing shots.

There are a number of large pools around the coast that have a man made buttress or wall to contain the water creating a swimming pool for the locals. These creations often date back to the late 19th century and so are mature and well populated with marine life and you will often find more reef species in them due to the depth. It is worth making a Google search for your area to see if such pools exist. Google Earth is also a good tool for identifying the location of a specific rock pool or looking for potential pools to investigate if the images for your area are taken at low water or perhaps half tide. You can zoom in on a location and get some idea of size and access before you investigate a location. This does not work every time, but at least gives you an opportunity for a day out on the beach!

As we all know we are only as old as we feel and given that most of us are still big kids at heart you will enjoy exploring rock pools for subjects and you photography will certainly benefit. If you have young children then there is the added bonus of keeping them engaged and amused and also perhaps involving them in your photography.

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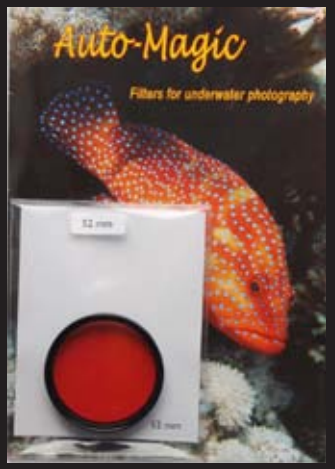

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