

Fish for Stamps

by Sue Daly

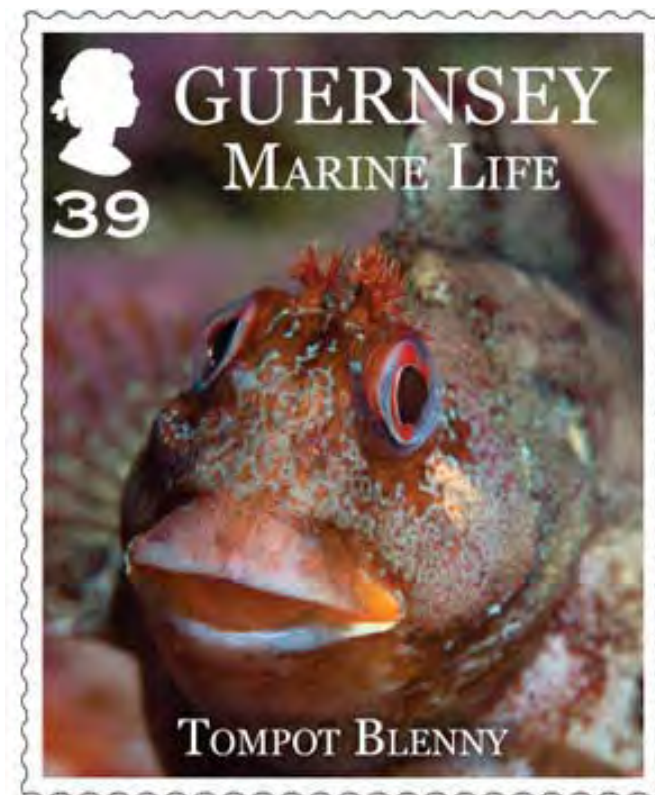
Photographing wildlife can be difficult at the best of times but when your chosen subjects live underwater the challenges for the photographer and their equipment are taken to a whole new level. Taking a camera underwater is fraught with difficulties. Sophisticated electronics and water don't mix and the failure of one tiny rubber seal can write off thousands of pounds worth of equipment. (I should know. I've done it!) As we all know, lighting is needed on all but the shallowest, sunniest dives so a flash is essential and two are even better; more equipment to keep watertight. A flat battery or full memory card means the end of your photography for that dive as does the simplest of mistakes, such as leaving the lens cap on the camera once it's inside the housing. (I've done that too!) Then there's the whole issue of which lens to take down. There's usually no popping back up to the surface for a quick rummage in the camera bag for a different one.

Then there's the sea itself, constantly moving on the surface and below, not always welcoming of visitors. Around my home island of Sark, one of the smallest of the British Channel Islands, there are the added difficulties of our huge tidal range that means planning a dive requires an intimate knowledge of the area and much consulting of the tide tables. Although we can have some of the clearest water in the British Isles, plankton levels vary and blooms can reduce visibility to just a few feet over night. Add to all of this our chilly sea temperature and you can see that every successful underwater image,

particularly in British waters, is a minor miracle. (I teach underwater photography to visiting divers and remind them of this when they despair of their success rate. If I have one or two 'keepers' from a dive I'm happy. More than that is a bonus.)

I've been diving and photographing the marine life around Sark and the other Channel Islands since 1988. While my images feature in textbooks and guides to British marine life the most satisfying commissions are those that give me the chance to show islanders just what wonderful things we have in the seas that surround us. I was delighted then to be asked by the Guernsey Post Office to submit a portfolio of images for a set of stamps featuring Channel Island marine life. The only downside was that they wanted pictures of fish, some of the hardest of all sea creatures to photograph. Fast and often timid, even the most common species can be difficult to approach. I've never even seen a mackerel while I've been underwater! Fortunately the commission came at the beginning of summer so I was able to dive and photograph with the project in mind and send new fish images to my client as I took them. As the season progressed the list of favoured species was honed but the decision was made to feature portraits of fish, ideally from front on. The challenge was on.

I decided that the fish I had the best chance of capturing on camera were the territorial ones and among those they don't come any more photogenic than the Tompot Blenny. This hand-sized fish lives in rocky areas and often hides in cracks or small caves where the male guards the eggs. Like blennies the world over, the Tompot is an inquisitive fish though and given enough time will emerge from its hiding place and pose for the camera. It's also quite punchy and will give a stray finger a sharp nip if it



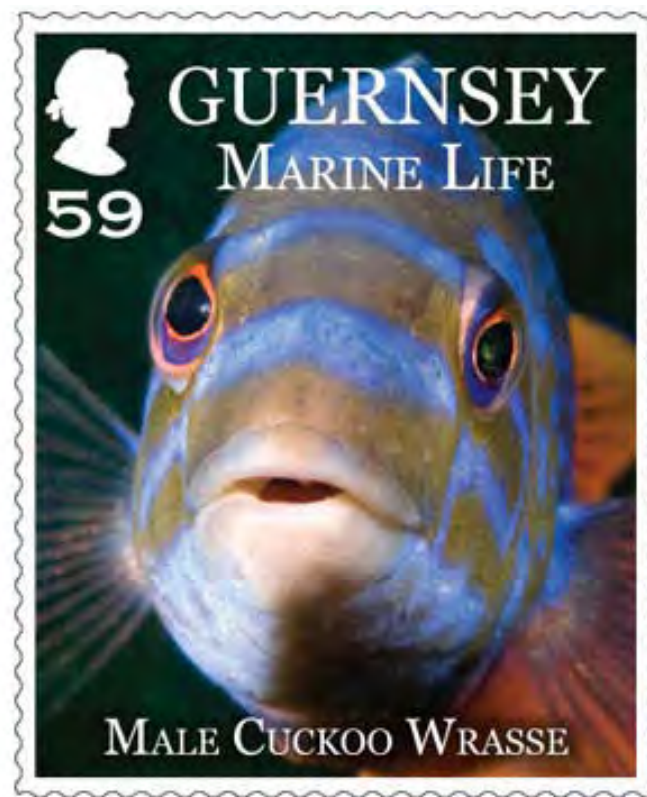
*Canon EOS 10D
in a Sea & Sea
housing. 100mm
lens. Sea & Sea
YS120 and a YS110
strobes. ISO 100
Manual exposure
F7 @ 1/60th*



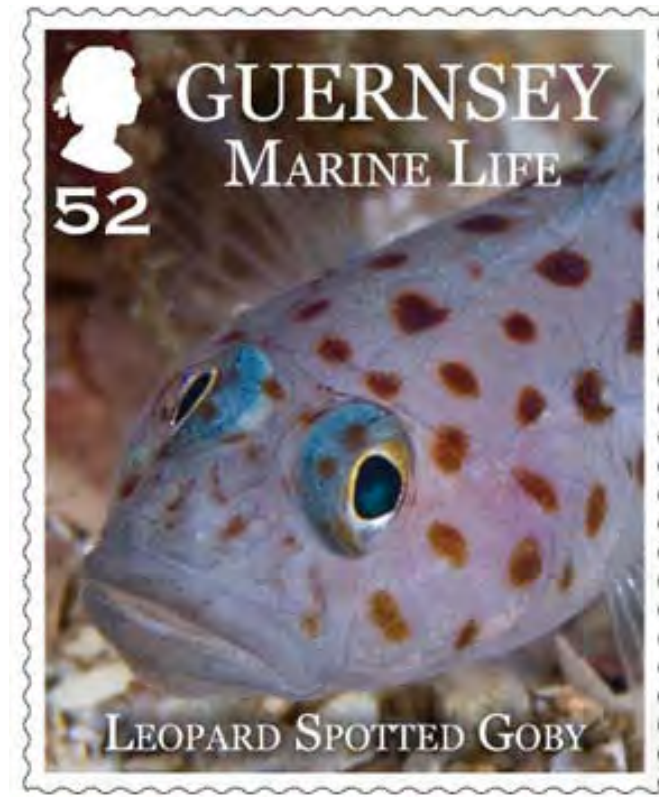
comes too close to its patch. With large eyes and lips and its characteristic headgear, the Tompot was an early choice for Guernsey Post and features on the 39 pence stamp. This one was photographed in a crevice between the stonework of our harbour wall, one of my favourite dive sites. Patience is also the key to photographing the Leopard-spotted Goby that appears on the 52 pence stamp. Just a few inches long, it too lives in rocky crevices and can often be found where the tide has carved out a cave where boulders meet a sandy seabed. Once disturbed it can take a long time to feel safe enough to venture from its submarine cave and I've spent whole dives lying on the seabed waiting, sometimes in vain, for this spotted beauty to emerge.

There are no such problems when it comes to photographing Cuckoo Wrasse. They live in groups with several, peach-coloured females and a single, dazzling blue and orange male. Should anything happen to the male the oldest female changes sex and colour to take his place. These intensely inquisitive fish swim right up to divers and often appear to react to their reflections in masks. The biggest problem is getting enough distance between the lens and a Cuckoo Wrasse for the camera to focus as they often put their faces right up against the lens. They are common at many of my favourite dive sites around Sark and often appear in the frame when I'm photographing other subjects. Fish with a sense of humour perhaps? They feature on the 59 and 69 pence stamps.

Photographing a John Dory, the star of the 74 pence stamp, poses quite a different challenge. From the side this striking fish displays elaborate, spiky fins top and bottom and a circular pattern that legend has it is the mark of St Peter's thumb when he took money from the fish's mouth. End



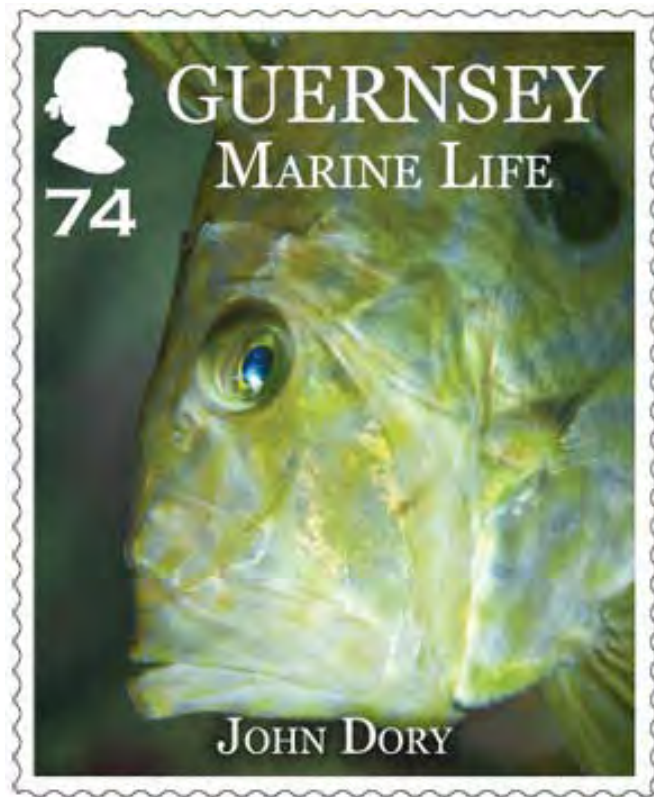
Canon EOS 10D in a Sea & Sea housing. 28-80mm at 36mm. Sea & Sea YS120 and a YS110 strobes. ISO 100 Manual exposure F7 @ 1/60th



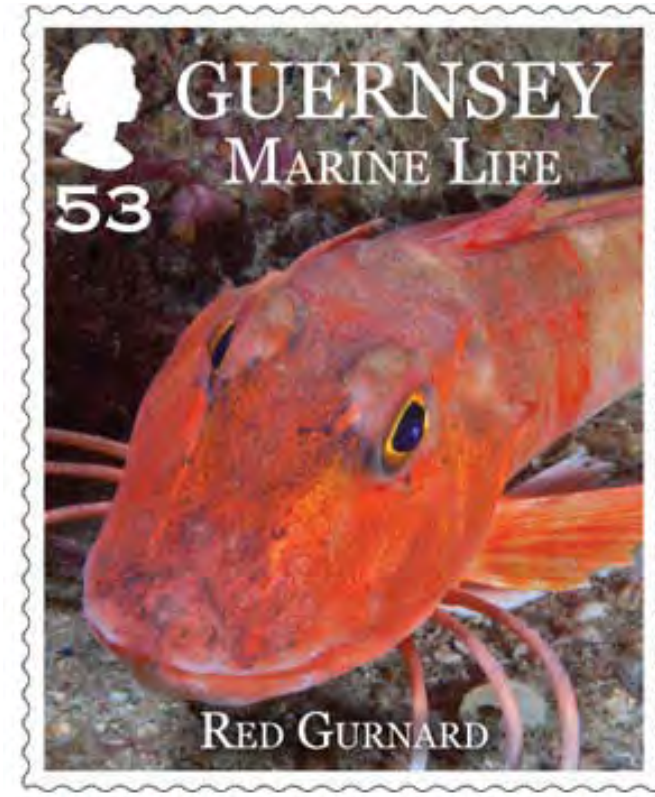
Canon EOS 40D in a Sea & Sea housing. 18-55mm at 55mm. Sea & Sea YS120 and a YS110 strobes. ISO 100 Manual exposure F8 @ 1/80th

on the John Dory presents little more than a dark, vertical line because this fish is incredibly thin, a characteristic essential for sneaking up on its prey of smaller fish. When approached by a diver, particularly one clutching a camera, it is this most cryptic of profiles that the fish presents, usually tail on: not the most photogenic of angles. As I swim in circles in an attempt to capture the fish side on it simply pirouettes. It's the underwater equivalent of chasing a squirrel around a tree. Quite by accident I discovered that the answer to this is to dive at night. John Dories are attracted to light and, far from being disturbed by my torch beam, will use it to hunt by, giving me the perfect opportunity to capture it in all its bizarre beauty.

As with all forms of photography there are occasions when putting in the hours and being in the right place at the right time brings its rewards. This was the case for the image of the Red Gurnard that was used on the 53 pence stamp. I'd sometimes seen one or two of these spectacularly colourful fish near one of my favourite reefs and knew that Guernsey Post were keen to include it in the series. So far I only had side on views, not the front or three-quarter portrait they wanted so was delighted to see one on the seabed over thirty metres down. There isn't much time at that depth but I know that Red Gurnards are skittish and once spooked disappear with the flick of a tail. I lay on the seabed and began taking pictures from a distance. Ever so gradually I moved closer until I was able to get the close up shot I needed which also shows the Gurnard's 'fingers', modified, taste sensitive fin rays that the fish uses to find food buried in the sand. By this time I was short on time and had to head straight for the surface but I had my shot making it a successful dive even though I hadn't had time to photograph



Canon EOS 5D MKII in a Sea & Sea housing. 28-90mm lens at 90mm. Sea & Sea YS120 and a YS110 strobes. ISO 640 Manual exposure F5.6 @ 1/60th



Canon EOS 5D MKII in a Sea & Sea housing. 28-90mm lens at 90mm. Sea & Sea YS120 and a YS110 strobes. ISO 250 Manual exposure F25 @ 1/200th



anything else.

The highest value stamp, the £5 miniature sheet, features the Black-face Blenny. A rarity around mainland Britain, this thumb-sized fish is quite at home in the slightly less chilly waters of the Channel Islands and, again, photographing them is down to knowing where to look and understanding their behaviour. In spring and early summer the male is easier to spot as his speckled brown colouring is replaced by bright yellow on his body and jet black on his head. He dances around the dull-coloured female when she is ready to lay her eggs and even though he may dart away at the approach of a diver he

doesn't give up his courtship for long and soon returns. Guernsey Post chose this fabulous fish for their first venture into augmented reality. Simply scan the Black-face Blenny miniature sheet with a tablet or phone loaded with the relevant app and you will be able to see a high definition film featuring most of the fish in the stamp series.

The film element of the commission gave me the chance to get to grips with both a new video system and new editing software. (I'm using, and loving, a Canon XF105 in the Amphibico Endeavor housing with a pair of Light and Motion Sola 1200 lights and am just about getting to grips with Avid for my editing work.)

Canon EOS 10D in a Sea & Sea housing. 100mm lens. Sea & Sea YS120 and a YS110 strobes. ISO 100 Manual exposure F6.3 @ 1/100th

I'm often asked if, after 25 years, I am tired of diving around Sark. The answer is a definite no. I've still only explored a few tiny areas and there's so much more I'd like to record down there. Maybe one day I'll get that shot of some mackerel!

I'm still learning every time I go underwater and, even on the best diving days, only get a couple of hours beneath the waves which means there's never enough time to get bored. I always come up wanting more!

Guernsey Post will be releasing

their marine life stamp issue on the 20th February when the individual stamps, miniature sheet, presentation packs and first day covers will be available.

There is a video clip about the fish at

<https://vimeo.com/50781713>

Sue Daly
www.suedalyproductions.com

Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

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.

www.magic-filters.com