Scottish Sea Lochs

by Jason Gregory

Along much of Scotland's west coast are around 80 fjord-like sea lochs. As well as the awesome scenery of these wild areas rich in 'top-side' wildlife and therefore photographic potential, the sea lochs offer plenty for the underwater photographer. Truly enjoyable motoring (rare these days?) along some wild, sometimes wood-lined, sometimes mountainous roads leads to a multitude of shore dives. Boats can of course reach many more.

A typical sea loch is narrower at its entrance to the open sea than its upper, wider, usually shallower 'basins'. We have the ice-age to thank for these sculptural feats. And so varying depths and sea water energy levels make for diverse marine life to feed our image making passion.

Sea loch diving, with or without a camera, does require particular attention to buoyancy. The seabed or 'substrate' of sea lochs is often fine mud or silty sand. Careless movements can easily ruin the otherwise clear water. But clear water doesn't mean well illuminated diving. Rain water running off the hills (yes, Scotland does get a bit of rain) is stained by peaty soils and when mixed with sea water, an almost coffee coloured hue is created. In shallow water and with good sunlight this can seem almost golden. This dark water prevents most sunlight 'percolating' through, often even in shallow depths. So a powerful main torch and/or some kind of focus assist lighting will be needed. At many dive sites, in for example Loch Long and Loch Fyne, it's essentially darkness diving, or 'night' diving! Great fun if you are prepared for these conditions, difficult if you are not.

Until scuba divers explored and more importantly recorded and photographed the marine life that they observed in sea lochs, several marine animals there were thought to be rare.

Protanthia simplex a dainty anemone in subtle shades of peachy orange are now known to be extremely numerous and have earned the common name of 'sea loch anemone'.

(Top) Loch Fyne, Scotland. (Right) Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/60th @ F10. ISO 200.

Unexpected 'things' appearing out of the darkness can give the inexperienced diver a kind of 'slow fright'. Pachycerianthus multiplicatus – a rather grand name, for a rather grand mud dwelling anemone looms large from the darkness of the sunlight starved environment in the deeper parts of upper basins of sea lochs. But with light from our torch the sight of tentacles exploding from the colourful centre of the 'Fireworks Anemone', as it is commonly known, is a benign pleasure. The contrast between what sometimes seems a seabed devoid of life and the festival of long white tentacles is startling. The size of this subject makes wide angle techniques the best option. Macro too can give good results; those with interchange-ability have both options.

The Fireworks Anemone is the subject of study and census. Their wellbeing, or otherwise, may tell us if we are looking after their habitat, or if we are not. Discovering that these lovely creatures are not rare doesn't make them less important. It means they and their habitats need protecting. If we don't know something exists, no-one will study, value and protect them.

The narrow entrances to some of the sea lochs generate faster flowing

(Top left) Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/30th @ F10. ISO 200.

(Above) Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/100th @ F22. ISO 200.

(Right) Nikon D300, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 'Fish Eye' f3.5-4.5 DX, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/60th @ F6.3. ISO 200.

Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/100th @ F16. ISO 100.

Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/80th @ F13. ISO 200.

water and are constantly 'swept clean'. Here, very different seabed types exist. The most interesting and colourful are areas carpeted with 'maerl'. This puzzling material is a form of red seaweed called 'coralline' algae. There are two types in Scottish waters. One seems more to coat rocky surfaces, the other actually builds small stony nodules. Both are a lovely pink colour and apart from forming useful structures for other life forms to inhabit, they can add colour and unusual texture to our images.

Familiar shapes, in fact sharky shapes are also found in sea lochs. Usually seeming to snooze on the bottom and generally tolerant of the camera diver, the Smallspotted Catshark or just 'Dogfish' to many, are a subject hard to resist. See The Shark Trust for good ID guides.

Another distinctive shape, and another creature built of cartilage and not bones, is the ray. Upper basins of some sea lochs seem to hold a population of the Thornback Ray giving the diver a decent chance of encountering one. I would suggest photos from above 'helicopter' style are a good way to capture the superb shape and markings. If the ray 'takes flight' and if strobes are charged and ready, shots of the wings in motion add graceful movement to a photo. Patience and timing, as so often is the case, are required to catch the 'peak of the action'.

From the robust larger animals to the small and physically delicate. None more delicate, in fact named as such – the brittle star. These are definitely macro subjects. This ancient design that seems just too weak to last has been on our Earth for many millions of years before we arrived. Quick moving, colourful and extremely numerous these little beasties can make a busy and wonderfully tangled composition. Look for the pure lemon coloured, or the blue and red spined ones, or any of a plethora of colour combinations. Sometimes they can be seen to 'recline' in discarded shells or man-made objects. They appear to have a certain freaky 'personality' all of their own.

Our UK waters out-perform most tropical locations in the crustacean

Nikon D300, Subal housing, Tokina 10-17 'Fish Eye' f3.5-4.5 DX, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/60th @ F10. ISO 200.

Nikon D300, Subal housing, Nikon AF-S Micro Nikkor 60mm1:2.8G ED, 2 x Sea & Sea YS90 (manual) 1/100th @ F22. ISO 200.

department, and sea lochs are particularly good for these guys. The larger crabs of various species have both a body shape, colouration and attitude to make dramatic images. Most crabs look mean, and most crabs are mean. Capturing their defensive postures, claws out as if to say 'you just dare' make a great and animated image. We all seem to like anthropomorphising the animals we see and the behaviour of crabs lends itself to this. Hiding, fighting and cuddling are all on offer!

Sea loch photo subjects don't have to have attractive visual appeal. How about one of the most humble organisms, sea squirts? These simple structures that filter water for its nutrients can, if viewed up close, reveal delicate and colourful 'bodies'.

The most common of these has to be the wonderfully named Ciona intestinalis. My 1970's comprehensive schooling didn't include Latin, but I can loosely translate this name into 'blue guts'! Singly for macro, or en mass for wide angle, do give them a try, you might grow to like them.

Some call it luck, being in the right place at the right time to capture the exotic, unusual or unexpected. Assemblages of marine life sometimes just fall into place and an altogether serendipitous image opportunity pops out at you. Look for interaction, feeding, mating and display behaviour. All these behaviours can be extra elements that add up to an interesting image. I was lucky enough to come across a little pink clingfish in its scallop shell nursery of tiny silvery eggs, watched over by a pesky hermit crab. A lovely snap shot (and it was a snap shot) of a bit of underwater drama. Not a hang on the wall photographic masterpiece, but a little macro story to wonder about.

Several sea lochs offer dramatic walls and cliffs. These imposing towers of rock than can extend into serious depths have a community of life suited to hanging-out for food carried along by tidal currents. One of these simple but surprisingly photogenic filter feeders is the Peacock Worm. Quite why the feathery collecting sieve that is so nervously fanned out by the worm has such appealing patterns is a mystery

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to me. Stealth mode is needed to get near for the photo. They will feel you approaching, and in a split second all you will be left with a leathery brown tube.

A good deal of what we see underwater is unfamiliar. Some stuff is a rather odd. And a few things could have come from a planet other than our own. But you don't need a billion dollar Mars rover (as amazing as it surely is) to see the very definitely weird. The little mud dwelling fellow – the Sea Mouse - is as bizarre a manifestation of sea loch life as you will find. Tiny white sensors indicate the head end, the rest of the body sports neatly swept-back iridescent hairs. It trundles along through the silt and is easy to photograph, but very difficult to understand.

The sea lochs of Scotland reward the adventurous diver with a hidden wealth of life. Tricky photographic conditions requiring honed skills are required, but fascinating and somewhat different photographic subjects are the reward. Team up with pals or club members to keep travel costs to a minimum and take a trip to Scotland. Take everything along with you, don your dry-suit and prepare for an interesting photographic experience. Leave the Clown Fish to others.

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