

Shooting Nudibranchs

by Dan Bolt

In recent years we have witnessed a rise in the popularity of nudibranchs amongst the scuba diving community, both as a photographic subject and from a natural history point of view. Now that underwater photographers and non photographers alike are seeing these little creatures with a new understanding and renewed interest in their many fascinating forms and behaviours, we are also seeing a rise in tempting photo competitions with dedicated nudibranch categories. In fact very recently I had the privilege to see almost 900 nudibranch photos submitted from photographers in 33 countries to the nudibranch Photo Competition which I was involved in running. And perhaps the most telling sign of this rise in popularity is Alex Mustard's cover shot of a nudibranch on a UK diving magazine back in January - not a diver, drysuit or bit of shiny tech diving kit anywhere to be seen; just a gorgeous Polycera quadrilineata.

Feeding into, and feeding from, this popularity are numerous macro-specific photographic trips and one or two nudibranch safaris being run around the world. A hugely popular

trip based in Europe is the Gulen Dive Resort Nudibranch safari in Norway. This isn't for the faint-hearted as water temperatures can be as low as 2 degrees C, but the clear waters and sheer numbers of slugs (both species and abundance) draws many scientists and underwater photographers to the annual event.

There is a great deal of cross-over between nudibranch photographers and marine scientists who share the same interest. The photographers gain insights into the behaviour, location and abundance of many species; and the scientists get access to many detailed images and greater number of in-water observations that would normally not be possible.

Many photographers develop their own favourite style or technique for shooting in different situations; quite often this is led by the development of new kit, or simply what is considered a fashionable 'look' at the time. Taking images of nudibranchs is no different and their many shapes, sizes and forms make them suitable subjects for a variety of techniques.

The most basic approach is



Coryphella lineata - Olympus E-PL5 & 45mm macro. PT-EP10 housing. 1/200th, f/13, iso400, 2xYS-D1. Two strobes slightly above eye-line pointing inward & equally powered. Manual exposure.

to see them as a traditional macro subject and apply tried & tested rules of engagement: macro lens, high shutter speed, small aperture and strobes. Compact camera users need not feel left out, as many models have superb macro capabilities which can be further enhanced using additional close-up 'wet' lenses.

Moving beyond this method can open up a whole new creative world to the slug shooter. If you like velvety-black backgrounds you might want to try using snoots on your strobes, using

'inward-lighting' techniques (where you aim your strobes back in towards the camera & use the very edge of the light cone to light the subject), and cutting your kit down to just a single handle and strobe to facilitate getting very close to your subject.

Going in the opposite direction and keeping some ambient light in your shots will often involve careful control of the strobe as TTL metering sometimes tends to overexpose in this situation so using your strobe in manual can yield much better results.



(Top left) Eubbranchus_farrani - Olympus E-PL1, PT-EP01 housing & 18-42mm @ 42mm +10Subsee. 1/125th, f/18, iso200, 1xYS-D1. Single strobe above port pointing slightly upward.

(Top right) Facelina_auriculata - Olympus E-PL5 & 45mm macro. PT-EP10 housing. 1/250th, f/16, iso200. Two strobes pointing out & from both sides of port, equally powered.

(Right) Polycera_quadrilineata_1.jpg - Olympus E-PL5 & 45mm macro. PT-EP10 housing. 1/250th, f/13, iso200, 2xYS-D1. Single strobe above port pointing slightly downward.



If you are shooting in temperate waters where ambient light levels are very much lower, keeping an adequate depth-of-field by using your aperture will necessitate using higher ISO settings & lower shutter speeds to let that light into your image. Playing to the strengths of your kit in these situations always pays dividends; if your image stabilization is better than your high ISO performance, then use slower shutter speeds, if not then ISO should be your tool of choice.

Taking a different view of nudibranchs is perhaps where you'll start to see the greatest opportunities for amazing photos. Observation can be the key to getting interesting



Habitat - Photo courtesy of Terry Griffiths - Nikon D7000 & 60mm macro.
1/1250th, f/13, iso200, 2xZ240

behaviour photos and as these critters can move surprisingly quickly, take some practice shots before you carefully approach the subject so you are ready for the action.

Almost every aspect of a nudibranch's life can be used for behaviour photography; aggregations, mating, egg-lying, feeding, cresting a pebble or frond of weed and sometimes even swimming in mid-water give plenty of chances if you know where & when to look.

Close-focus wide-angle is another technique which can be

applied to the larger species of nudis. Again, compact camera users are not disadvantaged because many wide-angle or fisheye wet lenses have very good close focusing abilities. The most problematic aspect of a CFWA nudibranch shot is getting the light to the subject; the ability to reduce the size of your camera rig and get your strobes as tight to your port as possible is the key. This approach can be used to include a diver in the shot, or perhaps more interestingly place the nudibranch in its habitat - often they feed and live in very colourful



(Tritonia_hombergi - Olympus E-PL5 & 45mm macro. PT-EP10 housing. 1/250th, f/13, iso200, 1xYS-D1 snooted.

sediment and ruin your photographic opportunities.

In every corner of the globe where slugs are found, using just one finger to steady yourself while keeping your body/fins away from the reef/wall/sea-bed should be your standard approach. Just because you can't see a slug or it's food or eggs doesn't mean they're not there!

If you shoot for competitions, nudibranchs are a surprisingly versatile subject in their own right and you don't even need a dedicated category to benefit from their many forms. Lots of competitions have 'abstract', 'behaviour' and 'portrait' categories which all lend themselves to photos of nudis. Applying the techniques discussed previously you've also got opportunities in 'traditional macro', 'super macro' and 'wide-angle' categories too.

Sometimes competitions throw up oddly themed sections to test the entrants creative abilities. Themes like 'reflections', or 'yellow' and 'camouflage' can all be useful to the nudibranch photographer if you know your species and have the ability to go & find them!

and interesting places which can be used to make beautiful images.

As is common practice amongst the majority of underwater photographers, a respect for nudibranchs and their habitat is paramount. This is not just for the benefit of the slugs themselves because if you adopt a sensible and conservation-minded attitude in the water then your images will benefit too.

Many species of nudibranch live on mucky/silty sites so poor finning technique or buoyancy will disturb the

(Left) Polycera quadrilineata - Olympus E-PL1 & 12-50mm @ 50mm. PT-EP01 housing. 1/160th, f/14, iso200, 1xYS-D1. Single strobe above port pointing slightly downward.

(Right) Flabellina pedata - Olympus E-PL1 & 12-50mm @ 50mm. PT-EP01 housing. 1/125th, f/16, iso320, 1xYS-D1. Single strobe above port pointing slightly upward.

If in-camera manipulation is permitted you can try your hand at a double (or more) exposure that places a close-up shot of a nudibranch onto a cleverly exposed sun-ball or diver silhouette. Tricky to pull off well; but stunning if done properly.

The increasing appeal of nudibranchs is perhaps, in part, down to the fact that there are still new species waiting to be discovered. Even in the most popular diving destinations in the world, every now and then something new pops up and gets the scientists, and photographers, all excited.

In completing the necessary dives for my recent iBook on nudibranchs of south west England, my buddy (and fellow author) Terry Griffiths and I stumbled upon a potential 4 new species whilst diving sites we had be visiting for many years. It will take some time, and many more dives, to confirm, but the fact illustrates that there's still so much more out there to be discovered.

Dan Bolt

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