

South West Ramblings 7

by Mark Webster

I began writing this next edition of ramblings during the late autumn of 2013 following a summer that offered some of the best weather and diving conditions for several years. The challenge was to make the most of the weather and imaging opportunities and inevitably this desire may of course clash with other home or work plans, but you can salve your conscience with the sure knowledge that next summer won't be so good and you can redress the balance then. This approach represents the thoughts of a somewhat deranged underwater photographer, my wife's view of course and not my own, as I know that if I am wrong then I can simply repeat this reasoning next year!

However, what followed the good summer was one of the worst winters on record in the south west for storms and continuous often torrential rain. This has caused significant damage to coastal defences, infrastructure and brought the misery of flooding to thousands of people across the region. So diving locally has been impossible either due to rough sea conditions or the appalling visibility which follows and was exacerbated by the rain and run off from the land and rivers. So

in completing these notes my fervent hope is that I can repeat the above reasoning again this year and spend plenty of time in the water.

Although many underwater photographers mostly prefer to dive alone (myself included) having another diver in your wide angle pictures is often a good way of completing an image and perhaps telling a story, particularly to the non diving viewer. If you are using a fellow photographer to pose for you may sometimes get caught out by their flash firing particularly if they use a compact in a plastic housing. This can result in some attractive compositions but often it can spoil the shot if the flash is pointing in the wrong direction or fires at high power.

By applying a little planning to these shots, even after the first one has been spoiled, we can produce some effective images which actually convey a story to the viewer. Your model's flash will only fire if it is set to slave mode or the TTL sensor sees your key flash as often happens when reflections occur inside the clear plastic housings. If the flash is pointing towards your camera then this is likely to result in an ugly white



Diver with flash 2 – the image improves significantly if you direct your model's flash downwards towards a subject and reduce the power output. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/60.

patch of over exposure and possibly backscatter in the image unless the flash has a very low power setting or you have heavy diffusion on the flash.

Often the best technique is to have the model's flash pointing downwards towards a real or apparent subject and select a low power setting. Even using a low power setting may result in some over exposure directly below the flash but this will look cleaner and more realistic and you can review the image and adjust the flash angle for the best effect. Make sure

that your model is looking through the viewfinder or at the review screen to complete the effect of the photographer at work.

During the summer we normally see a large number of candy striped flat worms that begin to appear as the nudibranchs start to fade away. This year the average size to me seems to be much larger than previous seasons and I have seen several up to 14cm/6" in length when they would normally reach 5cm/2" on average. Being larger they are easier to spot but the best



Large candy striped flatworms have been abundant this summer and can be found easily on their preferred diet of light bulb tunicates. The horns of the “head” are clearly visible in this image. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/125.

chance of finding them is to look for one of their favourite foods which are the light bulb tunicates that are very common on the reef.

Unlike nudibranchs the head of the flatworm is not so obvious but there are a pair of peaks or horns on the head and these are often best captured during the act of feeding as the flatworm elevates to nibble on a tunicate. The larger examples can even be captured with the long end of a fish eye zoom as a wide macro image, so don't ignore the subject if

you think you have the wrong lens installed on the camera.

One nudibranch you will normally see throughout the year is the *Tritonia nilsodhneri* which mimics the polyps on the orange gorgonian sea fans that are fairly common in the south west. On one of my regular dive sites at Porthkerris there is a small sprig of gorgonian (not yet a fan by a long way) which has been home to a single one of these *Tritonia* nudibranchs for the past couple of years. I have often wondered how it



**Tritonia nilsodhneri* nudibranch foraging on weed. The opportunity to photograph this species away from the host gorgonian sea fan shows how well the rhinophores and cerata mimic the polyps of the sea fan. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/125.*

found its way to this isolated sprig and whether it has any hope of another nudibranch finding the same location to breed as I have not seen eggs here.

I normally check the fan as I swim by just to be sure that it is still in residence but on this particular day I could not find the nudibranch on the fan. Thinking it may be dead or possibly eaten by a predator I had all but given up when I spotted a pale object on a piece of red seaweed a metre or so away from the fan. I thought to begin with that this was a

sea cucumber but once I had trained my lens on it I realised that this was the *Tritonia nilsodhneri* out for a stroll perhaps or feeding on algae?

I have only once before seen these nudibranchs off the host sea fan but this was in a location with multiple fans close together and dozens of this species were mating on each fan and obviously moving between them. So I am not sure why this critter was out for a walk..... was it looking for another fan, a mate or simply a change in diet? Whatever

the reason it gave me the opportunity to get some shots of this species without the distraction of the fan and fully extended as it moved across the weed which illustrates nicely how the cerata look just like the polyps of the sea fan. I returned a week or so later and found that the same nudibranch was still on weed close to the sea fan so perhaps it is just a change of diet that is the reason? Perhaps there is a nudibranch expert amongst our readers who can answer this.

Another nudibranch that is active until late in the season is *Acanthodoris pilosa* and I found many of them still laying eggs in the third week of August. The average size of this species is 25-30mm (1" or so) but some are 50-60mm (2" or so) which means you can shoot them with either a macro lens or a wide macro set up. In fact I found one feeding on a bushy bryozoan (*Alcyonidium diaphanum*) that allowed me access with the 17mm end of a Tokina fish eye zoom which will focus right down to the surface of my mini dome. Although I was harassed by a



The Acanthodoris pilosa nudibranchs are found breeding into late summer often in groups of three or four on finger sponges or red weed. The picture area is an ideal size for a wide macro perspective with a fish eye zoom and teleconverter. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2 x teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30.

cuckoo wrasse I did manage to get some clean images so don't assume you have the wrong lens if you encounter an interesting subject. Also try using a wide macro set up (e.g. 10-17mm FE zoom plus 2x teleconverter) which provides a very flexible lens range from true macro at the 17mm end to medium wide for larger subjects and is ideal for capturing subjects like these.

In the last edition of

ramblings I described the march of gangs of seven armed starfish in search of scallops. Since then I have had the opportunity to dive the wreck of the Epsilon in Falmouth Bay for the first time in more than fifteen years and was pleasantly surprised by another species of starfish. This ship was sunk by a mine as it left Falmouth harbour in January 1917 and is a popular destination for local dive clubs as there



Fields of brittle stars (Ophiothrix fragilis and Ophiconomina nigra) surrounded the wreck of the Epsilon in Falmouth bay stretching to the limit of visibility. The seabed around the wreck comprises maerl, a calcified sea weed, which provides nutrients for the brittle stars. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f11 1/25.

are still substantial chunks of wreckage and plenty of marine life.

Whilst the wreck itself has not changed much since my last visit, we did encounter many thousands (possibly tens of thousands) of brittle stars (*Ophiothrix fragilis* and *Ophiconomina nigra*) which surrounded the wreck well beyond the limits of visibility, which was perhaps 10m on this dive. The seabed here is covered

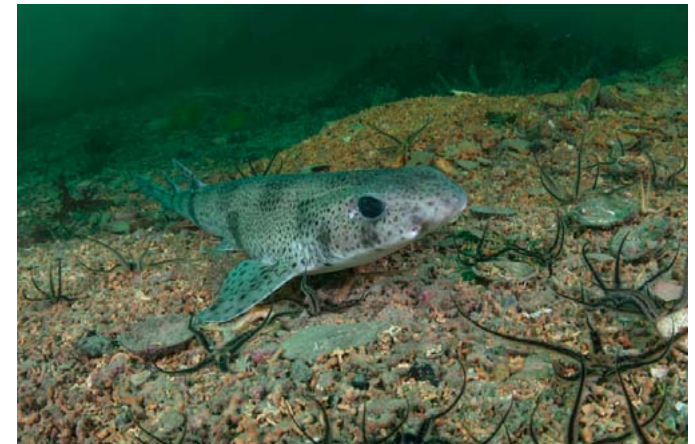
by a healthy colony of maerl which is a calcified seaweed and home to a variety of marine critters which I assume is what had attracted this swarm of brittle stars. Maerl is found in healthy quantities in several areas of Falmouth Bay and beyond, but this is the first time I have seen it attract such huge numbers of brittle stars which not only covered the seabed but also climbed up onto some areas of the wreck and



Inevitably there are inquisitive male cuckoo wrasse on the Epsilon and they are always willing to pose for the camera. The addition of a fellow photographer in the background completes the composition. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f11 1/30.



Red gurnard do become nervous once they realise they have been seen and will begin to move away from the camera on their “fingers” and with short swims which expose the bright blue colour of their pectoral fins. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f11 1/30.



The wreck of the Epsilon seems to attract a good population of dog fish that like to sleep most of the day. Most are very approachable and will even tolerate a mini dome and flash guns at very close range. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f11 1/30.

small items of debris around the wreck to elevate themselves into the tide to feed. These are quite colourful and make a great CFWA image subject with the field of brittle stars stretching away into the background.

Back on the wreck there are plenty of opportunities for fish photography (pouting, pollack, wrasse etc.) and shots featuring your fellow photographers. Where the maerl is exposed it is worth looking carefully for camouflaged species as scorpion fish and red gurnard that like to rest here and feed on the small fish and crustaceans in the maerl. The red gurnard are not as patient as scorpion fish with the keen photographer. I have found they generally tolerate a couple of head on shots before they decide they have been seen after all and try to put some distance between you with a combination

of crawling on their fingers and occasional short swims which reveals the deep blue colour of their pectoral fins.

We also found a number of dog fish here which also seemed reluctant to rest amongst the dense beds of brittle stars but would tolerate a few of the more spindly variety when they moved location. Dog fish are mostly co-operative and will allow a close approach when they are resting during the day, but some are very skittish and will depart as soon as they sense you are coming towards them. If they move they generally do not swim far so it is worth a second approach once they have settled down again.

If you have dived in the Caribbean you will know that the reefs are often dominated by sponges which can grow to impressive sizes and often in a dazzling array of colours. In the UK we don't often

see such large growths of sponge but we do have a wide selection of colourful sponges and there are some reefs where they fight for dominance with soft corals for example. They can make very good foreground subjects in a wide angle composition so it is worth spending a little time looking for good examples in good positions and experimenting with exposure and lighting. Some sponges have very textured surfaces and can be lit with a snoot or extreme side lighting to enhance the effect.

During August we have seen a second plankton bloom which unfortunately did not herald a return of the basking sharks in any numbers, but did bring with it numerous jelly fish and comb jellies. The dominant jelly fish was the compass jelly fish (*Chrysaora hysoscella*) but we also saw blue jellyfish (*Cyanea lamarckii*) and the almost



Yellow boring sponge (Cliona celata) with soft corals (dead men's fingers). Boring sponges normally penetrate the seabed strata but the harder granitic rocks in the south west makes them grow away from the reef. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/30.

Compass jelly fish have been common throughout August although water clarity and colour have varied dramatically with the plankton levels. This shot was taken on one of the clearer days when the water was almost blue. Nikon D300, Subal ND2, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125.



transparent moon jellyfish (Aurelia aurita) which is a real challenge to light successfully. Comb jellies (Ctenophora sometimes called sea gooseberries) are another species which is very difficult to light successfully due to them being mostly translucent, but it never stops me trying as they are such pretty subjects often found just below the surface and it is satisfying when the shot is successful.

The autumn months also featured excellent weather which gave me the opportunity to play with some new toys

(see the Subal ND7100 review in UWP76) but little did I know that the winter months would be so wildly different. Hopefully the next edition of ramblings will feature some wonderful spring diving.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk

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The type of articles we're looking for fall into five main categories:

Uw photo techniques - Balanced light, composition, etc

Locations - Photo friendly dive sites, countries or liveaboards

Subjects - Anything from whale sharks to nudibranchs in full detail

Equipment reviews - Detailed appraisals of the latest equipment

Personalities - Interviews/features about leading underwater photographers

**If you have an idea for an article,
contact me first before putting pen to paper.
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To keep UwP simple and financially viable, we can only accept submissions by e mail and they need to be done in the following way:

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Size - Maximum length 20cm i.e. horizontal pictures would be 20 cm wide and verticals would be 20cm.

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