

South West Ramblings 8

by Mark Webster

It has been a while since the last gush of ramblings from my laptop, but there has been a reason for that.....

In the south west of the United Kingdom the winter of 2013/2014 will be remembered as one of the worst in recent history. The winter months were unusually mild but the region was constantly battered by powerful Atlantic storms and a continuous deluge of heavy rain which resulted in widespread flooding of homes and farmland and heavy damage to coastal sea defences. When at last the weather began to abate in March we could only look at the sea, which was the colour of mud due to the turmoil and constant run off from the land and rivers, and wonder when we might be able to see the condition of the reefs and marine life. Finally in mid March the seas were calm for a few days and, although the water colour was still not encouraging, we ventured in for the first home dives of 2014.

Generally the visibility was appalling! The water had the clarity of a thick London fog (if you are old enough to remember those events...) with a heavy suspension of fine mud and silt and many familiar seabed features had been heavily scoured by

the enormous winters seas. So we fumbled our way around for the first couple of dives not seeing much in the way of marine life, although the familiar rosettes of nudibranch eggs were already beginning to appear, so there was at least hope! By the end of the month the conditions had improved a little although navigation on some sites was still a real challenge, but we were seeing a few reef fish at last and the first of the spring season nudibranchs had begun to appear. So I spent a happy couple of dives in the last week of March exploring a small patch of reef at Porthkerris cove where I quickly discovered five different species of nudibranch which were all still very small (perhaps 8-10mm) compared to what I would normally expect to see at this time of year.

The sea lemons are normally the first to appear each year but are quickly followed by *Limacia clavigera* and often *Favorinus branchialis* which are frequently seen on or close to the sea lemon egg rosettes on which they feed and also lay their own eggs. I eventually found three examples of this activity although you have to look very carefully as the nudibranchs



Favorinus branchialis nudibranchs will be some of the first to appear in the spring. Start looking for them as soon as you begin to see the sea lemon egg rosettes as these are a favourite food and also a platform for laying their own eggs. Nikon D7100, Subal D7100 housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f32 1/200

are very small (<10mm) and their predominantly white colour matches the eggs very well. Having found one you need to be patient and wait for the nudibranch to turn inside the egg rosette and face the camera in order to illustrate the subject, eggs and activity. *Limacia clavigera* are also found on the reef and on the kelp fronds where they feed on the sea mat broyozoans and hydroids. Apart from the occasional wrasse and scorpion

fish there was not a lot of fish activity, or perhaps it was just that I couldn't see them!

Somewhat surprisingly during our first boat dive of the season in late April on a favourite nudibranch reef we came across a male Lump sucker tending his egg brood. These fish are rarely seen in Cornish waters and normally only after a cold winter which had not been the case this year. Lump suckers are quite common in



Male black faced blennies are often seen patrolling their territories and displaying for a mate, but this is the first time I had seen one with a female that was swollen with spawn. They showed no concern at my presence, but unfortunately my air did not last long enough to see the consummation. D7100, Subal D7100 housing, 105mm macro, SubSee +10 wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100, f16 1/80

the North sea in the spring time when they come up from deeper water to spawn when the temperature is generally below 8c. The local water temperature has been close to 10c during this winter so this was an unusual find and inevitably I was armed with my 105 macro lens and +10 wet lens for nudibranchs. I tried hard to persuade myself to enjoy the moment!

During May we have seen numerous male black faced blennies in their striking breeding colours. Many are occupying the same small patch of reef territory that I have observed them in previous seasons (so presumably are the same fish?) but there are also many others in neighbouring territories that I haven't been aware of before. Generally May is early to see this activity, so I can



We have seen huge numbers of Rhizostome jellyfish in May and June which make irresistible wide angle subjects when the surface is calm and the sun is shining. Just be aware of how far and fast you are moving with your subject in the current! D7100, Subal D7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200, f18 1/250

only assume this is due to the mild winter which has affected some activities but not others. One treat this season has been the opportunity for the first time to observe and photograph a male and female together preparing to spawn, even though it was a struggle to get them both in the frame with a 105mm macro lens! The male sported a very vivid yellow/orange and his face was very dark whilst he danced and posed with his dorsal up around the female, who was swollen with eggs and just patiently sat and watched. The male would make contact with the female every few minutes and seemed to be caressing her. Neither were distressed by my presence and they would look directly at the camera together every now and then. I spent

around 30 minutes watching and hoping to catch the spawning moment, but my breathing was getting progressively tighter as the gauge approached 5bar so in the end I had to abandon them before the event occurred.

Seeing jelly fish during the plankton season is not unusual, but every few years we see a population explosion of a particular species. This year in May and June we have encountered large numbers Rhizostome jelly fish measuring up to 1m and more in diameter which on some days seemed to be coming by in squadrons of hundreds on the tide. Although these jelly fish can propel themselves they are largely carried with the prevailing current and you can often predict that they will return to a particular area with each change of the tide. They are great wide angle subjects particularly when close to the surface on a calm sunny day, but you have to be aware of the speed and distance of your own drift with the jelly fish on the tide. On one particular day I was absorbed with the task in hand just below the surface and found I had drifted to a headland area that we don't normally dive. As I could see the bottom around 12m below me I decided to descend and follow the reef back in to the bay towards the boat and eventual pick up. Approaching the bottom I could clearly see the reef terminating on the sandy plain of the seabed and almost immediately realized that the long tubular object I was gazing at was a cannon! This was an old iron cannon perhaps 2.5m in length which had the remains of ropes attached to it, so would seem to have been lost during an attempted recovery, perhaps being transported to shallow water on the shoreline. Although the outline of the cannon is clear, the iron is heavily corroded but the more interesting thought is where is the wreck it came



On a good day reefs like the Bizzies in Falmouth Bay can compete with those in the tropics with striking colours in the soft corals, sponges and invertebrates which produce very appealing wide angle images. D7100, Subal D7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f9 1/30

from? Obviously this cannot be far away, so further detective work is required!

Another population explosion we have noticed this spring has been the European cowries, which are not rare by any means, but you would normally only expect to see two or three on a dive. This year though they are literally hundreds everywhere which again is possibly due to the mild winter, although they must have multiplying after the storms!

Finally some news to further lift my spirits and spur me on in this season's nudibranch quest. I received the very flattering notification that I had won the British section of the recent Nudibranch Photo Competition and also scored the runner up and commended slots, which means I now have a new Nauticam SMC lens to play with and a copy of the recently released Photographic Guide To Nudibranchs of South West England (by Dan Bolt, Terry Griffiths



European cowries have been seen in abundance this year. Normally you have to make an effort to find one of these pretty little molluscs, but this year the reefs have been overrun with them and we have taken them for granted. This image has the spines of a thorny starfish in the foreground to indicate just how small these cowries are. D7100, Subal D7100 housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, SubSee +10 wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250, f32 1/200

and Bernard Picton) to identify my finds. Competitions do not appeal to everyone and there is always an element of luck involved in the judging, however they are a good way of giving your photography a purpose and will encourage you to think of different ways to present or light a common subject if you are trying to create images that will get noticed.

So how does the Nauticam SMC

lens perform? The first thing to bear in mind is that a +10 wet lens is a specialist tool and you will only need it when you find some really small subjects or want to focus on some very fine detail in a larger subject. It is perfect of course for UK nudibranchs which tend to be quite small and even with the 1:1 reproduction of a 105mm macro lens most species will not fill the frame. Fitting the wet lens changes

this and the SMC will increase the magnification to a maximum of 2.3:1 which is more than enough for most critters.

If you have not used one of these wet lenses before then the first challenge you will face is finding the subject with the lens fitted! Even though you may focus easily on a subject with your 105mm lens, with the wet lens installed your picture area shrinks dramatically as does the focus range which with the SMC reduces to between 100mm to 50mm from the subject at maximum magnification. So you need to be careful in your aiming of the lens at the subject and also conscious of the distance so that the lens can focus.

The autofocus with my D7100 works very well without a focus light even at maximum magnification although additional light will help the lens lock on and assist you in determining when you have the sharpest focus at the right point on your subject.

Depth of field is very narrow and the slightest movement will move the critical point in and out of focus so a little patience and a close to neutrally buoyant rig will help to get good results.

Flash positioning is also a consideration particularly if your subject is not posing on a flat section of reef. Nudibranchs in particular are often found in awkward positions under overhangs or in fissures in the reef and it may not be possible to position your flash guns in a regular arrangement as the wet lens brings you much closer to the subject. Be prepared to move them around and even discard one completely to allow good lighting access.

The results produced by the SMC were excellent with very sharp focus, well saturated colours and no evidence of fringing or aberrations at the edges of the frame. I use it with a threaded



Diaphorodoris luteocincta is a tiny species of nudibranch often only 6-8mm in length, so the Nauticam SMC is an ideal tool for shooting this and similar species. D7100, Subal D7100 housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100, f32 1/80

My Nauticam SMC was a sort of free gift following success in the Nudibranch Photo Competition and it proved itself a very able tool for shooting detail of nudibranchs like this Polycera faeroensis. D7100, Subal D7100 housing, Nikkor 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 125, f36 1/125.

adaptor on the front of my port, but there are various flip systems available if that is your preference. It is a heavy piece of glass so you may want to add a little more buoyancy to your rig to compensate and help you hold the housing steady for sharp results.

If you are in the market for a wet lens then the SMC is certainly worth considering and will produce excellent results once you have mastered the nuances of using it (a shameless plug for the



competition sponsor I know....!).

So now that summer seems to have arrived and at last we are enjoying some good visibility after the plankton blooms, so I will wrap up these latest ramblings and hope to bring you tales of a stunning summer season as the year progresses.

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