

Last Hour of the Last Day

By John Collins

There are a couple of mantra's we are prone to hearing often. 'Ah! You should have been here last week' is most commonly heard from a kind crew member on seeing you assemble your rig. They can't help it - a reflex reaction to that housing and strobe appearing on the camera table. You then hear about the Whale Shark/Manta/Striped Marlin encounter last week - no picture was captured of course. 'One guy had a Nikonos, but it was set up for macro'... What, then, to do to try and get ahead of the Gods of Underwater photography, whose sense of humour, as we know is boundless.

On a recent trip to Cocos, where anything really is possible, a dry bag on the chase boat saved the day more than once. First, a flash blanking plug for the housing and a sealable cap for the flashlead (keen crew members will put the flash in the rinse tank later!) . This along with spare film allowed a snorkel with a curious Mobula ray - spotted from the boat as it swam near the surface - after the dive, of course. Next in the bag, an F80 with 28-105mm zoom and an oversized polariser, which stayed pretty much in the bag until the Last Hour of the Last Day. This, of course the other great chestnut in underwater photography - the best opportunities will arise in the dying moments of the trip. And so it was, en route to Dirty Rock, with 60mm macro and small Sea & Sea flash to shoot the only macro of the trip, that the chase boat ('Panga') driver got excited

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Nikon F80 28-105mm zoom, Provia 400F. Divers observe the action on a baitball from the surface, the shark activity so intense it would be foolhardy to snorkel!

Nikon F100 in Subal N10 housing, 60mm lens, Provia F 400, available light. With perfect adaptation to the open ocean, the Silky shark specialises in taking injured fish.



about the horizon on an apparently featureless sea. A discussion with the divemaster ensued and we were given a choice. There was a lot of bird activity out to sea - we could go there and check it out OR go to Dirty Rock, which we had dived

a couple of times already. It was unanimous - 'Take her to sea Mr. Murdock...'

After a few minutes, the birds were clearly visible. Then the dolphins, and on close approach our hopes were realised - a bait ball. My first thought



Nikon F80 28-105mm zoom, Provia 400F. Seen from the boat, the swirling mass of bait fish can be seen frantically trying to avoid predators.

Nikon F100/Subal N10 24mm lens Fuji Provia 400F, available light. With patience, these smaller cousins of the Giant Manta Ray come within touching distance.



The first clue to bait fish being near the surface is large numbers of birds diving.



while kitting up was about my friend and fellow UWP contributor, Nigel Motyer who had his hand slightly chewed in just such circumstances a few years ago. A roll over the side, grab housing and down we go, into the blue.

The sheer number of sharks attracted by all the activity is staggering. And, having been in the company of white tips and

hammerheads during the week, we were not going to be worried by this lot now, were we? Well, I have to admit feeling the nitrox a bit drier than normal. In fact, my mouth felt it had shrank a size since the last dive. It wasn't the sharks per se, but their sheer number and behaviour. The Silky sharks were most numerous, small enough, but cheeky. They approach quickly and generally

turn away at the last second but will occasionally brush or bump to see what happens. Then there are the black tips, bigger than I expected but at least not as cheeky.

Finally, a few silvertips to complete the cocktail. This is the largest shark I had been close to without the protection of a cage. These are all open ocean sharks, busy and looking for a slice of the action. We deliberately stayed about 20m off the baitball itself as the action there was a little too frantic as we were to observe from the boat later. Seeing the dolphins do all the work of systematically herding the bait ball was the most amazing sight. Unlike the sharks, their movement seems busy but focussed. They had created a nice little smorgasbord but a lot of guests were showing up. We watched while the tuna started to show in in numbers. Other predatory fish like the Dorada or dolphinfish were spotted too.



Nikon F100 in Subal N10 housing, 60mm lens, Provia F 400, available light. Tuna pick up signals of bait fish activity and are among the first to delve in for their share.

Nikon F100 in Subal N10 housing, 60mm lens, Provia F 400, available light. Schools of bottlenose dolphins are often responsible for creating a ball of sardines or anchovy type bait fish and herding it towards the surface.

Back on the boat, the surface activity was getting even more frantic. We manoeuvred directly on top of the bait ball and watched tuna clear the water as they shot in to feed. They really are formula 1 fish, incredibly fast.

The sharks seemed to get more frantic in trying to get their share, perhaps sensing that the tuna were going to do some serious feeding. There were sharks thrashing at the surface in groups and the water was white with action for minutes at a time.

The second group of divers in another panga were called on the radio to tell them about the baitball and arrived on site quickly. They had finished their dive and were all kitted out for snorkelling. We were shaking our heads thinking, not a good idea, when the first diver was over the side and in the water, metres from the centre of the baitball. I did not think it was possible to board a boat faster than you can roll over the side - but it is! This having sobered any thoughts of snorkelling the group were happy enough to dip



nothing more than a mask into the water.

An hour or so after we had first seen it, we estimated the baitball had halved. A huge number of the immediate residents had a good lunch and we had the good fortune to witness it. And the Last Hour of the Last Day lived up to its expectation. Reassuring to know that the usual rules still apply.

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