

Dark Thoughts

by Mark Webster

Whether you choose to take your photographs on temperate or tropical reefs there is a seemingly endless selection of marine fauna and flora to record. However, if you choose to dive only during daylight hours you are likely to see only half the story as many of the reef's most secretive and some might say most interesting creatures remain hidden until the sun goes down. Diving at night is an exciting experience if only because it feels slightly unnatural, but for the photographer it opens up a whole new range of subjects. Although the prospect of managing your camera equipment in the dark may seem a little daunting at first don't let this put you off as a judicious choice of equipment and techniques can make the task very simple.

Firstly you need to consider how you are going to find your subjects. Effective lighting is essential, although it is a mistake to work on the principle of "the more light the better" at night in order to light as large an area as possible. Many night creatures are extremely sensitive to light and using wide beam powerful torches is more likely to disturb them before you have had the chance to spot them. The best choice for photographers are the small powerful narrow beam torches which are available from several manufacturers which are both effective for searching small areas and to illuminate just the picture area. Some photographers even advocate putting a red filter over the torch



Red prawn - you will see the glint from the eyes of dozens of prawns as your torch passes over the reef. They will often remain frozen in the beam which will allow you to make several exposures. Feather stars are host to a variety of crustaceans and fish. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

Porcelain crab - some crustaceans are very sensitive to light and will disappear quickly if you play your torch on them for too long. Once you have spotted the subject pre-focus the camera on an adjacent feature before moving in quickly for the shot. Feather stars are host to a variety of crustaceans and fish. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 60th.





Strawberry corals - most coral polyps remain hidden during the day. Strawberry corals make an ideal extension tube shot, but are very light sensitive. Nikonos III, 1:3 tube, Kodachrome 64, f22 @ 60th.



Sleeping puffer - barrel sponges are a perfect hiding place for several species of fish at night. Sharp nosed puffer fish in particular seem to prefer sponges at bedtime. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

(similar to the lighting on the bridge of a ship at night) which in theory will disturb the night vision of your subjects less.

Choosing how to mount your torches is also an important consideration as it is essential to keep your hands free for operating the camera. A popular method is to mount the torch directly over the lens either on the accessory shoe or on the port itself on an adjustable ball joint or bracket so that any subject directly in front of the camera will be lit. This method is particularly useful when using prods or framers and the flash position is largely fixed. Another

option, or perhaps in addition to the fixed torch, is to attach the torches to your flash guns. This method is well suited to housed camera systems, so that you know that when you see your subject is lit through the viewfinder your flash gun is also pointing in the right direction. This also makes hand held flash shots easier, which might be needed for subjects in deep crevices and will also allow you to direct the torch at the camera controls and displays. It is important to try various combinations to discover what is most comfortable for you, your equipment and preferred

techniques. Whichever method you finally choose remember to always carry at least one spare torch and perhaps a strobe flasher - torches flood and batteries run down and you may need these to signal to your surface cover at the end of the dive

Many night creature are quite small and given that your vision is limited to the breadth and depth of your torch beam you will find that aiming to take photographs in the close up and macro range will be most productive. It is not impossible to use a wide angle lens at night, as there are certainly larger



Parrot fish teeth - sleeping fish give you the opportunity to concentrate on feature which are all but impossible to photography during the day. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

predators around but you will rarely see them except perhaps fleetingly. Unless you have a specific wide angle subject to record you are likely to end your dive frustrated and wish that you had opted for close up equipment.

For Nikonos or Sea and Sea users the choice is between one of the available supplementary close up lenses or a set of extension tubes which will allow you to take extreme close ups or concentrate on macro life. Framers or prods are used to indicate the focused distance and picture area, but these can be a drawback in some circumstances when subjects (such as sleeping fish) are found in cracks and crevices. For these circumstances you can try removing the frame/prods and measure the distance with a separate single prod or by using converging focusing lights. To mount these either fabricate a bracket yourself for two small spotting torches (Mitylite or similar)



Sleeping blenny - soft corals are a good place to find the smaller reef species sleeping and can provide a contrasting background to the main subject. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 60th.

or buy one of the commercially available rigs. Either way, the operating principle is the same - the torches are set to converge at the correct focused distance for your lens, and when the two beams meet as a single spot on your subject you know it is in focus and take the shot.

For housed SLR users the choice will be a macro lens in the 50mm to 105mm range or perhaps a zoom lens in the 24-100mm range which has a close up or macro setting. Auto focus cameras will work well provided there is enough light and it is directed at the main subject. Strong contrasts or deep shadows cast by the edges of rocks and crevices can upset the older systems and you may need to resort to auto focus lock or switch to manual focusing. Having your torch mounted on the flash gun, as described above, will help a great deal in these situations allowing you to light the subject more directly.



Sleeping chromis - species which are difficult to approach during the day are a cinch at night when they remain frozen in your torch beam. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.

TTL flash works well at night as the subjects generally fill the frame and there is no natural light to upset the exposure - your torches will have no effect. Manual guns are well suited to macro or the close up kits for the Nikonos or Sea and Sea cameras when the flash position is fixed. Try running a test film to determine the optimum aperture and then simply bracket around this setting.

Some nocturnal fish and invertebrates are mesmerised by the torch light and will freeze when caught in the beam. This makes them particularly easy to approach, set up the camera, focus and take the shot. However, many night feeding corals, anemones and invertebrates are very sensitive to light and will retract quickly if a light is directed at them for too long. For these subjects it is best to try to spot them and then take the torch beam off the



Lion fish eating a banded shrimp - some fish are specialised nocturnal hunters. This lion fish surprised me when he launched himself at my subject, a banded shrimp, and promptly ate it! Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, YS120 & YS30, Velvia, f11 @ 60th.

subject whilst you prepare for the shot. It can help to pre-focus on an adjacent piece of rock or coral and then pan onto the subject for final composition and take the shot before it has time to react.

Sleeping fish are often encountered - wrasse for instance in temperate waters and parrot fish in the tropics - but are often well protected by the crevice they have chosen. Other species which hide from you during the day will pose happily at night - squat lobsters, decorator crabs, coral and porcelain crabs are all much more approachable. Your torch beam will reveal those tell tale specks of light reflected from the eyes of prawns, lobsters, crabs and even octopuses. Many will pose happily as long as the torch beam is on them, but will be quickly gone once it leaves them. When photographing a subject in a hole or crevice, pay

Twin spot dwarf lion fish - there are several species of lion fish that you will only see at night. They don't like the attention of a torch, so you have to work quickly once they are spotted. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 125th.



attention to the position of your flash, as although your torch may be illuminating the subject the beam of the flash can easily be obstructed by rock or coral and can cast a dense shadow over part or all of your image.

In addition to small macro creatures, try looking for abstract colours, patterns and bold contrasts which are often found in the polyps of night feeding corals, sea urchins, anemones and sleeping fish. You can then fill the frame with only the pattern which produce striking photographs. But remember it is not environmentally friendly to touch or damage the delicate polyps and coral structures or distress the fish when using prods or framers.

It is all too easy to shoot 36 frames quickly on a night dive, but try to leave a few frames for the end of your dive, especially in tropical waters, as the surface lighting from your boat will often attract squid and garfish looking for an easy meal. They will generally drift around the edge of the pool of light but will

often remain immobile when a torch is directed at their eyes.

Although safe diving practices advocate the buddy system many photographers make poor partners or they prefer to dive solo. At night your attention will be mostly focused on what is within the torch beam and it becomes even more difficult to maintain contact with a buddy. Even if you do dive as a pair it is wise to recognise that you may well part, intentionally or otherwise, and you should plan for separate ascents and return to the boat, shore or beach. A boat will normally be well lit for your return, but shot lines and dark beaches should also be equipped with a flasher or constant light source to aid navigation. It is also wise to agree with the beach or boat cover and your fellow divers a maximum duration of the dive so that there is adequate warning of anyone losing their way back or being caught by unexpected currents.

Night photography is simple and enjoyable as long as

you keep your equipment, techniques and objectives simple. It is often difficult to drag yourself away from a warm saloon and cold beer at the end of a long day of diving, but if you can tempt yourself once you will keep coming back for more.

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See Mark's website for further details:
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