

South West Ramblings 10

by Mark Webster

The UK summer season is always unpredictable at best, although the months of May, June and July had produced some consistently warm and calm conditions to cheer us up after a particularly stormy winter. But it could not last of course and the winds gradually began to increase in early August before the tail end of hurricane Bertha brought gales and heavy rain to most of the UK. In the south west we also get a second plankton bloom in August and this arrived at the same time to further reduce the visibility when combined with the disturbance of fine silt by the rough weather, which has been a left over from the massive seas of the winter. So when the weather and visibility gods are aligned against the intrepid underwater photographer we have to make the best of the conditions when the opportunity arises to get under the water.

The colour of temperate waters is generally toward the green/grey end of the spectrum, although before and between plankton blooms in high summer there are some sunny days when the water does display a Mediterranean or tropical blue. However, the latest plankton bloom

had induced a very deep green, but all is not lost as this can provide a very striking background to some of our more colourful subjects. So even in difficult conditions we can still produce some successful images with a little planning and good knowledge of your local dive sites. Perhaps the first thing to do is to create a list of subjects both macro and wide angle that feature colours that will contrast well with a deep green background and then match lighting techniques to reduce the inevitable backscatter.

One of our smallest and most colourful subjects must be jewel anemones. These colonial anemones thrive on high energy sites where they are swept by strong currents bearing the nutrients that sustain them. Often these anemones are on fairly flat or

Even when the plankton is thick and the water is green we can still produce some successful CFWA images with a fish eye lens. Be as close to the subject as you are able and then adjust the flash position and background exposure. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/60.





If the visibility is really poor then full macro with a 105mm lens is the only way to go and you will still produce some very pleasing images of these pretty anemones. . Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash gun with fibre optic snoot, ISO 200 f11 1/60.



Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 400 f29 1/200.



Jewel anemones are often found in the company of other species like these daisy anemones which provide a striking contrast with the saturated colours of the jewel anemones and green water background. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/60.

overhanging reef walls or rocks and you may need to search hard for a single anemone or group that is positioned against open water to create a green background. This can be further complicated by the desire to introduce a little brightness or even a hint of sunburst by looking for a subject in the correct position to allow an upward view towards the surface. Patience will often turn up something, but often the best looking anemones are in the hardest to access positions or require a downward view reducing the natural light intensity behind the subject. When this occurs you can experiment with faster ISO and slower shutter speeds and then perhaps boost the brightness of the background in post processing if needed.

Having found your ideal group of jewel anemones in the perfect position you can begin

to work on the image itself in macro, wide angle macro, close focus wide angle or a wide angle seascape. In poor visibility conditions we can of course reduce the effects of potential backscatter by working as close as possible to the subject which can be achieved with either lens choice, although the lighting in wide angle will be a little more challenging. Using edge lighting in macro will reduce the effects of backscatter in front of the subject, but can still illuminate suspended particles in the water column behind the subject. These particles are more obvious against a darker background, so increasing the brightness of the open water will mitigate the effects but when conditions are really poor then you may have to wait until post processing to clean up the image.

Wide angle is of course a different story

and you will need to experiment with the strobe placement to find the best position for the prevailing conditions. If you are using a fish eye then ensure that the flash guns are well behind the dome port, possibly behind the housing, to ensure that you do not pick up flare and scatter at the edge of the frame. Then it is a matter of adjusting the strobe angle relative to the subject for the best edge illumination and also the distance of the strobes from the housing, which generally increases as your distance from the subject increases.

Normally you will be working with wider apertures than in your macro images so it is a little easier to balance the exposure of the open water background with the flash exposure and brighten it as required. Don't forget to boost your ISO if you begin to struggle with slow shutter speeds as

shooting with say ISO 400 or even faster makes little difference to image quality with the current generation of DSLR's.

If you are struggling to exclude backscatter, especially with a wide angle lens, another lighting option is a snoot which can produce some interesting images in which you can adjust the "mood" by reducing or increasing the natural light exposure. You don't need to invest in an expensive adjustable commercially made snoot to try this, simply look in your recycling bag for suitable plastic bottles to cut up or use a plastic flower pot or investigate plumbing fittings. A few minutes with a Stanley knife and a roll of black duct tape or carpet tape can produce a number of size options to experiment with.

Personally I love this sort of DIY tinkering, particularly if the end result is a satisfying image, but if you don't and you have deep enough pockets then have a look at the bespoke options online. If you are old enough to have watched Blue Peter in your formative years then

Another option for lighting wide angle images when visibility and light levels are low is to use a snoot. You don't need to splash out on expensive snoots from the flash gun manufacturer, in this case the snoot is a 100mm/4" flower pot! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash gun with snoot, ISO 100 f10 1/160.

playing with bits of plastic tube and sticky tape will be second nature to you!

Snooting is also very effective in low visibility macro images as well, although the size of your snoots will be much reduced to reduce the area of illumination. Fibre optic snoots are good in this application although they can be a real pain to aim at the subject. I use a small "Mitylite" torch attached to the end of the snoot, but some fibre optic snoot systems will also boost and transmit the light from the flash gun focus light using a lens which may be easier to use. When you have found a suitable subject to snoot light



in macro it is worth playing with both dark and balanced light backgrounds. The dark backgrounds can be used as they are and also saved on the card for potential double exposure opportunities on subsequent dives. Ensure that you have left enough space around the subject for the second exposure if you are planning to use this technique.

One of the classic double exposure background is a sunburst on the surface which is always very striking with a macro image. The sun may be shining when the visibility is low but is much more difficult to expose, although



You can try and be subtle with a double exposure and just introduce a hint of surface light behind a subject that would be difficult to compose with CWFA. This Tritonia nilsodhneri nudibranch on a sea fan is an example, with the addition of an under exposed surface to add a little light and impression of depth. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro and 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f25 1/250 macro, ISO 100 f16 1/200 wide angle.

you can try working in very shallow water to capture the effect. But perhaps in these conditions we should try to be a little more subtle and just use the sun to provide a lighter open water background or hint of sun to combine with a macro subject that is normally difficult to shoot with balanced light.

One example I tried

is the Tritonia nilsodhneri nudibranch only found on gorgonian sea fans which are normally found in deeper water in positions which are not ideal for a balanced light macro image. The same thought can be applied to other macro subjects to keep you occupied in low visibility dives. These images won't work every time of



There are small and large caves and swim throughs and one tunnel through the reef at St. Anthony which are best explored at high water. When the tide is running it can be a struggle to swim up the gullies here – note the angle of the kelp behind the diver. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash gun with snoot, ISO 200 f11 1/60.

course, but it is all part of the learning process and refinement of techniques to add to your arsenal to be applied as conditions dictate.

With the beginning of September the water clarity began to improve again but we still had persistent east winds, when I was at home and able to dive, which limits the available dive sites. However, one of our favourites close to St. Anthony's light house is mostly sheltered from the easterly winds and provides some excellent diving and occasionally a few surprises.

There is a small cave system here which can only be explored easily on a high water spring tide in calm conditions, so we started our dive here after a bit of a struggle against the flooding tide to enter the gully with the caves. The walls of the gully

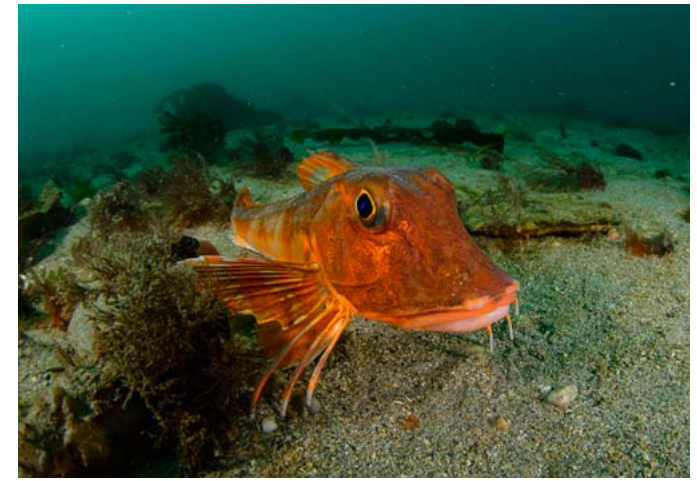


This enterprising spider crab is nobody's fool! This crab pot had several crabs in residence, but this wise old spider crab just climbed on top to reach in and pick out the bait through the netting. He just gave me the beady eye as I got closer....stay away this is mine! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash gun with snoot, ISO 200 f13 1/60.

are covered with jewel anemones and invertebrates which gradually reduce as you enter the shelter of the caves. Having a diver pose at the mouth of the cave will produce some classic compositions and keep the camera busy for a while.

The light house at St. Anthony marks the north east side of the entrance to Carrick Roads and the Fal river so there is a real mixture of habitats here ranging from reef to sand and gravel, more silty conditions and even eel grass beds. From the caves and gullies we moved back onto the sand and gravel and I began to stalk some of the many juvenile cuttlefish which are common here in late summer.

Cuttlefish can be fickle creatures....one day they will come to you and pose almost touching the dome, whilst the next on the same location they will



I was slowly getting closer to a cuttlefish after a long pursuit when on the edge of my viewfinder I saw something orange moving. Looking over the top of the housing revealed this red gurnard only a few inches away. Sometimes we are so focused on the subject in mind that we can miss a better opportunity as this proved to be. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom. Inon Z240 flash gun with snoot, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

scoot off as soon as you turn towards them. I was having one of those days when each subject would decide to scoot just as I got ready for a shot.

I then turned my attention to a wise spider crab that was sitting on top of a crab pot picking out the bait by reaching in through the netting and inevitably the cuttlefish began to gather to see what was happening. But as soon as I turned the camera towards them they began to get stage fright once more. I decided to follow one of the larger ones slowly and finally began to get close enough for a shot, but as I began to frame the critter through the viewfinder I noticed something orange moving in the corner of the frame.



There are plenty of classic macro subjects still to be found on low visibility dives. If you fix a maximum subject distance in your mind and get the strobe positioning set for this first you can then begin the hunt for subjects that will fit the picture area. This juvenile Tompot blenny was only 50cm/2" or so in length so was a perfect size for the 105mm lens. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f25 1/250.

When you are using a fish eye anything that appears in the corner of the frame is generally pretty close and as I looked up over the housing I found that I had settled right beside a reasonably large red gurnard. These fish are normally very skittish unless you find them at night when the light will mesmerize them, but this one was gently picking its way over the seabed towards me with what seemed to be an inquisitive look (can fish have those?). This turned out to be the most friendly red gurnard that I have ever encountered and

it just kept circling me and coming ever closer until it actually touched the dome with its "snout" possibly investigating the reflection.

So I ended up spending 30 minutes or so with this fish while the nervous cuttlefish gathered around to watch and looked a bit miffed that they were not receiving the expected attention. Well you cannot hope to please all the marine life on a dive, but the photographer was certainly happy when I surfaced after more than an hour in the water.

So even if a good summer does not always provide the best diving and photography conditions, that does not mean we should despair or just give up.

Low visibility and low light conditions should be seen as a challenge that will inevitably improve your photography for those dives when you can see several metres or more and the sun on the surface. An added benefit is that low visibility will force you to move much more slowly and focus on smaller areas on the reef which often reveals subjects or activities

that you would normally miss.

The visibility will always improve eventually and we should then be ready to make the most of the conditions and if you are lucky enjoy some interaction with marine life which makes the wait for good conditions even more worthwhile. Autumn is approaching now with stormy seas no doubt but there will be opportunities to see what the marine world has on offer as the season changes.

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Guidelines for contributors

The response to UwP has been nothing short of fantastic. We are looking for interesting, well illustrated articles about underwater photography. We are looking for work from existing names but would also like to discover some of the new talent out there and that could be you! UwP is the perfect publication for you to increase your profile in the underwater photography community.

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.
E mail peter@uwpmag.com**

How to submit articles

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:

1. The text should be saved as a TEXT file and attached to the e mail

2. Images must be attached to the e mail and they need to be 144dpi

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

File type - Save your image as a JPG file and set the compression to "Medium" quality. This should result in images no larger than about 120k which can be transmitted quickly. If we want larger sizes we will contact you.

3. Captions - **Each and every image MUST have full photographic details** including camera, housing, lens, lighting, film, aperture, shutter speed and exposure mode. These must also be copied and pasted into the body of the e mail.