

South West Ramblings 11

by Mark Webster

It is always a little sad to me to observe the days gradually getting shorter and the temperature slowly getting cooler as the season changes from summer to autumn. The dog days of summer may be here as I write this instalment, but we are in fact enjoying a splendid Indian summer with plenty of calm sunny days. Unfortunately working away from my home in the south west means that I have missed many of these perfect days, but those days that I have been able to dive have been very productive. Early autumn is often very active with many species putting in some enticing cameo performances before disappearing for the winter months.

As underwater photographers we are essentially hunters seeking a target to capture with the camera. But unlike hunters or wildlife photographers on land we do not have the luxury of being able to capture an image from a distance, or conceal ourselves, and most of the time remote systems are impractical. We need to get close to our subject for a number of reasons and that means that your subject is very much aware of your presence and approach, so for good images we

really rely on the trust and cooperation of the animal. The first challenge of course is to find the desired subject and then be armed with the correct lens to capture it and hopefully have the right conditions to produce a successful image. The gods of underwater photography do not often align in this way but when they are close we can significantly improve our chances with the correct approach.

One of our favourite dive sites is close to the mouth of the river Fal. The estuary is quite wide where it meets the sea and there are wide relatively shallow areas on both sides bordering the deep central channel that is a product of a drowned river valley, which provides Falmouth with one of the deepest natural harbours in the world. The low headlands on each side of the estuary funnel the strong tidal flow with each change of the tide and create all sorts of eddies and back flows which results in high levels of nutrients over these shallow areas. This of course attracts marine life, both sessile and predatory, amongst the patch reefs and sandy areas here which offer great habitat diversity and the chance to get close to some good subjects.



We can become so focussed on the hunt for a particular subject that we run the risk of missing a more obvious and perhaps co-operative one. I was following a cuttlefish and suddenly realised that this deep orange gurnard was just a few inches away from me and obviously not spooked by my presence or the camera. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/100.

We often dive this area after a deeper reef or wreck dive in the bay, so the camera is normally equipped with a fish eye zoom lens unless I make a change to a macro lens on the boat. So I am usually looking for opportunities to create some CWFA images with my fish eye zoom with hopefully cooperative subjects. In early autumn there are normally lots of medium sized cuttlefish here

resting and feeding and it was these critters that I was seeking on three different dives that produced three different interactions and some very pleasing images.

In the last episode of ramblings I briefly described an encounter with a very patient red gurnard which only occurred as a result of following several cuttlefish who were not cooperating on that day. You can



As this cuttlefish got even bolder and came close enough to feed on fish directly in front of the housing it adopted this very striking dark brown/black and white pattern which provides terrific contrast with the negative space. But what is it all about? Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

become very focussed on the search for a single subject and consequently miss an opportunity with another that maybe more cooperative. In this case I had settled down to make a slow approach towards a slightly nervous cuttlefish when I noticed a red gurnard on the edge of my view through the viewfinder that seemed totally unconcerned about my proximity, which is unusual for this species. I turned my attention to this new subject and as a result captured a

set of images which showed this fish from a variety of angles and poses and in extreme close up to the dome of the housing. This interaction lasted more than 30 minutes and would have continued if I had not been low on air. The gurnard kept approaching me, climbing over bits of weed, occasionally stopping for a quick scratch in the sand, but most definitely intent on getting closer. This is very unusual behaviour for most fish and I kept shooting thinking that it must



The colour of the cuttlefish when striking at prey varied just as dramatically, but the one common theme seems to be the warty appendages that appear on its back. When he relaxes again after catching the fish then these smooth out and disappear. The strike starts slowly but ends very quickly and it often difficult to capture. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/125.

get spooked soon. But that didn't happen and I finished the dive very happy thinking this will not happen again, but I would be proved wrong by another fish species in a couple of weeks.

In between I continued to pursue cuttlefish who are masters of camouflage and often like to rest on the seabed partially buried, so you have to look hard and be prepared

for disappointment as many will take flight as you approach. Quite often you might be surprised by a cuttlefish partly buried right in front of you watching warily. When this occurs try a different approach - don't stop, swim on as if you have not seen the critter without making eye contact and then slowly come to a stop a couple of metres away. If the cuttlefish holds position then be patient and just

observe for ten minutes or more and then maybe try a couple of flashes to see if the subject reacts. I am not wholly convinced that flash upsets fish, seahorses or cuttlefish as they seem not to react at all when the flash is fired (do their iris react quickly enough to see the flash?) and often the only reaction is to the sound of the shutter. If the subject begins to move then follow slowly in parallel, don't rush to get in front of the subject which may make you appear more of a threat. To get close enough you need to wait until the critter accepts your presence and is confident that you are not a predator and this may take some time.

I followed this procedure with this particular cuttlefish and after some time it began to look less nervous and I could see it was beginning to look for prey, so I gradually moved closer. If your subject begins to feed when you are close then it is obviously relaxed in your presence and you may be in for a memorable experience. I watched the cuttlefish strike several times as I gradually moved in closer resting my housing on the seabed each time I stopped. The cuttlefish was feeding on small sand gobies that are normally very inquisitive and will be attracted by any disturbance in the sand that might reveal a meal for them. These gobies were gathering at the base



If you have a cuttlefish encounter with a macro lens don't ignore your subject. Once your cuttlefish is settled you can make a close approach for a single eye shot like this one. Cuttlefish and most other fish do not react to flash even in close up and I have photographed the same cuttlefish in the same location for several days in a row with no reaction. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f22 1/60

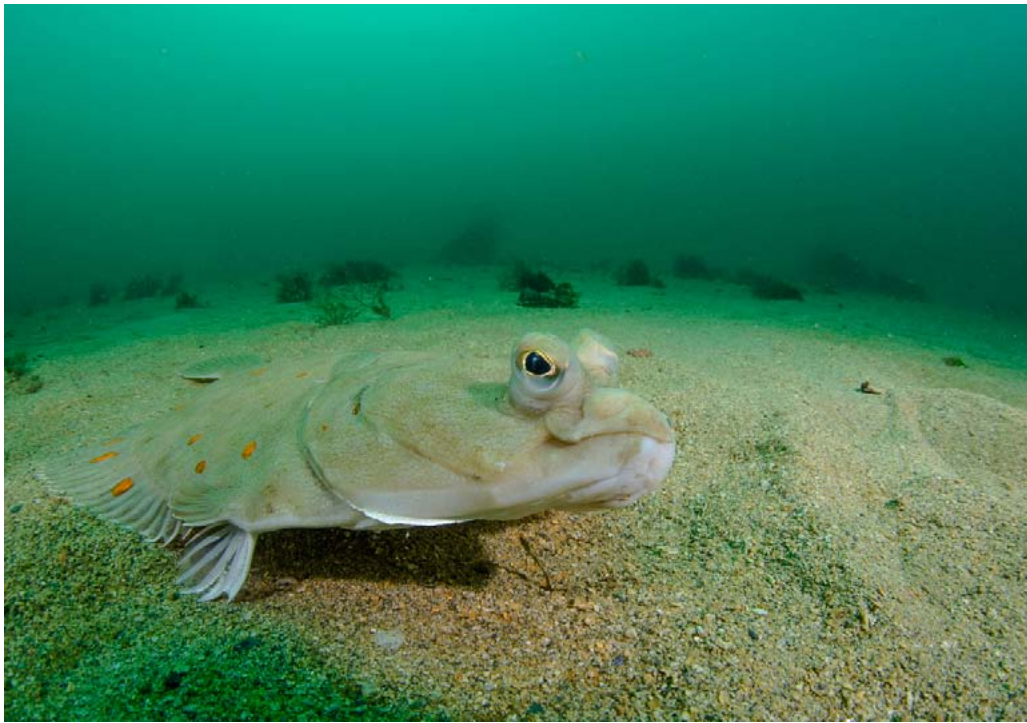
of my housing as it was contacting the seabed and the cuttlefish quickly realised that this might present an easy meal with me actually helping rather than hindering the hunt. Once he had made the first strike close to the housing I knew that this was going to be a special moment and in fact this feeding arrangement went on for nearly an hour and it was me that terminated it as I had to return to the surface!



Just a few days after my cuttlefish encounter I was back in the same area looking for another when this plaice caught my attention. Whilst a plaice does not perform like a cuttlefish, this one plainly wanted to make friends with me once it had accepted I was not a predator. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/100.

As I watched the cuttlefish hunt I thought at first that I could tell when he was about to strike due to the change in colour and texture of the skin. To begin with he would turn very pale and warty appendages would appear on the back just before the strike which can start slowly with a gradual extension of the central arms, but the actual strike is very quick and I often missed it. As the hunt progressed I realised that the

pre-strike colour was not consistent but that the warty appearance seemed to feature most of the time. In fact the colour changed significantly with each location although the seabed texture and topography did not, so these changes did not appear to be for camouflage purposes. In fact at the end of the dive the cuttlefish was adopting a very bold dark brown/black and white colour as it fed on fish directly in front of the dome of



The plaice eventually left the kelp and weedy areas and followed it onto much finer sand. The plaice then seemed to give up on the hunt and just progressively moved closer and closer to the dome of my housing producing a fantastic interaction and some good images to remember it by. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/60

my housing. Interactions with marine life large or small are a real buzz and I finished this dive thinking that for a photographer it does not get much better.

Just a few days later we were back on the same location at the same state of the flood tide so I was hoping that all the marine life would be just as active and that I might be able to make friends with another cuttlefish. I tried hard to make friends again

but no one was interested and I was beginning to think that this dive might not be so productive after all. It was then that I spotted a plaice peering out from under a piece of kelp which I almost ignored as they are often very skittish. But having found no willing cuttlefish I thought it was worth investing some watching time and an attempt to get closer. After ten minutes or more I began to move in and got to a metre or less and took

a couple of shots. The plaice rose up and swam away with graceful undulations of its flattened body and I thought the game was up already. As I watched the plaice it swam just a few metres away and settled on the heavy sand seabed and seemed to settle again so I moved in slowly for take two.

I got a little closer this time and perhaps shot four frames before the plaice moved off once more but did not go too far. We played this game for several more moves and it then appeared that the plaice finally decided that I was a friend and not a foe after all. He began to move towards me and actually fed a couple of times on the same small gobies that the cuttlefish favour. Thereafter I spent a delightful forty minutes or more shadowing the plaice and each time he stopped he got bolder until we reach the point of posing almost on the dome of my housing. So another happy dive, fantastic experience and interaction with wildlife and some good images to remember the event.

A few comments on lighting in these situations. When you are working on a sandy seabed often with some current running you can often run into some backscatter and flare issues particularly with a fish eye lens. Suspended sand particles can be caused by the current, your subject and your own movements, so you

can reduce your own contribution by consciously positioning yourself down tide of the subject. So at least the sand you disturb will move away behind you and anything coming towards you from the subject should pass by fairly quickly. The seabed will be very reflective and can cause flare and hot spots if you keep your flash guns low to the side of the housing. You can reduce this by positioning your flash guns more above and behind the housing and then adjust the angle to avoid backscatter. However, the exact position will change as you get closer to your subject and then you must watch for shadows cast by the housing or the shade on your dome port. Keep checking as you change position to fine tune the best set up.

Striking up a relationship with wildlife is always a pleasing experience and as photographers we also have the means of capturing that moment. The old saying goes “patience is a virtue...” and this is certainly true with marine life. For every dive that produces a connection and some good images there may be dozens that are dull and frustrating, but it is certainly worth the wait for those moments when it all comes together in front of the lens.

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