

South West Ramblings 13

by Mark Webster

The weather this winter has been far kinder than last year when we suffered several very strong and damaging storms which blighted the visibility for several weeks throughout the south west. We had to endure a fine grey/white suspension in the water throughout February, March and April which often reduced the visibility to 1-2m at best which certainly made finding subjects and photographing them a challenge.

Dive sites also changed quite a bit due to the heavy seas with substantial scouring changing the topography which added to the fun of low visibility navigation on many shore diving sites. The milder and calmer conditions in January and February 2015 has meant more diving and also an early start to the season for some of the marine denizens.

You can definitely see the seasonal changes underwater just as you can on land. As the water temperature begins to gradually increase after the winter months one of the first real signs of spring activity are the tiny swirls and rosettes of nudibranch eggs that begin to appear.

This is a time of year that I really enjoy as hunting down these tiny

sea slugs requires patience, habitat knowledge and of course sharp eyes to spot a creature that is often only a few millimetres long.

Some dives are totally fruitless but often it is right at the end of a dive returning over a patch of reef previously explored when I will finally spot a good subject, just when you are at your coldest and in increasingly urgent need of a bathroom break! For this reason I normally plan on a two dive excursion and spend a brief surface interval warming up before returning to the spot in the hope that the quarry has not moved too far.

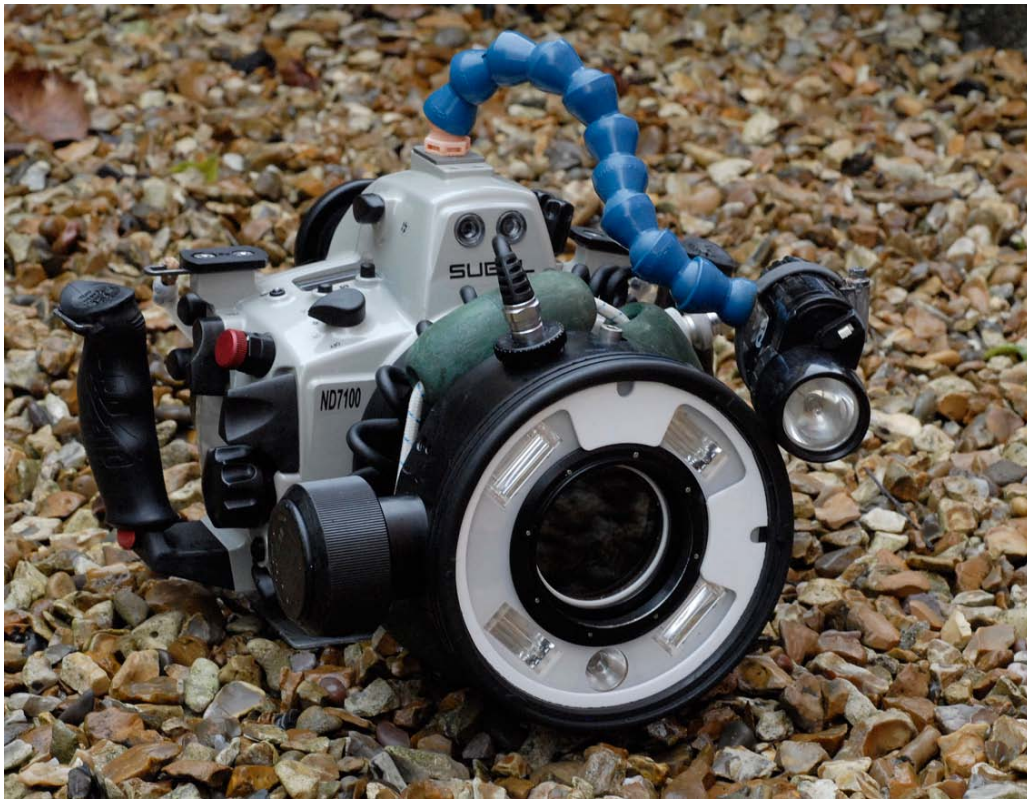
Even in winter with water temperatures of 7c or 8c I normally spend 50-60 minutes in the water so you can get very cold and it is important not only to wear enough thermal protection in water but also to warm up adequately between dives. Cold hands are a big frustration as it reduces your ability to operate controls accurately and distracts your concentration from the photography. In the winter months I wear 5mm three fingered gloves which make a tremendous difference and still allow you to operate the primary housing



Eubranchius farrani are one of the first species to appear and range in size from 8-15mm. They can be pure white like this example and also be decorated with yellow, orange and less often blue or black. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f20 1/200.

Limacia clavigera is a common small species already making an appearance and seen here feeding on a sea mat (Bryozoan) on kelp. This species can be seen in profusion as the summer months approach. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Subsee +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f22 1/200





In March I dusted off my Inon Quad flash and still continue to be delighted with the access and quality of light it provides for macro subjects despite requiring manual flash exposure. Nikon D200, 60mm micro, ISO 800 f8 1/50.

During the search for nudibranchs there is always the opportunity to practice your close up skills on classic subjects and compositions like this individual jewel anemone. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Subsee +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f22 1/200.

controls easily after a little practice.

Back to ring flash?.....When I upgraded to the D7100 around 18 months ago it came with a welcome return to TTL photography using fibre optic triggering. This pleasure brought back happy memories of the

film days when using TTL for macro and in most circumstances you can rely totally on the camera to make the correct exposure for you. However, the downside of this was that I had been neglecting my beloved Inon Quad (ring) flash as this requires a





Using a fibre optic snoot to light a small nudibranch like this Polycera faeroensis is a bit of a challenge to say the least, particularly with a wet lens in the mix. There are many features in the macro world to cast shadows even when your snoot aiming is good. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash and Sullivan fibre optic snoot, ISO 200 f20 1/200.

cable to synch with the camera and also requires the hot shoe and cable connection to be configured in the housing and it all seemed too much fuss the set it up and return to manual flash exposure! But on the first few dives this year I encountered several nudibranch subjects that were quite awkward to light with the twin Z240's due to the reef topography and yearned for the simplicity of the ring flash. So I determined to dust it off and return to the hunt with a flash

system that I have been using for more than 14 years and it has certainly rekindled my enthusiasm for this style of lighting.

There is an accessory wet lens for the Inon quad flash which increases magnification for small subjects but does not match the enlargement of a +10 wet lens. I had previously tried installing my SubSea +10 lens on the quad with an adaptor, but found it was too long and caused shadowing due to the close proximity



Polycera quadrilineata - nudibranchs often rear up like this when searching for a food source and apparently have an acute sense of smell and taste so presumably from this activity they know which direction to go next. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Subsee +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f25 1/200.

of glass which gives just a little more magnification than the SubSea +10. But it does have a slightly larger girth and so will not slip into the port aperture of the quad flash and so can only be used with a regular threaded adaptor on the port and twin flash lighting.

of the flash tubes to the lens mount. However, a little lateral thinking made me realise that the SubSea lens will actually pass through the threaded port aperture of the quad flash and can be held in place by the friction of a stout elastic band. This arrangement leaves perhaps half of the lens extending forwards and does not cast shadows and allows me to maximise magnification for the really small critters.

The pleasure of ring flash lighting has though raised another dilemma for me. I was lucky enough to win a Nauticam SMC lens in the nudibranch photographic competition last year and it is truly a superb piece

So now I am burdened with the awkward decision of selecting the Nauticam SMC with the benefits of greater enlargement and TTL flash control, or the Inon Quad flash with the SubSea +10 with its improved access, zero flash positioning but requiring manual exposure control. Tough decisions to be sure!

Although nudibranch activity is beginning to increase so far the variety has been limited to perhaps four or five species. Normally the first species to be active and appear in profusion are the seam lemons (Archidoris pseudoargus) but I have only seen one so far and just a handful of their attractive egg rosettes. I wonder if this is restricted to my



This pair of Eubranchius farrani have finished mating and the larger one turns on the smaller to bite it! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Subsee +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f25 1/200.



On my search for the elusive soft coral nudibranch Tritonia hombergii I was lucky enough to find this soft coral cowrie instead (Simnia patula) which I have only seen two or three times before. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Subsee +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f25 1/200.

local area or whether this is common throughout the UK this year?

So with just a few species to photograph I decided to focus on the activity of feeding and mating in order to set myself a bit of a challenge. Having decided to do that I soon found that it is not so easy to capture a nudibranch with jaws agape as they often like to bury their heads into the food source, so you have to seek out those that are feeding on elevated targets like hydroids, ascidians and sea mats.

One strange thing I did observe (perhaps not?) was when a pair of Eubranchius farrani finished mating the larger of the two launched an attack on the smaller seemingly to chase it off. The larger one bit off a cerata from the other and seemed to consume it whilst the bitten nudibranch retreat. Perhaps this is just rough sex in the nudibranch world or maybe this pair have spent too much time reading Fifty Shades of Green seas.....but I digress. I also wonder if there is anyone

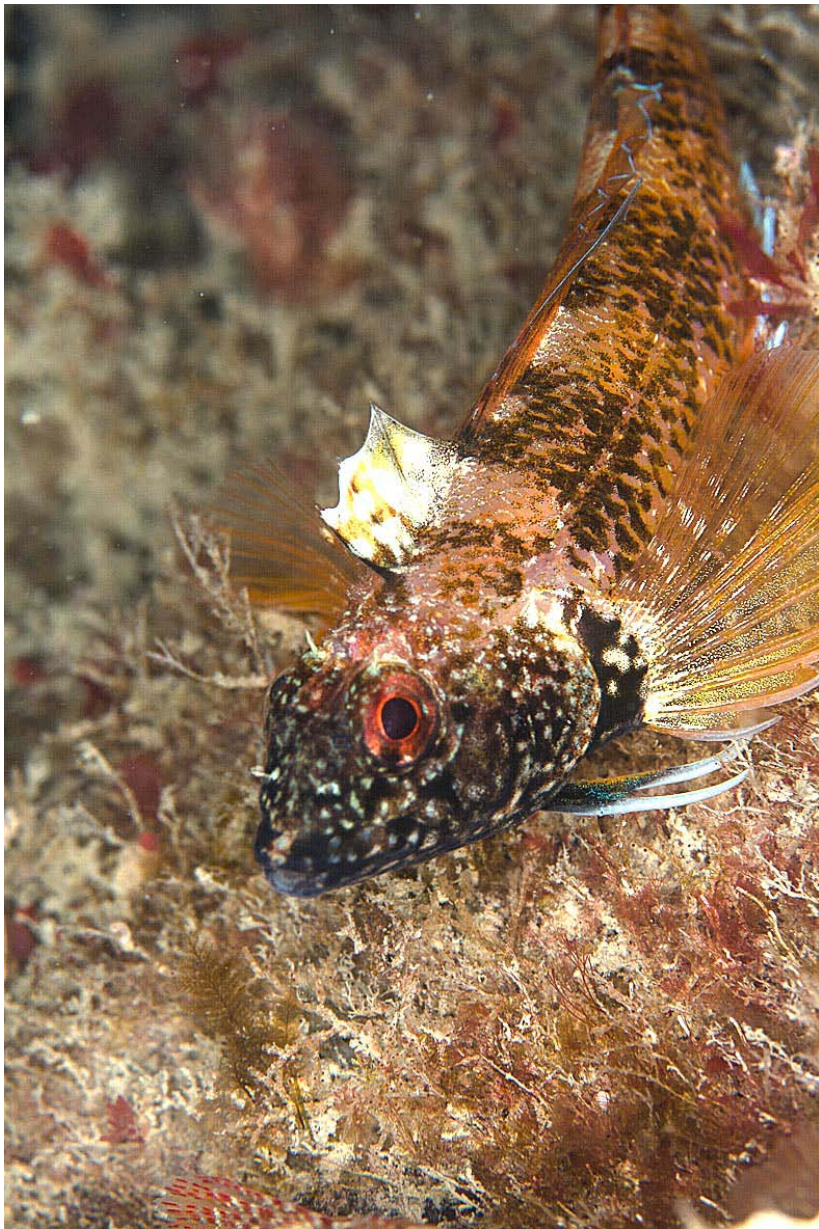
else equally as sad as me to have observed a mating pair long enough to observe this?

Another approach to keep the creative juices flowing with a common subject is to play with lighting techniques and in macro this often means snoots. That sounds easy to say but directing a narrow snoot or fibre optic snoot at a 12mm subject magnified to 2:1 can be an immensely frustrating task! Not only do you have to accurately aim a very narrow beam of light at this small subject, but you also need to

deal with multiple shadows cast by weeds and hydroids at a macro level which you don't see until you check a shot and then realise you have to start again!

Often in a quest for new subjects you will stumble across another which provides a pleasant surprise. One species I often look for is the soft coral nudibranch Tritonia hombergii which I have yet to see for the first time in the flesh. So I spend lots of fruitless hours (so

far) looking at dead men's fingers in the hope that I will finally discover one, but on a recent dive I was pleasantly surprised to find the equally unusual soft coral cowrie Simnia patula. I have only seen this species two or three times before back in the film days (you remember those surely!) so I was particularly please to capture this digitally at last. You often see bald patches on these soft corals which indicates the presence of these critters but you have



Another surprise in March was to see male black faced blennies already in their breeding livery and paired up with females. Hopefully a sign of an abundant spring and summer. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f20 1/200.



In January and February many wrasse are almost sessile and can be found resting amongst seaweeds for protection. This small corkwing wrasse just patiently stared me out from its lair in a clump of red seaweed which has produced a warm light from the flash. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f20 1/200.

to look quite hard to find one in action as they match their host very well until lit by flash.

During the late winter months there is often not much fish activity and you will often find wrasse resting on the reef amongst weed when the water is cold and they may hold still long enough to catch a couple of shots. Fish activity this year has been more evident

this winter due to the higher water temperatures and I have been surprised to see mating pairs of black faced blennies already active in March.

These fish do not normally get together to spawn until May and June, but the males are already beginning to sport their mating livery and pair up with the more drab looking females. Another surprise has been the arrival of a few large

Rhizostoma jelly fish, which again would not normally be around until after the first heavy plankton bloom in April and May, so this is yet more evidence of a very early start and hopefully an indication that this will be a bumper year for marine life.

If you have not started your UK diving season yet it is certainly time to do so. There is plenty of activity and a plethora of good macro subjects to keep a photographer happy.

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Uw photo techniques - Balanced light, composition, etc

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Equipment reviews - Detailed appraisals of the latest equipment

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**If you have an idea for an article,
contact me first before putting pen to paper.
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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:

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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.

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