

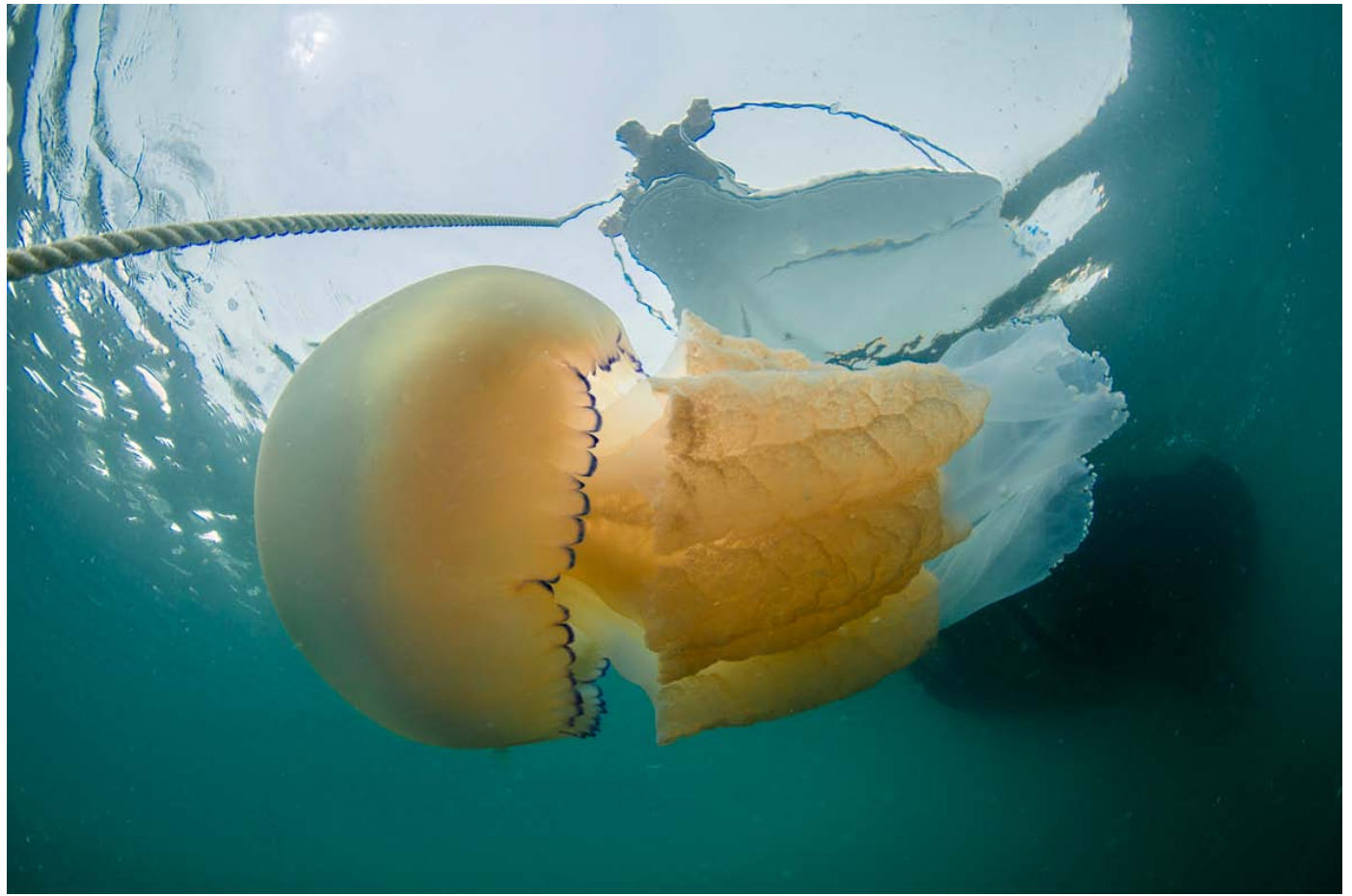
South West Ramblings 15

by Mark Webster

After a cool and windy start, it seems like summer has at last decided to arrive in the south west, although the water temperatures are still chilly at 11°C to 12°C but that has had the benefit of holding back some of the heavy plankton blooms we would normally expect in May and June. We have come to expect to see certain species or events at a particular time of year or in a particular location, but nature's fickle species life cycle in the underwater world occasionally surprises us by mixing up the schedule or not making an appearance at all.

One of the first strange events this year has been the arrival of hundreds of *Rhyzostoma* (barrel) jelly fish in April. These impressive beasts would normally appear in early summer at the end of the first plankton bloom so it was rather odd to see them drifting around in the colder clearer waters of springtime. They are still with us in huge squadrons at the end of June and have now been joined by moon jellyfish (*Aurelia aurita*), compass jellyfish (*Chysaora hysoscella*), an occasional lions mane jellyfish (*Cyanea capillata*) and all sorts of comb jellies (ctenophores).

Following a recent dive on the Manacles I was drifting gently in the current waiting for pick up when I felt some very firm but "soft" pushing on my legs. Looking down in the water I found I was surrounded by seven or eight very large *Rhyzostoma* two of which were determined to barge



*There are only a few options for shooting a *Rhyzostoma* jelly fish, but from below with the light behind is perhaps the most striking whether in silhouette or with fill flash. You need good buoyancy control and remember to hold your breath. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, ISO 200 f13 1/125.*

past me with their surprisingly strong swimming strokes. These jellyfish are very heavy (apparently weights reach 35-40kg) and have smooth, firm but compliant texture to the bell body and it is an odd sensation to come into contact with them.

If you get close to them look out for juvenile fish within the bell and around the tentacles, often horse mackerel, which are normally very shy and

difficult to photograph. A fish eye lens is the best tool to get close and capture an image just below the surface, which needs some efficient buoyancy control in a drysuit. *Rhyzostoma* as a subject are a little like basking sharks in that there are only a few compositions available, but they do look spectacular against a sunburst either in semi silhouette or lit with flash from below.



There was a dearth of nudibranchs on my favourite reef patch which had been overrun by candy striped flat worms. Only the occasional Limacia clavigera made an appearance. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f22 1/80.



Amongst the usual nudibranch suspects a few rarer species have made an appearance like this Trapania pallida which is extremely small (~10mm) so needs high magnification. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f29 1/250.



Colpodaspis pusilla is an odd looking species, not quite a nudibranch and not quite a sea hare. It is also extremely small and so needs some careful searching to find and patient technique to photograph at high magnification. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f29 1/160.

A less attractive sight for early holiday makers is that of numerous dead and rotting Ryzostoma collecting on the beaches after high tide, but as always, beauty is in the eye of the beholder!

Being a nudibranch nerd I always look forward to springtime and a new sea slug season with great anticipation. I really enjoy the challenge of trying to spot these tiny beasts and then hopefully capturing a good image. I have several favourite reef spots which are normally very productive in both numbers and species variety. But one of this year's surprises and biggest disappointments is that my most favourite reef is almost bereft of nudibranchs this year. This sheltered overhanging reef section is in only 7m depth at high tide and is covered in all sorts of sponges, hydroids and tunicates which

are a feast for sea slugs which would normally be fighting for space here.

However, this year this reef patch has been taken over by literally hundreds of candy striped flat worms with only the occasional sighting of one species of nudibranch, Limacia clavigera, to add variety. In contrast other reef areas that are not normally productive are peppered with nudibranchs and very few flat worms. These reefs don't look any different to previous seasons in terms of available food source, so I am baffled as to whether there is a reason for this or if it is just a quirk of tides and the movement of larvae changing the scene this year. Any thoughts from the nudibranch experts out there?

There is another patch of reef that I

occasionally see a relatively rare species which is a cross between a nudibranch and a sea hare. This is Colpodaspis pusilla which is not often seen because it is extremely small (5-10mm) and requires some dedicated searching to find.

This species has a small internal shell which is covered by the mantle and there are two prominent head tentacles. The tentacles, tail and mantle are almost pure white in colour and all have a textured appearance. It has been a couple of years since I have spotted one of these, but this year the reef patch seems to have a high population and on a recent dive I saw six individuals. All quite odd!

Sea hares are another fickle species which vary their population and locations year by year. 2013 was a good year for sea hares on most shallow



Sea hares have been abundant this season particularly in the estuaries of the Fal and the Helford where there is plenty of weed and algae for them to feed on. For the larger examples I like to use my fish eye zoom to get very close and include some of the habitat and background. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/50.

reefs, estuaries and even extending into rock pools in large numbers. But 2014 produced very few sightings for me locally whilst 2015 seems to be heading for a bumper year again particularly in the Fal and Helford river estuaries.

In fact there are already reports of the large Mediterranean species (*Aplysia fasciata*) washing up on the banks of the Helford river. This species last invaded the Falmouth

Bay area in 2007 when hundreds, some literally as big as a rugby ball, appeared and began breeding in October and November after a warm summer.

I have not encountered one of these yet, but there are plenty of small and medium sized sea hares to be seen in various habitats.

Sea hares' coloration and pattern vary from downright dull to almost spectacular which I think in part



depends on their food source. If you are looking for them it is best to start in shallow tidal waters where there is plenty of weed and algae and concentrate on finding their egg spirals first, which vary in colour from white to yellow and pink, and are easy to see laid on the weeds. Sea hares will not be far away and once you have seen the first then dozens will soon be obvious.

In the last couple of weeks they have been frequently seen paired up for copulation often with a smaller example riding the back of a larger one. Sea hares are of course

In your hunt for nudibranchs it is always a good idea to look for the egg masses first as these are often easier to spot. Once found begin to search carefully on the reef and amongst the weeds for the parents. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f22 1/80.

hermaphrodite like nudibranchs so it is difficult to work out why there is a size difference and you may also encounter instances of sea hare orgies where up to a dozen are balled together nose to tail all enjoying their version of Bunga Bunga (you might need to look that up if you are not familiar with Italian politics...). You can use your macro lens to shoot these critters, but I often like to use the fish eye zoom with the larger examples to capture some of the habitat as well.

Other dives have focused mainly on classic wide angle imaging when the visibility has been good. Although we may try to convince ourselves that we already have a good image of this or that, there is frequently room for improvement and the constantly changing conditions underwater means that there is always an opportunity for a different image or an improved one of the same or similar subject.



There are two distinct species of soft coral seen in the south west – the plain white dead men's fingers and the slightly slimmer red men's fingers which may vary from deep red, through orange to yellow. The co-exist happily side by side as can be seen in this image. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/40.

This is what drives any photographer, land or underwater, to keep on picking up the camera and pursue perfection. Either that or UWP is an addiction that should be eligible for counselling on the NHS, but I digress.

There are certain sessile species that thrive on high energy reefs and so to catch them at their best we need to dive when there is at least some current running. There are a number

of sites that we dive that are simply not diveable when the tide is flowing at full force and so we have to try and time our dives for the end of the tide run or the end of a slack water period to see anemones, sea fans etc. at their best.

There is nothing worse than the anticipation of a shear reef wall covered in colourful plumose anemones only to find you have got the timing wrong and you have acres



Timing your dive to have just enough tide to see plumose anemones feed is vital. This image is taken just as the tide is reaching full slack and many of the anemones have already retracted to become unattractive blobs! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/30.

of jelly looking blobs instead!

Our usual approach is to arrive at least an hour before predicted slack water and deploy a shot line with a good anchor and large buoy on location to observe the tide strength. The behavior of the tide can vary dependent on the subsea topography of the site. Where we have well submerged reefs the tide mostly follows the table predictions and slacks off progressively and you should enter the water before full slack. On sites that have more complex structures that come close to or break the surface, like the Manacles or Runnel Stone, you may see a false

slack followed by a final surge. This can often be in the other direction and give the impression that the tide has turned, but is more likely to be a volume of water that has been held back by the tidal flow levelling out. On big spring tides it can all be a bit more tricky and the tide can literally turn and begin to run the other way. On these occasions you need to dive on the turn and use the reef as shelter during the dive and then expect to drift a long way during ascent and pick up! Getting into the water with some tide running also needs a little thought. It is best to expel as much air as you can from your suit and stab jacket, carry your camera with a good lanyard attachment, and enter the water well up tide of the buoy to give yourself time to expel remaining air in your suit and jacket, catch the line as you pass and descend quickly.

If you have your timing right then you will be able to see the anemone fields and soft corals at



Whilst waiting for the tide there are always other subjects to keep you amused. On the offshore reefs male cuckoo wrasse are persistently inquisitive and love to investigate their own reflection in the dome port. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/40.



The European cowrie has been seen in abundance this spring as well. Often they are found on the reef with a busy background, so look for those that may be elevated like this one and use a wider aperture to soften the background. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Nauticam SMC wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f18 1/250.

their best, either as they begin to deflate as the tide slacks or as they start to feed again as it begins to flow. This is also a good time to observe fish behaviour as many lazy species like bass will shelter from the current behind the reef until the tide slacks and this can provide an opportunity to get closer. Tidal diving, when not drifting with it, can be tricky but when you get it right and see the reef at its best it is worthwhile.

Finally, for anyone who might be following the my last ramble regarding the proposed Dean quarry at St. Kerverne, the latest update is that the Secretary of State

for Communities and Local Government has advised that the planning permission approved by Cornwall County Council for the re-opening of the quarry should be revoked until a formal environmental impact assessment is completed.

This was announced on 10th June and on the very same day the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change announced approval for the planning application for the giant tidal lagoon in Swansea Bay (the rock from Dean Quarry would be used to construct this), so a sure sign of joined up government!

We are not yet sure if this means the battle is won as

of course there is an appeals process which could reverse the decision again, but it is a step in the right direction and shows that the value of the Marine Conservation Zone has been recognized.

Hopefully if the tidal lagoon does go ahead, a decision which is attracting its own barrage of opposition, then Shire Oak Quarries Ltd. will source their rock from an established quarry in the UK or Norway.

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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 150dpi

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.