

South West Ramblings 17

by Mark Webster

I think that I have mentioned before in my previous scratchings that we should not ignore estuaries as an alternate habitat which can offer many imaging opportunities of different or juvenile subjects not seen on the open water reefs. I am fortunate to have both the Fal and the Helford estuaries close to my home which provide a range of habitats, the Helford being notable in particular for eel grass, including one habitat that is quite unique and only appears at a few locations around the UK coastline.

You may not be too familiar with Maerl, a form of calcified or coralline seaweed, as it needs quite specific conditions to thrive, but both estuaries and some parts of Falmouth Bay, extending to Nare Head in the east and the Manacles reef in the west, do offer the right conditions.

Maerl is a Breton word (sometimes written maërl) and if you did not know better you might mistake it for small coral nodules, but it is in fact a species of red seaweed with a hard chalky skeleton. The most common species is Lithothamnion corallioides which under the right conditions can form large beds, resembling a reef like structure,

several meters deep. These deep beds are constructed of a mixture of dead maerl at the base, with intervening layers of dead and living maerl topped off by a layer of vibrant pink to purple coloured living marl which is a surprising revelation when you see it for the first time.

Although there are small beds and concentrations throughout Falmouth Bay, the most spectacular bed is found in the Fal estuary on an area locally known as the St. Mawes Bank, directly below St Mawes Castle on the east bank of the Carrick Roads channel. This maerl bed is reputedly the largest in England and it is certainly an impressive sight with vast areas of purple coloured nudules dominating the seabed. The deep

A healthy maerl bed looks a little like a mini coral reef and can be quite a surprise when you see it for the first time. Just like a coral reef it is teeming with life but not all of it is immediately obvious. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom + 2xTeleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f13 1/25.



A satellite view of the Fal estuary and Carrick Roads. The St. Mawes Bank area is circled in red.





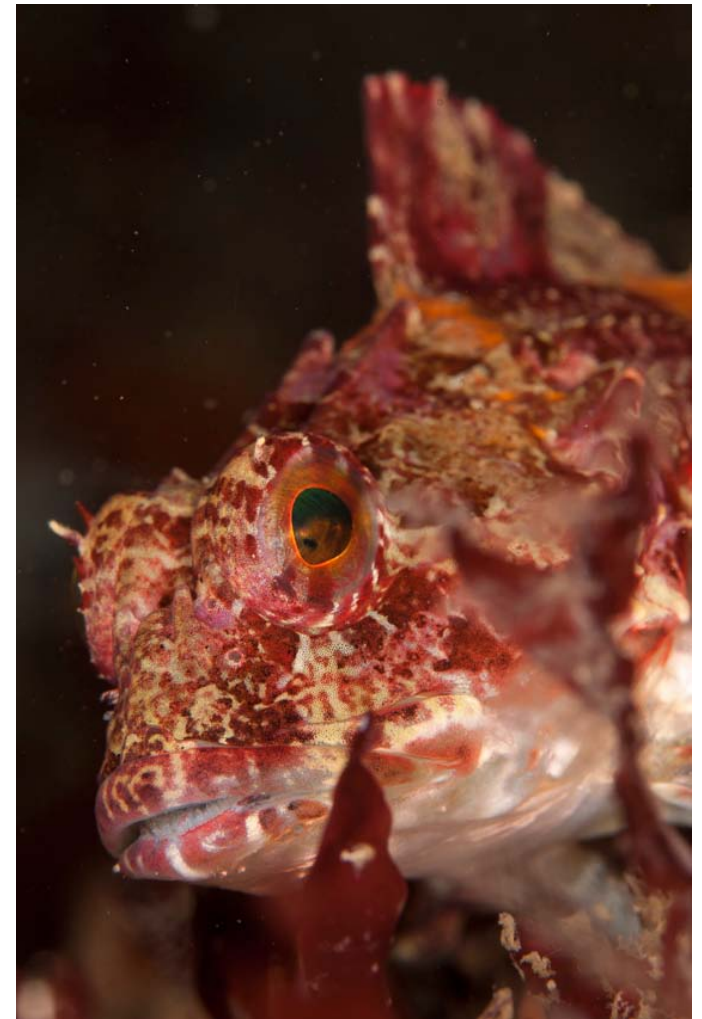
There are hundreds of hermit crabs in the maerl ranging from the size of a pea to a golf ball. The larger ones often have cloak anemones and can be quite bold like this pair marching towards my dome port. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom + 2xTeleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f13 1/25.

entrance to the Fal estuary, known as the Carrick Roads, is a drowned river valley and consequently has shallow gently shelving edges before plunging quite steeply with small drop offs to the main channel at 30-35m which is the original river bed.

This feature makes Falmouth one of the deepest natural harbours in Europe. The maerl beds are found at the top of the bank between 5m

and 14m where there is plenty of sunlight and high levels of nutrients born by the tidal flow, which even on a neap tide can be quite strong.

At this location the shipping channel is marked by two buoys, the East Narrows and the West Narrows buoys, and it is on the green east narrows buoy where we generally begin our dive. It should be highlighted at this point that Falmouth is a busy



Scorpion fish can colour themselves extremely well to match the maerl and so can be difficult to find unless you disturb one when working with another subject. They don't swim far so watch for it to settle and then make a slow approach for your shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f22 1/80.



A view looking east from the East Narrows buoy towards the shore at St. Mawes – the castle is just on the edge of right of the picture. Nikon D7100, 18-200mm zoom, Programme mode.

port and the dive is adjacent to the main shipping channel. Even though the maerl beds are situated on the east side of the buoy out of the deep water channel, there is still plenty of small boat and yacht traffic to be aware of. So you need good boat cover here and surface marker buoys or dive flags for when you surface, cautiously!

The tides can be strong here so the best plan is to dive on slack water unless you are very familiar with the area. Perhaps the best choice is to use one of the local dive charters who will be knowledgeable of all the required

precautions for diving this location. So if all that has not put you off, read on for more on what maybe the closest thing to a Lembeh muck dive in the UK.

You can of course begin your dive anywhere along the bank by following the depth profile on your echo sounder, but it is handy to use the East Narrows buoy chain to descend as it provides an easy reference and the clump weight is on the edge of the maerl bed at around 12m dependent on the tide. Check out the loose ground chain around the



If you start your dive on the East Narrows buoy check out the ground chain for crabs, shrimps and the occasional tom pot blenny before moving on to the maerl for a slightly different composition. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f13 1/60.

clump weight for critters, particularly crabs, that have made a home amongst the links, but watch your fingers if there is any movement in the chain due to surface swell.

From here to find the best maerl ascend up the bank to 8-10m and then turn either north or south depending on any tide. If you swim far enough north towards St. Just then you will begin to encounter eel grass which marks the end of the maerl bed. It is best to swim into any current so

that disturbed sediment dissipates behind you and also means that as you surface you will drift back towards the buoy location.

As you ascend the bank you will notice that the maerl gets thicker until it has an almost uniform coverage with small rocks, clumps of seaweed and occasional areas of exposed sand. The sight of this deep purple field of coralline nodules is impressive on its own, but it is not until you get closer begin to realise that the maerl beds



This is a crab, really! There are hundreds of small spider crabs in the maerl that use sponges, weed and anemones to disguise themselves. This makes it very difficult to capture a successful image, but the temptation to keep trying is overwhelming! Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom + 2xTeleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f13 1/30.

are alive with other marine denizens – invertebrates, crustaceans, molluscs and fish, many of them sporting impressive camouflage.

Maerl is home to a host of cryptic critters, but is also a valuable nursery for juvenile fish, crustaceans, molluscs and cephalopods and the habitat is quite crowded. For your first dive here with a DSLR a 60mm macro lens is ideal whilst compact users will have all the range they need.

Once you have a few dives under

your belt it is worth coming back with either a 105mm and wet lens for the really small stuff or with a fish eye zoom to try and capture the mood of the habitat with some wide macro compositions.

For macro you will of course need flash and there is always plenty of suspension in the nutrient rich water here and often some backscatter is unavoidable. On a sunny day this site could work very well with a Green Water Magic Filter, but



Some hermit crabs insist on going large, but carrying such a large anemone must seriously affect your maneuverability, but perhaps the feeling of security is more important. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f16 1/25.

although I have often contemplated it I have yet to try it (the editor may castigate me for this admission...).(Consider yourself well and truly castigated :-) Ed)

Where the maerl is tightly packed you will need to be cautious about making contact with the habitat and you may find that a stainless steel muck stick is useful for holding location and keeping above the maerl.

There are literally thousands of crabs here, the most obvious being

the occasional large common spider crab and edible crabs that burrow into the maerl. But once your eye begins to understand the topography you will realise that many of the apparent lumps of sponge are in fact a smaller species of spider crab that are experts in cryptic camouflage. They cover themselves in sponges, weed, hydroids and anemones so well that it is often difficult to work out where the head is even when you spot one following a bit of movement.



Juvenile spur dog fish have a much darker more defined pattern than the adults and an almost fuzzy appearance to their skin, which is rough to the touch. Being small they are an ideal size for a 60mm portrait. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/40.

Seeing the “crab” in your image can be a bit of a challenge and it sometimes helps to introduce a bit of side lighting from a single flash, perhaps with a snoot, to separate the shape of the subject from the background.

Next up are hundreds of hermit crabs ranging in size from very small in winkle shells to the size of a golf ball often sporting one or more cloak anemones. The size of some of the shell and anemone combinations dwarf the hermit crab and you wonder how they can manage to move all the weight around. You can then move on to huge number of Leach’s spider crabs which are normally associated with snakelock anemones. There are few if any snakelocks to be found here, but that does not seem to bother this species which are decorated with the familiar yellow sponge covering you would expect. Many of them are sitting in the maerl



Tom pot blennies are an appealing subject in any location, but this one has made its home in an algae encrusted bottle peeking out at the camera just like a Lembeh Strait veteran. Check any bottle or jar you come across for unexpected residents. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/30.

nodules which makes them hard to discern in an image, so it is worth looking for one that is emerged from the maerl for a lower angle, there are plenty to choose from.

Another crab species that is hard to separate from the background are the spindly dark decorator crabs that use weed and hydroids to disguise themselves. You will often find them close to

small outcrops of weed or the numerous small sponges growing amongst the maerl, so they blend in extremely well and again you might try some selective lighting to isolate them from the background.

Whilst you search for the various crab species you will encounter dozens of dragonets, gobies, wrasse, scorpion fish, topknots and the occasional



There are also healthy maerl beds to be found inside Gul Rock close to Nare Head at the eastern end of Falmouth Bay, adjacent to the wreck of the Hera. Red gurnard are commonly seen amongst the maerl at this location. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f10 1/50.

dog fish, gurnard and thornback or blond rays. Juvenile spur dog fish are quite common here which have much darker pronounced markings than the adults, with a more textured skin, and at around 10-15cm in length are perfect for a portrait with a 60mm lens. Where you encounter a sand patch look carefully for cuttlefish which seem to prefer to bury themselves in softer soils when resting, perhaps they cannot match

the colour of the maerl, although you will also see juveniles and adults over the maerl hunting. Although you will be focusing on the maerl and its inhabitants, don't ignore the occasional clumps of seaweed which often have sea hares and pipefish amongst them and iridescent green juvenile ballan wrasse which make a great portrait.

Within the maerl you will see numerous yellow/orange sponge

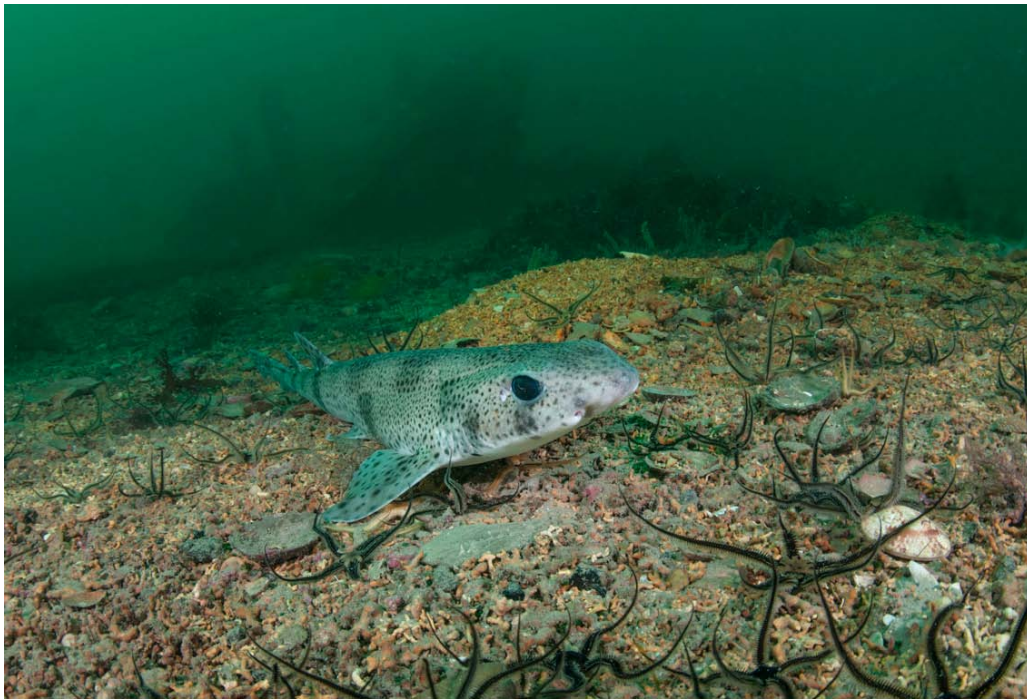


The most common nudibranch you will see on the maerl beds are the sea lemons (Doris pseudoargus). This one is coloured to match the orange sponge that it is feeding on. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom + 2xTeleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f13 1/30.

growths smothering some maerl nodules. Look a little closer at these as you are likely to find many sea lemon nudibranchs (Doris pseudoargus) dressed in matching colours feeding on these particularly between the depths of 5-8m. You will find other sea lemons amongst the maerl nodules often with a yellow and pink blotch pattern which camouflages them well. They are quite difficult to photograph well as they are quite shapeless when

curled around the maerl nodules to feed. In the springtime other nudibranch species will be found here as well, but it seems to be the sea lemons are the dominant species.

Like any estuary that has seen shipping activity over hundreds of years, the Fal and Carrick Roads has a lot of discarded items of varying antiquity. It is a great place for finding old bottles, cups, plates and stone jars and jugs that have been tossed over



A mixture of living and dead maerl can also be found around the wreck of the Epsilon in Falmouth Bay. The pink living nodules of maerl can be seen around this dog fish surrounded by brittle stars. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/20.

the side by anchored boats and you will often find some of this debris amongst the maerl.

Just as you would in a tropical muck location, check out any discarded item that might provide a home and you might be in for a surprise. Tompot blennies in particular will choose a cylindrical home and beer and wine bottles are ideal, some of which have been there so long they are covered in encrusting algae's and sponges themselves and so frame a

cheeky fish perfectly.

As mentioned above there is maerl throughout Falmouth bay with very healthy beds in the mouth of the Helford river and inside Gul Rock close to Nare Head, adjacent to the wreck of the Hera. Whilst these locations have plenty of life on them they lack the diversity and high concentration that you find on the St. Mawes Bank location. Elsewhere there is wide evidence that healthy maerl beds must have covered much



There are also healthy maerl beds to be found inside Gul Rock close to Nare Head at the eastern end of Falmouth Bay. Whilst still full of marine life this area lacks the density of species found on the St. Mawes Bank. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f11 1/20.

of the bay at some point in time, but many areas now only have small outcrops of living maerl amongst the dead or dying nodules. A good location to observe this is the wreck of the Epsilon which is surrounded by this type of maerl deposit and fields of brittle stars feeding on it.

So if you love muck diving you are sure to love maerl diving, even if it is colder, and you can mix this up with a wide variety of reef and wreck dives in the locality to cover all tastes

with a few days diving here. If you do not know the area well then please consult the local dive shops and charter boats to ensure you dive this location safely. The only other caution is that one dive probably won't be enough and, as with all forms of muck diving, there is a risk of addiction!

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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 high.

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.