

South West Ramblings 18

by Mark Webster

I recently described the unusual local habitat of the maerl beds here in the south west and mentioned in passing the adjacent eel grass beds in the river Fal. I thought it would be worth dedicating this ramble to this particular habitat as it is found in a number of locations around the UK and does offer a unique environment and some great image opportunities for the photographer looking for something a little different, with sometimes challenging conditions.

The sea grass (*Zostera marina*) that we have in the south west of the UK is a hardy species found throughout the Atlantic and Pacific. Distribution is patchy in the southwest, but it is also found on the Dorset coast, Solent estuary and Isle of Wight, Wales, western Ireland and western and eastern Scotland including Orkney and the Shetland Islands.

It can withstand quite cold water conditions and surprisingly will be found within the Arctic circle in Norway, Iceland and Russia. The areas where the grass is most healthy are shallow bays and estuaries where sea conditions are perhaps a little kinder, but they do often survive some

very heavy winter storms. The eel grass beds in Cornwall are healthiest in spring and summer but survive year round and there is often an abundance of life to be found during winter if the weather remains mild.

Although there are eel grass beds in the river Fal, notably off St. Just and St. Mawes, the healthiest and most extensive beds are found in the Helford river estuary. These are mostly located directly off Grebe beach, close to Durgan village, extending directly offshore towards the middle of the estuary and east towards Toll point. In fact this area of the Helford estuary is classified as a voluntary marine conservation area in recognition of the fragile nature of the habitat.

The extent of the eel grass beds are marked by a line of moored buoys which warn against anchoring within the protected area. Although the eel grass often extends beyond the line of buoys in the summer months, it does work well at preventing damage from anchors in an area that is extremely popular with yachts, fishing boats and other pleasure craft.

The visibility in the estuary will vary with the level of rainfall, but on



One of the first species you will notice that cling to the eel grass blades are juvenile snakelock anemones which are perfect for confirming exposure settings etc. Nikon D200, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f8 1/40.

The eel grass beds in the Helford estuary are classified as a voluntary marine conservation area marked with warning buoys to discourage anchoring within the habitat.





Many other species of nudibranch use the eel grass beds in spring for spawning when you will find the eel grass blades decorated with their egg spirals. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/13.

average will vary from 2-3m up to 10m during calm dry periods. When the waters appear murky it is best to dive on the flood tide which will push some of the brackish water up river and often produces better visibility under a surface layer of 2-3m.

If you are diving the eel grass beds with one or more other photographers then you need to agree to dive solo to get the best imaging conditions. Even when conditions are at their best here the eel grass always has a fine coating of sediment and the seabed is very soft and silty so every movement has the potential to spoil the visibility for your own shot and for someone else if you are working in close proximity. It is best to spread out and move very carefully especially when approaching to set up with a subject.

Currents are very gentle here so be patient if you disturb the sediment and eventually it



Sea hares are found here in abundance and there is often two distinct seasons, one in the spring and one in late autumn if the summer has been warm. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/10.

will clear. I often simply swim out offshore on a southerly bearing to the edge of the eel grass beds and then slowly work my way back north towards shore exploring and hopefully leaving any sediment behind me. This is predominantly a macro destination, but it is worth exploring occasionally with a wide angle lens or wide macro set up when conditions are good or you are seeking a particular or larger subject.

The eel grass beds are little like a muck dive due both to the conditions and also your initial impression is of apparently lifeless areas of green stalks. You need to move slowly here and look carefully focussing your gaze on small areas to begin with and slowly you will begin to see activity from various different species.

There is an abundance of macro subjects here, but the beds also provide excellent shelter for many



The hermit crabs here are mostly very bold and will approach the camera, this one ended up investigating my dome port. Nikon D200, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/40.

juvenile species of fish and cuttlefish in particular. The grail subject here is of course the spiny seahorse, which has occasionally been brought to the surface by fishermen in their keep pots. This is the ideal habitat for them, but to date I have not been able to find one despite my determined searches! I can recall being shown seahorses in the eel grass off St. Mawes in the mid 1970's, before my interest in photography, and not being too impressed as they seemed common then. I have not seen one in the UK since but I have not given up hope yet.....

Start by examining the blades of eel grass in your selected area. There are always numerous small snakelock anemones clinging to the blades and these are a good subject to capture first and use for a few practice shots to get your exposure and flash positioning perfected.



There are several species of shrimp living on the eel grass blades but this is the most exotic looking and also difficult to find due to its camouflage. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon +10 wet lens, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f18 1/80.

Closer examination of the blades will reveal other species clinging to them and feeding along with invertebrates and mulluscs such as seas quirts, spiny cowries and juvenile starfish. In the spring time look carefully for nudibranchs and their eggs as several species are abundant here which contrast very well with the green of the eel grass.

One nice find here are tiny cling fish which blend almost perfectly with the colour of the eel grass until flash reveals some additional colour. I am not sure if these are juvenile Cornish sucker fish or perhaps the small head cling fish, however they are hard to spot but once found are usually quite tolerant of a close approach with a macro lens. If they do move they are slow swimmers and generally



One of the nicest subjects here are the tiny cling fish. Difficult to spot and a challenge to photograph well but worth the effort. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/80.

just hop over a couple of blades further away and settle again. So be patient and eventually you will have a willing subject, but you may need to part the blades a little for access with your camera so be as gentle as possible to avoid spooking the subject and disturbing the fine silt.

Another small subject that clings to the blades are small shrimp, some of which are almost totally transparent whilst others have near perfect camouflage, so both are equally hard to spot.

On the seabed between the eel grass stalks you will find an abundance of marine life. In the spring and late autumn there can be literally thousands of sea hares grazing or mating and leaving their spirals of delicately coloured eggs. You will often find one



Pleurobranchus membranaceus is the largest UK nudibranch, similar in size to a tropical Spanish dancer. Look for the eggs first and the parent will not be far away. D300, Subal ND2 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f16 1/30.

riding on the back of another during the mating process and sometimes large groups head to tail in a sort of Bacchanalian orgy.

Every few years after a warm summer we have seen the invasion of the much larger Mediterranean species of sea hare (*Aplysia depilans*) in October and November, which can reach the size of a rugby ball. These beasts are often a dull brown, grey or black colour so are not as photogenic as their smaller cousins, but nevertheless are a most impressive sight.

Another large species of mollusc closely related to the sea hares and smaller nudibranchs is the *Pleurobranchus membranaceus* which is the largest sea slug in the UK. Again these are



There are many species of swimming and burrowing crabs to be seen here, particularly in the sand patches between the thick growths of eel grass. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 105mm micro, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f18 1/80.

springtime breeders and you should look out for their large white gelatinous swirls of eggs to begin with. Once spotted begin to look carefully amongst the stalks and you may be lucky enough to spot the perpetrator which often look a drab dark brown until lit with flash when their true colouring of red or orange is revealed. These sea slugs have quite a textured appearance with many nodules and a wide skirt or mantle that can be used to swim in the same manner as a Spanish dancer nudibranch in the tropics. This is not one of the most beautiful sea slugs but is an unusual species to encounter so is worth recording in its habitat.

The crab population here is enormous and thrives year round. It won't be long before you begin to notice that hermit crabs are everywhere ranging from the size of a pea carrying a winkle or whelk shell to the size of a tennis ball in varying shell types and often towing around one or more



These spindly spider crabs are very common around the roots of the grass. Be patient to find one on the edge of the grass to avoid casting shadows with your flash. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 105mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 100 f18 1/80.

large parasitic anemones.

Others are sporting spotted cloak anemones or have covered their shells with small hydroids to keep predators at bay. As soon as you begin to focus in on one you will spot another and you will soon find that some are brave and will hold their ground whilst you perfect your image or wait for the visibility to clear, whilst others are much more nervous and will scurry off in a small cloud of silt.

There are also numerous spindly decorator spider crabs which suspend themselves between stalks almost like spiders on a web covered with bits of weed and algae which often makes them a very difficult subject to portray as their camouflage is so good.

Every so often you will come to a small clearing in the eel grass and you should look here for swimming crabs that are normally partly buried watching for a potential meal or a threat. In the



Cuttlefish come into the estuary in spring to lay their eggs in the eel grass. Mating pairs are often nervous so watch from a distance until they accept your presence. Nikon D100, L&M Titan housing, 18-35mm, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 200 f14 1/40.

springtime you may also find that many large spider crabs have come into the estuary looking for a mate, particularly on the edge to the eel grass beds in deeper water.

Another seasonal visitor to the eel grass beds in April and May are cuttlefish seeking a mate and then leaving their clusters of eggs (known as sea grapes) attached to the roots of the eel grass. Between August and September you will find many juvenile cuttlefish hiding amongst the blades of grass or buried in the soft silt. Some are so inquisitive and fearless that they will come close enough to touch your finger tips.

As autumn approaches dog fish will begin to come into the estuary to mate and leave their egg pouches (mermaid's purse) attached to the roots. You will also see the larger egg pouches of the thornback rays which are frequently seen on the edge of the beds. The rays generally prefer to

settle on an open seabed, so start your search on the offshore edge of the beds and follow this east towards the estuary. You will occasionally find one resting within the eel grass and they seem to me to be more approachable then, perhaps because they cannot swim away immediately without elevating above the level of the grass.

There are also well camouflaged hunters within the eel grass preying on the small and juvenile species. Patient observation will reveal scorpion fish resting on the bottom, often almost covered by weed and debris, and the elegant John Dory which weaves its way slowly between the vertical stalks. Don't ignore the seaweed and dead grass blades on the bottom as this is ideal cover for pipefish, sticklebacks and tiny juvenile corkscrew wrasse.

The soft seabed areas between the stands of grass are home to a number of bottom dwelling fish, the most common being dragonets, gobies, dabs, plaice and the occasional Dover sole. The sandy areas are also home to numerous mollusc and invertebrate species including scallops, spiny cockles, whelks, dog whelks, burrowing anemones and fan worms which need some patience to capture. Divers occasionally come to the estuary to collect scallops, but as this is a nursery area for them I would recommend only taking their picture.



In the autumn the leaves falling from the overhanging trees on the shoreline can make an attractive composition with a touch of Snell's window to capture the trees as well. Nikon D7100, Subal D7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 200 f16 1/80.

As you approach the shore and begin to see the end of the eel grass beds you can turn east towards Toll Point and explore the low reef area here which is a complete contrast to the green of the eel grass. Tompot, leopard spotted and black face blennies, wrasse, scorpion fish, edible crabs, lobsters and of course more sea hares and nudibranchs can all be seen here.

So if your finds in the eel grass have been disappointing you can still get your photographic fix here. In the autumn there will be lots of dead leaves floating on the surface fallen

from the overhanging trees on the shore line. If you have a wide angle lens fitted then it is fun to kneel on the seabed in shallow water and then capture these on the surface with the trees encircled by Snell's window above.

So if you have not dived on eel grass beds before then they are certainly worth considering as a total contrast to regular reef diving. Other eel grass beds around the UK will offer a similar experience so it is worth investigating if your own local or regular coastal dive spot supports this species. As with all photography



John Dory's favour both the eel grass and the adjacent reef for hunting. They are difficult to spot and require a patient and cautious approach to get close enough to use a wide angle lens. D200, Subal ND2 housing, 18-35mm zoom, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO 100 f7 1/30.

it is habitat and subject variety that keeps us engaged and enthused and hopefully satisfied with the resulting images!

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