

Shooting Scilly Seals

By Demelza and Will Postlethwaite

There can be few experiences to match an interaction between man and another mammal. When the experience takes place in an element which differs to our own and with creatures of rivalling intelligence it can become almost life changing in its effect.

Atlantic Grey Seals exist in a few colonies off the British coast but there is just one place, to our knowledge, which provides the photographer with almost guaranteed opportunities to capture this creature on film underwater and in clear water.

The Scilly Isles, 28 miles off the coast of Lands End in Cornwall, are a sub tropical idyll for wildlife and people alike.

Life long Scillonian, Mark Groves, sets out almost daily with his RIB full of visitors to the Isles hoping to snorkel with a colony of seals around the jagged uninhabited Eastern Rocks. Occasionally the snorkelers are joined by divers but more often it is film crews. A pioneer of underwater photography himself, Mark has been visiting the seals for many years so they have no fear as the boat approaches and, when in the water, some even greet him as a friend.

While we chose to use scuba units Mark prefers to snorkel with his customers and



Silvery sea - No strobes, ambient light, aperture priority, f8. Nikon F90X in a Subal Miniflex housing. Nikon 20mm AFD lens. Fuji Provia 100 F

take his photographs on duck dives. Our subjects, the seals, were in less than three metres of water and, although clear for most of the year, our visit coincided with an unseasonable plankton bloom. In our favour the Cornish sun was shining and the sea was flat so our enemy was to be backscatter. There were several options to overcome this. The use of ambient light and avoiding strobes altogether, twin strobes swept well back on long arms, shooting up or down and aperture priority with fill-in TTL flash.

The beauty of ambient light photography is that backscatter is eliminated and you can concentrate on your composition. However, you have to shoot

close to the surface and close to your subject as light, and especially colours, are lost very quickly through water tending to reduce contrast and making pictures look washed out.

As you can see from “Silvery sea” the water’s surface makes an excellent backdrop but the underside of the seal is in shadow. At 3 metres with only brown kelp to reflect the sun the light levels were such that in order to get the seals interacting with us on film we needed to add light.

In “Melz with seal” you can see the image is lit by strobes on either side aimed slightly away from the direction of view such that the angle of the beam lights up the diver and the seal but not the centre of the frame and



White baby - 2 Sea&sea YS120 strobes on TTL, aperture priority, f8. Nikon F90X in a Subal Miniflex housing. Nikon 20mm AFD lens. Fuji Provia 100 F

therefore the water column. This strategy works well but, again, you need to be close and to fill the areas of the frame illuminated by the strobes. You can get interesting effects with this method by switching off one strobe and lighting just from the underside as can be seen in “Upside down”. It takes a couple of looks to see what is going on!

By filling the background of the picture either with the kelp by shooting down or with the water surface by shooting up you can help to avoid the backscatter showing up on your shot. With “Face in the kelp” a very obliging seal spent some minutes with only his head poking out of the kelp. This gave us the chance to shoot from slightly further away and any light from the strobes that reflected back to the lens is lost in the brown kelp backdrop.

Any horizontal shots would have shown how much material was in the water. In “White baby” the camera’s metering was switched from matrix or full frame to spot. This allowed us to have the strobes set to TTL without having to fill the frame with subjects in a single plane. Exposing with



Face in kelp - 2 Sea&sea Ys120 strobes on full, 1/60, f5.6. Nikon 20mm AFD lens. Fuji Provia 100 F

*Melz with seal - 2 Sea&sea
YS120 strobes on full, 1/60, f8.
Nikon F90X in a Subal Miniflex
housing. Nikon 20mm AFD lens.
Fuji Provia 100 F*



*Upside down - 1 Sea&sea YS120
strobe on full, 1/60, f11. Nikon
20mm AFD lens. Fuji Provia
100 F*



Scillonian-style dive centre

aperture priority meant that even as the seal moved in the water column with more or less sunshine in the shot the exposure remained good.

You can see that the whiteness of the seal's fur has lead to the spot metering to slightly underexpose the background water surface. Not only was the experience of interacting closely with these wild animals so amazing but the fact that they stayed with us for such a long time allowed us to

experiment with various techniques and get shots for quite a varied portfolio.

Our thanks go to Mark Groves for this opportunity, truly a man of the sea. Mark offers trips to see the seals and dive trips. He is based on St Marys and can be contacted on 01720 422732.

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