

In Praise of British Fish

by Mark Webster

I may be wrong, but I suspect that many readers of UwP Magazine perhaps only practice their art of underwater photography when they depart these shores for warmer waters. I often have students on my workshops who look horrified at the suggestion they might dive in chilly British waters if only to improve their skills if not purely for pleasure! Apart from the prospect of getting cold, a common misconception is that visibility is usually close to zero and that there are no colourful subjects worth recording. Whilst I would be the first to admit that visibility is not always stunning, there are techniques which can be used to work around this and there are also a whole host of aquatic celebrities to keep a keen photographer busy for dive after dive.

With this in mind I thought I might try to encourage more photographers to sample our temperate waters by singing the praises of British fish. After all, if you can learn to produce good images under difficult conditions then it can only make the task so much easier on your next tropical trip and who knows you may even learn to enjoy it!

We have to accept that light levels will be lower and the waters often murky in the UK, which means that we must return to the first principles of underwater photography in order to enjoy anything close to success. This means reducing the amount of water between the lens and the subject by using equipment that gets us closer and when you think you are close



Lumpsucker and diver - occasionally the opportunity arises to combine marine life with a diver and you should make the most of it. Male lumpsuckers will be found in early spring guarding their eggs and will stay on location for 3-4 weeks which means you can return and set up a shot like this one. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 20mm, Isotecnic 33TTL, Elitechrome EBX 100, f5.6 @ 1/60

enough, then try to get even closer still! Unless you have exceptional conditions, which do occur occasionally, you must forget about stand off photography and stick with macro and close up techniques. If we are concentrating on fish photography then you are unlikely to need to use a wide angle lens, but occasions do arise when you have a co-operative subject which allows you close enough to include the habitat or the subject is so large that only a wide angle lens is suitable.

Backscatter from suspended particles is of course the biggest enemy. You can avoid this and improve the apparent clarity of the water by careful positioning of your flash guns so that reflected light goes back towards the source (i.e. the flash) and not

the lens. We should generally avoid flat lighting from the direction of the camera/lens, however the only exception to this would be macro subjects photographed with a ring flash. The preferred lens for use with a ring flash is a 105mm, or perhaps a 180/200mm, where the field of view is extremely narrow and the light source is both very close to the lens and has a narrow beam output. In this way flat lighting does work, although it flies in the face of accepted principles, but is worth trying if you are really hooked on your macro images.

There are many ways to reach your dive site but for me the most productive dives are those made from the beach onto a shallow reef where you will find plenty of species and have



John Dory - the weird looking John Dory or St. Peter fish is actually quite common in the summer months on shallow reefs, but is very difficult to spot in the kelp due to excellent camouflage and a very thin profile when viewed head on. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash,



Wolf fish - the biggest blenny in our northern coastal waters is the wolf fish. Although he looks pretty fierce, they are quite docile and like their smaller tom pot cousins are happy to pose for the camera. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/60

as much time as you need to capture them on film. Diving from a commercial charter boat, unless it is full of photographers, is not often successful as your dive duration may be dictated by tide or the interests of your fellow divers in the group. There are many excellent beach diving opportunities around the coast starting in the borders at Eyemouth and St. Abbs, Swanage Pier, Bovisand and the South Hams, Falmouth Bay, The Lizard and Lands End to name just a handful of productive areas.

Over the Reef

In shallow waters the reef top will generally be swathed with a variety of sea weeds normally dominated by the hardiest species, kelp. A non photographer might view a dive to reef topped with kelp as a complete waste of bottom time, however for the photographer it provides a habitat which is home to varied cast of piscine characters. In addition to the more sessile reef residents there are numerous fish species which

cruise through the kelp and along the reef edge both protecting their territory and hunting for prey.

There are several varieties of wrasse to be found in British waters, the largest being the ballan wrasse which is our equivalent of the coral trout or grouper. Ballan wrasse are very territorial and the large males can reach lengths of 60cm or more and come in a variety of colours including a striking deep red speckled pattern. The females can grow almost as large, but tend to be slightly duller in colouration ranging

from green to brown. In the spring time you will often see them in pairs with the female carrying a heavy brood of eggs which the male is anxious to fertilise during spawning. These fish are very inquisitive and will often make repeated approaches through the kelp if you are patient enough to stay in one spot for 20-30 minutes. Look out also for feeding activity on the reef edge in the sand and gravel where you will also often see them rubbing their bodies on the seabed to apparently to remove parasites. In fact you might be lucky enough to observe another species of wrasse, the rock cook, actually removing parasites from the larger fish just like a cleaning station on a tropical reef!

Two other very colourful species of wrasse are also common on shallow reefs. The male cuckoo wrasse is resplendent in a snazzy blue and orange livery and can be very persistent in his approaches when you enter his territory. They can actually become aggressive particularly when they see their reflection in a camera port and they have been known to nip at exposed skin, which can come as quite a shock when you have your eye glued to the viewfinder! The female cuckoo wrasse is much duller to look at sporting a drab brownish livery. However, when a male dies or departs a territory it is the most dominant female which begins a transition to become a male and you may encounter an odd looking fish which is only half way through the change of life. The other colourful wrasse resident is the male corkwing which has an intricate swirling pattern of blue, red and brown and is most likely to be seen building a nest amongst the kelp



Basking sharks are our biggest fish and appear in spring time with the first plankton bloom on which they feed. Having caught up with one photography is relatively straight forward - natural light with a wide angle lens, but don't forget to expose for the shark and not the water as they are quite dark in colour. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 20mm, Elitechrome EBX 100, f5.6 @ 1/60



Dragonet - Sand and rubble may appear barren and lifeless to begin with, but if you settle down for a few minutes then creatures will begin to reveal themselves. There are nearly always numerous dragonets who will approach you cautiously - the male is the most colourful and if you are lucky he may display his colourful dorsal fin. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/125

in spring in preparation for the female to spawn. If you spot one, try to track his movements across the reef and you will soon be led to the nest site which will give you the opportunity for

some close portrait shots.

Other kelp hunters include the pollack who hangs above the weed often in small groups much like a barracuda waiting to strike. More difficult to spot are the



Male cuckoo wrasse - all cuckoo wrasse start off as females with the most dominant in the group changing sex when the male of the territory dies or departs. Occasionally you will encounter one which is partially patterned which looks decidedly odd. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/60



Leopard spotted goby - these little fish are quite common, found at the base of the reefs in little sandy overhangs. However they can be a little skittish, so a 105mm lens will be the ideal tool to fill the frame. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, Inon Quad flash, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/125

john dory whose body is wafer thin when viewed head on, which coupled with flawless colouration helps him blend perfectly into the kelp. However they will often track you in the hope that you will disturb something worth eating and, if you are fortunate, you might see one strike with its amazing

extending jaw which sucks the prey back in towards the fish a lot like a frog fish on a coral reef.

The best tool for capturing an image of these fish will be a 60mm lens in a housing or perhaps the standard 35mm on a Nikonos or Motormarine.

On the Rocks

Almost every rocky foreshore has numerous inhabitants which may not be obvious at first glance, but with a little patience you will begin to track them down. Many of the fish you will find in the cracks and crevices of the reef are territorial or semi sessile and are easily approached for frame filling close up photography. We are all familiar with the smiling features of the tom pot blenny, but there are also Montagu's and Yarrel's blenny, shannies and butterfly to be found in a similar habitat. A number of gobies share the reef habitat with the blennies, the most striking being leopard spotted gobies which are generally found in small sandy openings at the base of the reef. Less obvious species include scorpion fish and topknots both of which have excellent camouflage and are more challenging to hunt down, but normally equally co-operative once found. All these species can be shot successfully with a 60mm or 105mm macro lens on a housed system, but if you are using a Nikonos or Motormarine then you will have to work with a close up kit with the framer removed. You can try focussing on the subject using converging torch beams which intersect at the point of focus, although judging the picture area will take some practice. Whichever system you have, you will need to concentrate on your lighting angles, not only to elude backscatter but also to avoid casting shadows on the subject when shooting into crevices in the reef.

Larger denizens you may find amongst the rocks include



Corkwing wrasse - Corkwing are found on the reef throughout the year but are most active in the spring when the males are building their nests. If you spot one follow him until you find the nest location and then wait patiently for your opportunity. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/60

lumpsuckers tending their eggs in the spring, sleepy dog fish and topes and in our northern waters the granddaddy of all blennies, the fearsome looking wolf fish. All of these are fairly docile and co-operative and when conditions are favourable you may want to try a slightly wider approach with perhaps a lens between 20-35mm which will include some of the reef habitat.

On the Sand

Wherever we dive in the world the temptation is often to head for the reef which usually offers the greatest concentration of sea life. All too often we can ignore the sandy areas that border a reef or indeed the often large areas of sand and gravel which we cross to reach the reef. This can be a mistake as these seemingly barren areas do harbour some interesting fish life, particularly in the summer months. As the shallow waters begin to warm in the early spring, formerly lifeless areas begin to sprout new growths of seaweed beds, eel grass and stands of bootlace weeds. These are in turn populated by fry and juvenile species which in turn attract predators. The weedy areas are a great



Pouting shoal - this is a typical small school of pouting on a shallow wreck site. Occasionally we experience good conditions with good visibility and reasonable visibility - you need to be prepared to take advantage of them! Nikon F801, Subal housing, 20mm, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome 100, f8 @ 1/60

place to spot species like sticklebacks and pipe fish which blend very easily as they hang motionless or move very slowly through this natural camouflage. There are two species common in our waters, the greater pipe fish, which has a head very much like a seahorse and an armoured appearance to its body, and the snake pipe fish which is altogether smoother and more colourful, often found with a series of pale bands down the length of its body. Seahorses are apparently making a comeback as well and there are increasing reports of sightings and capture of these critters in crab pots all along the south coast. They also favour the weed on the sandy areas but are incredibly well camouflaged so you will need a great deal of patience and a good chunk of luck!

The sand and gravel areas are home to a number of species that are adept at camouflage and



Topknot - topknots are usually found in cracks and crevices in the reef. Occasionally they will be found sitting on top of a rock as here, which allows you to get a low angle of approach and include some natural light in the shot. Nikon F801, Subal housing, 60mm, YS50 & YS30, Elitechrome 100, f5.6 @ 1/30



Scorpion fish are amongst my favourite reef subjects as each one will have a different colour and pattern dependant on where they are perching. Once found they are normally convinced you cannot see them, so make the most of every angle and exposure. Nikon F2, Hugyfot housing, 55mm, YS50 flash, Fujichrome Velvia, f8 @ 1/60

may not be immediately apparent. One approach is just to settle on the sand and concentrate on the area a meter or so in front of you. Often species like dragonets, gobies and dabs will eventually begin to reveal themselves with movement and will normally become increasingly inquisitive. They tend to move in small jumps and jerks so it sometimes helps to pre-focus and then track a particular subject until it settles momentarily in range which allows you to obtain one or two frames without the auto focus hunting at the last moment!

There are larger species which are more confident of their camouflage and are more likely just to sit and watch you come closer once found. The largest of these in shallow waters is likely to be the monk fish or angler fish which has amazing camouflage and is content to sit on the bottom gently waving its lure to attract unsuspecting prey. I have seen particularly large specimens which have numerous small or juvenile fish swimming amongst the lures above the fish's mouth which are ignored in the sure knowledge that they will attract a much larger meal.

Other sand hunters include plaice, turbot and thornback and blond rays which are often found close to estuaries digging for crustaceans in the silt.

Closer to the border between reef and sand you may also encounter small schools of red and grey mullet, sand eels (which attract the voracious pollack) and red gurnards, although the latter tend to appear more often at dusk or at night. So don't ignore the sandy areas as they can prove to be almost as productive as the reef itself. Bright sand can cause exposure problems with TTL systems and



The snake pipe fish is the second most common pipe fish in our waters. It prefers shallow waters and will be found amongst sea weeds at the reef edge. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm, YS120 & YS30, Elitechrome EBX 100, f11 @ 1/60

often you will have to rely on experience to judge this. If your flash output seems unusually low at small apertures then you should suspect that the TTL is underexposing and it is best to resort to manual exposure calculation.

Open Waters

There are time when you will need to board a boat to go offshore as the open waters of our coastline still do harbour schools of fish despite heavy commercial fishing. However, capturing a shoal of mackerel or herring on film is probably more a matter of luck than planning in my experience. I have often leapt from the deck of a boat with enthusiasm to chase a shoal of mackerel which can not only be clearly seen on an echo sounder but are also coming up to the deck on hooks as I submerge, but when you reach your target depth you are on your own again!

Easier larger targets do appear in the spring and summer in the form of basking sharks, sun fish and jelly fish (although the latter is not strictly a fish of course). For these beasts you

will want a wide angle lens and it is best to leave your flash on deck as you will be working right on the surface. A wet suit and snorkel is most effective particularly for basking sharks as you will have to swim hard in bursts to stay with your quarry. As these sharks are plankton feeders the conditions which attract them will not include gin clear visibility. So you need to get as close to the subject as possible and it is often better to use manual focus as auto focus will often try to lock onto particles in the water just at the wrong moment. Jelly fish are of course slower moving and can look quite spectacular when captured against the sun close to the surface. Sun fish are found in the south western approaches and the Bristol Channel, although they do occasionally turn up in the North Sea during particularly warm summers. Although they laze on the surface happily alongside a boat, they will quickly sound once they become aware of your presence in the water so you have to be prepared to grab a few frames quickly. I have never had much success with them and must admit to being green with envy when watching the

sequence in Blue Planet showing seagulls pecking parasites from sunfish - a few weeks at sea is all you need!

Hopefully these few words will have converted a few of the dedicated tropical photographers out there, or at least tempted some to sample our home waters. When conditions are right we have some wonderful coastline and if you prepare yourself with the correct equipment you can remain comfortable even in the chilliest waters. Taking the plunge can only improve your photography which will boost your enthusiasm even for temperate waters - so let's hear it for British fish!

Mark Webster

Mark Webster hosts underwater photography workshops aboard the MY Coral Queen and in Indonesia. He is also the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' published by Fountain Press.

**See Mark's website for further details:
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