

South West Ramblings 20

by Mark Webster

There has been a bit of a gap since the last ramble as the diving opportunities have been few and far between in recent months. This was mostly due to a long, wet and windy winter which produced only a handful of days when seas were calm enough to dive, but due to the preceding winds often the visibility was so poor it was just not worth the effort of submersion.

Finally, spring began to arrive but despite a mild winter there seems to have been a very slow start to the season and we did not really experience the expected heavy plankton bloom that normally arrives in May and June. This may be due to the fact that the water temperature remained relatively warm during the winter months and there so there was no sharp rise of 2-4 degrees which generally propagates the murky green waters.

I always look forward to the first spring dives as they herald the arrival of one of my favourite subjects, which are nudibranchs of course.

We have a patch of reef not far from Falmouth harbour which is sheltered from all but the worst weather. At high water you might

find 8-9m of water depth here and the reef wall stands up 4-5m with a deep undercut which attracts a healthy community sponges, hydroids, bryozoans and tunicates which are all good eating for nudibranchs.

There are always nudibranchs here in the spring but some years surpass others in the number and variety of species and we have seen some very unusual and rare specimens here.

For some unknown reason this year is not a stand out year and, whilst there are some common species, the reef has been dominated by countless candy striped flat worms (*Prostheceraeus vittatus*). They are so numerous that on some days we have found dozens cruising across the sand presumably in search of a fresh patch of reef with more to eat. They all seemed to be moving in the same general direction and following a similar route, so perhaps they are able to detect the path taken by the leading flat worm? I don't think I have ever seen these flat worms on sand in the UK before. Whilst they are nice subjects, and of course you have to capture a few images, they don't have the attraction of nudibranchs, at least



*Although candy striped flatworms (*Prostheceraeus vittatus*) are a common species it is unusual to see them off the reef and on open sand. This pair were amongst twenty or more that seemed to be following each other in the same direction perhaps looking for a new patch of reef to feed on. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f16 1/30.*

not for me.

So in seeking more variety I planned dives at Porthkerris on the Lizard and offshore on the Manacles reef which have both been good hunting grounds in previous seasons. Porthkerris has an excellent beach dive with a deep reef just a short swim from the shore.

On the seaward side of the reef the tide can be quite strong and, like the Manacle further offshore, this

nutrient rich water flow supports dense colonies of several different species of hydroids which of course is gourmet dining for sea slugs. So the number of nudibranchs and the selection of species on these two locations was much broader on both the inshore and offshore reefs which increased the imaging opportunities significantly.

As I have described in the past, many of the most colourful and



Diaphorodoris luteocincta and *Diaphorodoris alba* are also looking for mates in the spring time, although I have not seen them in pairs or groups very often. The shallow depth of field at high magnification means it is difficult to get two or more in full focus. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f32 1/60.

interesting species are very small indeed so with a DSLR you will need a combination of a 105 macro lens and preferably a +10 wet lens or an equivalent combination if you are using another format.

One species which seems to be abundant this year is *Diaphorodoris luteocincta* and the closely related *Diaphorodoris alba*, which are extremely small at between 5-10mm in length and so are quite difficult spot to initially.

These critters are often buried in their food source so you may only

catch sight of part of the animal. I generally pick a patch of reef with a good coverage of hydroids and bryozoans and then look for white dots and investigate each one.

Once you have spotted one you may find that you are looking at the rear end, but be patient as these guys are quite active in their feeding and will soon turn around.

Use the time to get your focus, framing and flash position sorted whilst you watch through the viewfinder. There are two related species and they both look spectacular



Nudibranch Doto fragilis is easier to find if you look for the eggs first and then try to find one with the rhinophores exposed. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f32 1/60.

in magnified by the viewfinder with a vivid yellow skirt and large spiral sculpted rhinophores.

Diaphorodoris alba is plain white with a yellow skirt whilst its cousin *Diaphorodoris luteocincta* has a contrasting deep red coloured stripe running down the centre of its body and also lines of short cerata.

Spend time, perhaps a whole dive, with your subject and wait for opportunities to capture your subject in various poses, particularly from a low angle if possible to separate

it from the background. These two species are often seen together but I have not seen them mating.

Another hard to spot species is *Doto fragilis* which seems to favour the more feathery hydroid (e.g. *Gymnangium montagui*) to feed and lay its eggs. In fact it is the egg clusters that you will most often see, but wherever you find them look closely at the base of the hydroid where this critter is most often hiding unless it is out feeding on the branch itself. Often this species likes to have its head



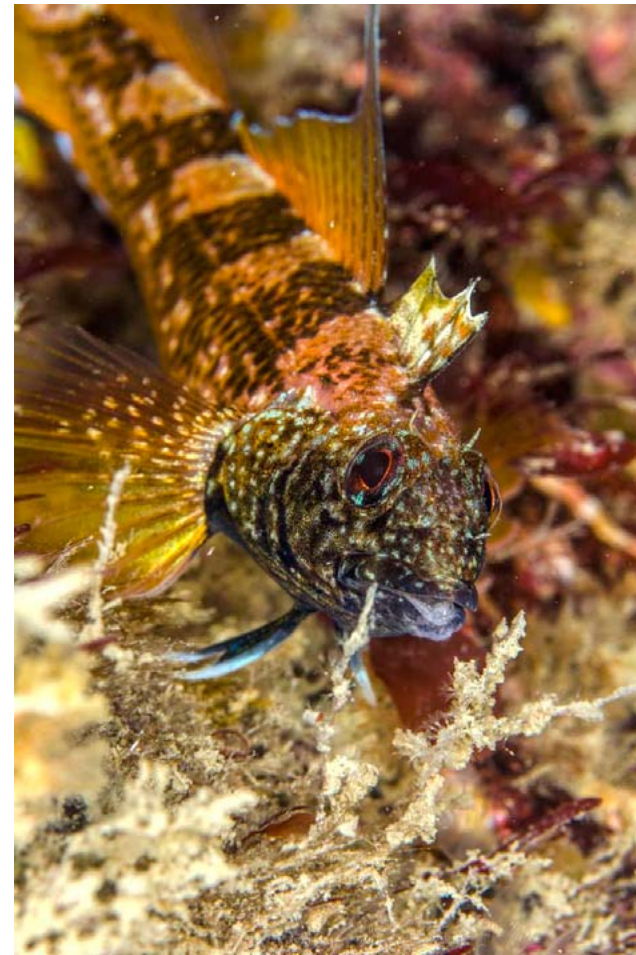
In your hunt for nudibranchs feeding on bryozoan sea mat on the kelp fronds you may see some of these little glass shrimp. They do like to move about and hover over the kelp, but every now and then they settle long enough for you to get a shot. There are many dynamic movement - you, the camera, the kelp and the subject, so be patient and try to shoot at the right moment. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, +10 wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f32 1/60.

down towards the hold fast of the hydroid and shooting its rear end does not produce a very attractive image. Be patient and look for one that is facing the right way so that you can capture the head and rhinophores and hopefully the eggs in the frame.

Another good hunting ground for nudibranchs is the sea mat bryozoans that you find on kelp fronds. This is a favourite food for the attractive

yellow and white slugs Polycera quadrilineata and Limacia clavigera and the elevation of the kelp often helps to get a low angle on the subject and perhaps an open water background.

If you don't see nudibranchs on the kelp there may be other creatures to keep you engaged. I spent quite some time on one dive trying to capture a tiny glass shrimp which



Male black faced blennies are beginning to develop their breeding colours now and are always inquisitive and willing to strike a pose within their reef territory. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f11 1/60.

of course. You will also see numerous fish species either courting, pairing off or nest building as well and they can often be more approachable at this time as they are focussed on the task in hand.

The male black faced blenny in his yellow breeding apparel is one of the more striking subjects and a perfect size for a 60mm macro or zoom

seemed to enjoy hopping around at the crucial moment, or if not then the kelp would move in the swell. This provides a frustrating challenge with a 105 macro and +10 wet lens, but don't give up as perhaps one in five or ten shots will be sharp eventually and of course the joy of digital is that we can carry pretty much until we get it right!

It is not only nudibranchs that come out in the spring time to breed

lens. I don't know what the life span of these fish is, but each year we will find a mated pair at exactly the same location on the reef and this applies to at least six locations at Porthkerris. So if they do not survive for several seasons then the next dominant male in the area must step in to claim a territory as soon as it is vacated.

Whatever the reason the great this is that you can rely on seeing



Corkwing wrasse are at their most approachable at this time of year as the male is distracted by building and defending his nest. Wait close to the nest site and the fish will often become relaxed and inquisitive. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100 f18 1/100.



Male Tompot blennies are guarding their nest of eggs at this time of year and so you are more likely to find one out in the open in front of the nest. This is a good opportunity to capture a full portrait instead of the more usual head and shoulder shot. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f16 1/30.

a co-operative subject if nothing else turns up on the dive. Black face blennies, both males and females are one of the most patient subjects and will hold a pose for almost as long as you want as long as you don't

make any sudden movements.

Another approachable species at this time of the year is the male corkwing wrasse who will be busy nest building and foraging for suitable materials around the nest. Once you have spotted

where the nest is just wait patiently and the builder will soon return, perhaps wary at first, but the need to continue the job in hand means that you will soon be accepted if you watch calmly. Also look out for pairs of Tompot



This lobster pot was full to bursting with four lobsters and a very large female dog fish which had laid two egg sacks (mermaid's purses) inside. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100, 10-17mm FE zoom and 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f16 1/30.

The fisherman was going to be in for quite a surprise when he pulled the pot! I did not have the ideal lens on to capture all this but was able to record some detail shots as a reminder of this strange situation.

So even with a slow start to the year it is always a pleasure to get back into the water and seek out familiar subjects. Although the selection of exotic looking nudibranchs seems to be missing in our area so far this year seeking out the common species and capturing a good image is still an absorbing and satisfying past time.

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blennies getting amorous or the male on his own guarding the nest of eggs.

Crabs are also in the mating mood at this time of year and you will often find them paired off in the fissures of the reef with the male clutching tightly to the female. Off the reef on some sites there are dozens of pairs of hermit crabs with the male holding onto his partner and dragging her about the seabed when they feel threatened.

They obviously both must come out of their shells to procreate but I have yet to witness the act, but paired up they can make an attractive behavioural image for your portfolio.

We have also enjoyed our first dive of the year on the eel grass beds in the Helford river. Although I started my search on the outer edge of the eel grass towards the river centre in search of thornback rays, I eventually

gave up due to the non co-operation of the subjects I found and made my way into the eel grass. Here there was the usual plethora of sea hares, which I could not resist, a pair of large and co-operative decorator crabs and the largest spiny cockle I have ever seen.

One rather unusual find recently was a lobster pot with several inhabitants, some you would expect to see and others a total surprise. This

pot was in only 6-8m of water close to one of our favourite sheltered reefs and normally I would not pay a great deal of attention to a pot as I pass by, but this one looked unusually crowded at first glance. As

I got closer I could see it was indeed full to bursting, not only with four lobsters of varying sizes, but also an extremely large dog fish. The dog fish was the size of a tope and absolutely crammed lengthwise into the pot and was obviously a female as much to my surprise there were two large egg sacks (mermaid's purses) carefully hung from the netting inside the pot. Quite why she would have struggled into the pot to lay them here I have no idea, but she seemed quite calm despite the lobsters crawling all over her and fighting amongst themselves.