

South West Ramblings 21

by Mark Webster

Writing these articles can often be a challenge in the quest to cover a new subject and not repeat previous rambles. We often dive and find there are no engaging subjects or behaviour to record with the camera and of course I am well aware that nobody wants to read about these dives!

The diving during this summer season has been pleasant but not remarkable in terms of events, although I was jealous to see that I had missed the spider crab moulting aggregation at Babbacombe this year which must be a remarkable sight. However, I was fortunate enough to once again have one of my images make the Highly Commended category in the British Wildlife Photography Awards this year and, although the image was actually taken at the tail end of 2015, I thought it might be interesting to relate the story behind the image in detail here.

We have a number of very good beach diving locations in the far south west of Cornwall and I have previously described one of my favourites which is the eel grass beds near Durgan on the Helford river. The location is within the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation

Area and the outer limits of the eel grass beds are marked with buoys to discourage anchoring within this zone. The majority of visiting boats observe this and consequently there is very little anchor disturbance or damage of this delicate and valuable habitat.

This location might be considered to be predominantly a macro dive as the selection of small and juvenile critters is excellent, but there are also wide angle opportunities here even if the visibility conditions often make it more of a challenge than close up.

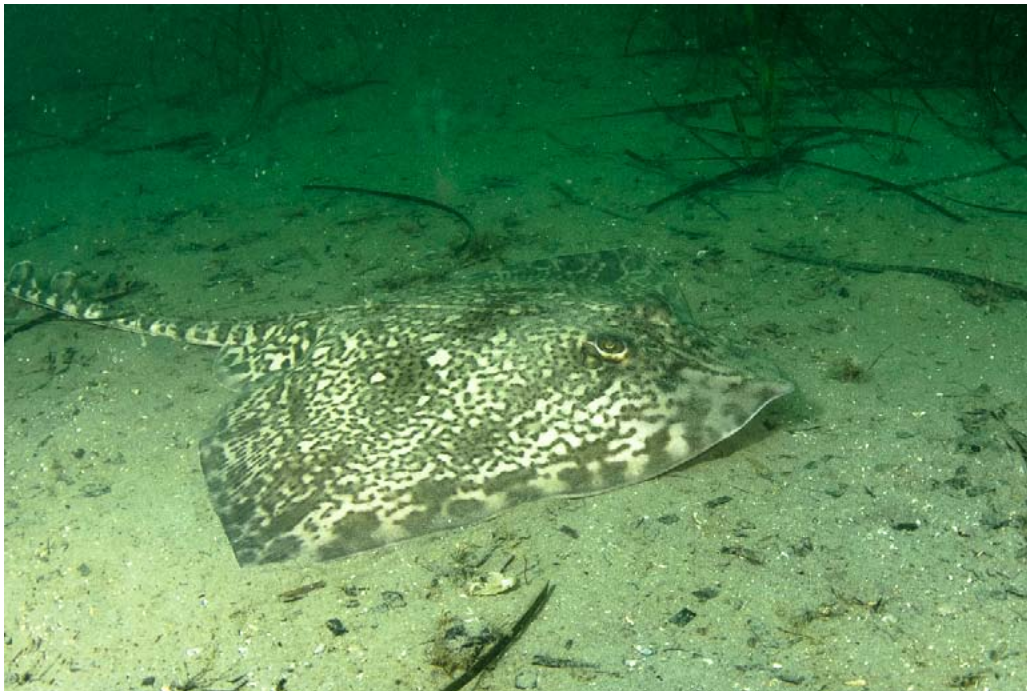
The easiest way to dive the eel grass beds is from a boat, but it is also a beach dive if you are prepared for a little bit of effort! There is no parking

This is the shot selected by the BWPA judges which I felt represented a peek into the world of the thornback through the blades of the eel grass. It is always satisfying to have a picture chosen in a big competition, particularly when you have had to work hard to get close to your subject and capture the moment. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f11 1/25.



Durgan village has an easier beach entry but a longer swim to the east to access the most healthy area of eel grass





This is a typical sighting of a thornback ray on the edge of the eel grass beds towards the centre of the river. They are generally feeding here and often if you can get close it is only for a few moments. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f11 1/25.

adjacent to the two entry points either at the top of the footpath to Grebe beach or the beach in Durgan village, but it is possible to drive down and deposit your equipment before returning to the National Trust car park at the top of the lane.

Having a buddy with you make this process a little easier as you can leave someone with the equipment. You then have to walk back down to the chosen entry point to kit up. The footpath to Grebe beach is quite steep

but the beach entry will put you right on the eel grass beds, whilst the entry at Durgan village beach is easier you will have to swim east after entering the water to find the best of the eel grass.

The eel grass beds stretch from just a few metres from the shore to almost the centre of the river. At the outer edge of the eel grass the seabed becomes more sandy with some gravel and is an ideal habitat for molluscs, particularly scallops



If you find a ray when diving with a macro lens then don't ignore the opportunity to get close for some detail shots. It seems they object less to a macro port, possibly because they cannot see their own reflection which is more obvious with a dome. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 60mm micro, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 250 f10 1/60.

and cockles amongst others. It is also a favourite feeding ground for thornback rays which were my target for this particular dive, although finding one or more is not guaranteed.

When the rays have finished feeding in this area they will often come into the eel grass to rest, presumably using the cover of the grass as camouflage. So my usual dive plan is to swim out on the surface to the outer edge of the beds and submerge to look for rays feeding and

try to capture images of them out in the open initially.

Like most fish the rays behaviour can be unpredictable with many taking flight as soon as you enter their comfort zone, which might be several metres away or only several centre metres away, but each one is different. However, I have found that once you have spotted a ray obviously a very slow approach is required and you should avoid the temptation to approach from the front. Edge slowly

closer and if the ray is not spooked then just wait a while before using the camera and often they will settle back to feeding again. Once you have gained your subject's confidence you can then begin to take pictures and if you are lucky begin to work around towards that coveted head on shot.

On this particular dive I had searched on the sand and gravel for a while, where I did encounter a couple of rays which eventually let me get close enough for a few side portraits, and after forty minutes or so I decided it was time to head back slowly for shore. I normally just follow a compass bearing north towards the shore and keep my eyes open for john dory's, dog fish and of course the thornback rays. I was beginning to think that my luck had run out when I realised that a darker mottled patch in the grass ahead of me could be a ray. When you spot anything in the eel grass the best approach is just to let your momentum carry you past the target and gently change course to come down to the seabed a couple of metres away. The reason for this is twofold - firstly to not spook the ray, who think they cannot be seen in the grass, and secondly to not disturb the fine silt around your target which covers the eel grass. Having gently landed on your finger tips it is best to wait a few minutes to see if you have indeed spooked the ray, although once settled in the grass they are reluctant to move immediately unless they feel threatened. In order to move the ray has to swim almost vertically out of its resting place to extricate itself from the eel grass which they seem to find quite awkward.

So far so good. After five minutes or so I began to creep forward to the ray's location, again using finger tips to avoid disturbing the silt and holding my camera housing above my head for the same reason. The ray seemed aware of my approach



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but not startled by it, but I would stop every few moments to watch and let any disturbed silt settle or be carried away by the gentle current. Judging when to take the first shot is always a bit of a gamble as the temptation is to be as close as possible, but quite often it is the pointing of the camera, and possibly reflections in the port, which can unsettle the ray. I came to a stop about one metre away and gently brought the camera housing down which flattens the eel grass directly in front of me, but also disturbs silt of course. Another wait for things to settle and then a couple of shots to see how the ray reacts to the flash and things were looking good for a closer approach and a change of position to get a more head on angle.

Moving in the eel grass is tricky as you are trying constantly not to disturb the visibility and



The rays seem very reluctant to swim away immediately once they have settled into the eel grass. This seems to be because they have to swim up vertically over the grass if they want to leave quickly. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f11 1/25.

also with each move of the camera housing you need to be aware of grass blades in front of the port and also obscuring the flash guns and casting shadows. So it sometimes helps to have the flash guns a little more elevated than you might normally consider in order to clear the grass blades and also gives you more of an overhead lighting affect. Use your finger tips to move yourself and avoid fin movements at all costs! It is a slow process but hopefully minimises the sediment disturbance and also does not alarm the ray.

So finally I was in position perhaps half a metre from the ray who is now looking a little edgy but I am now in a good position even if it decides to leave as it will have to come towards me to lift off. So I took a couple of shots just in case the subject panicked and then started to slowly pull

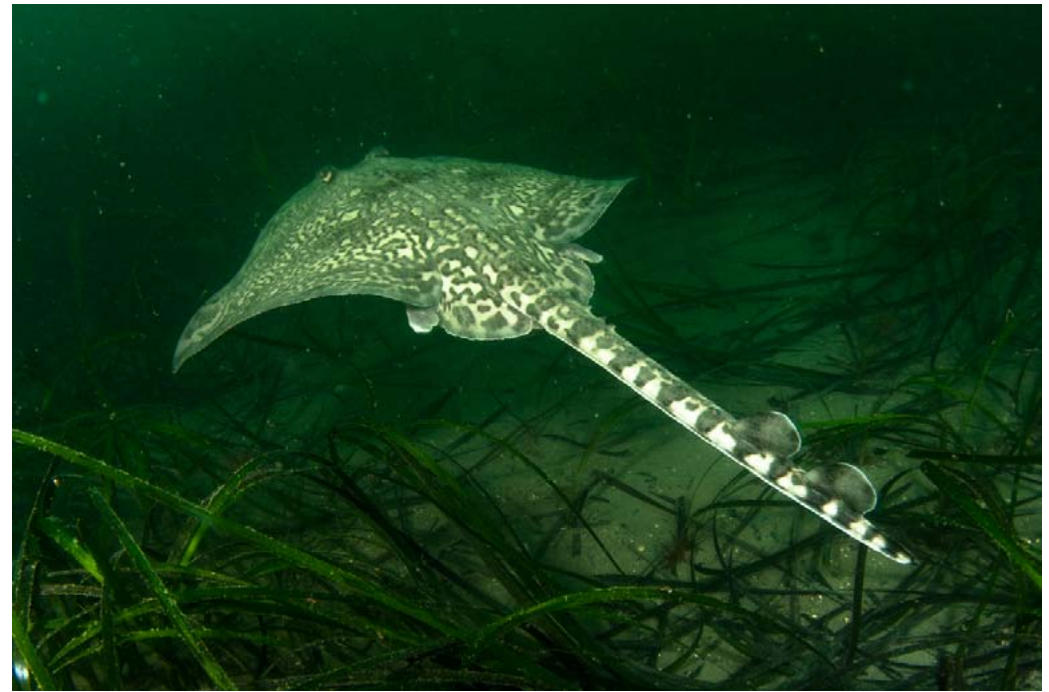
aside blades of eel grass that were in the way of the port and the flash guns. This went well but during the process the ray was also twitching a bit which stirred up the silt just as I thought it had settled out again so it was difficult to have a totally clear shot. After ten minutes or so the ray decided it would try to lift off and move, but realising it would have to clear me and the camera housing as well as the height of the eel grass it gave up and seemed happy with just messing up the vis for me again!

Eventually he did elevate and move, but only a few metres and settled again on an area with a lower density of eel grass, so I went through the whole approach process again and got some more pleasing shots. In these situations you spend far longer getting close to the subject and setting up for the images that, for me at least, it is far more satisfying when you take the shots and they look reasonable in the review screen. The ray made a couple of more moves and settled for shorter periods before finally losing patience with me and swimming away again towards the middle of the river.

I came ashore after a long dive but feeling pleased with the images that I had captured, although we can never be sure until you review them on a big screen. But this thought kept me going as I trudged back up the hill to head for home and see the results.

Each year when the BWPA entry invitation is announced I usually doubt that I have shot anything suitable in the previous twelve months and I need to review everything to look for inspiration. It was during this review that I started to think about this set of images and realised that at least some would show a relatively common subject in an unusual habitat and thus might stand out amongst the other entries. The one I eventually selected has some eel grass in the foreground and some suspended silt particles around the subject which of course we normally strive to exclude at all costs in our images. However, I felt that for a natural history illustration such as this it added to the mood of the image and the visual description of the habitat. Luckily I was right and I was very happy to receive the notification that the picture had been chosen and subsequently more chuffed to find it occupies a double page spread in the book published to illustrate the entries and winners of the competition.

I was back in the Helford river several times this year but have only had one similar lengthy encounter with a ray, with most others being fleeting and disappointing. This year my camera was armed with a 60mm macro lens which I was gently cursing as the ray let me get closer and closer, but I was able to get some good



Hopefully this is the view of a ray you will have once you have finished getting some pleasing images close up to your subject. Encounters can often last 30 minutes or more if you are patient with your approach. Nikon D7100, Subal ND7100 housing, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO 320 f11 1/25

detail shots around the eyes to join the portfolio of ray images from this location. So if you find yourself with a less than ideal lens don't give up on the opportunity but try and make the best use of the detail images that you can capture and use the experience to study behaviour details for the next time.

I certainly hope that this ramble has not been too onerous to read and that it offers some encouragement to others that it is possible to shoot

pleasing and successful images in seemingly mundane environments and challenging conditions. We need to train ourselves to be patient and not expect a successful image on every dive and although you may not have a competition in mind, the images may turn out to be just the ticket for a specific category.

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