



The Whole Fish & Nothing But the Fish

In the second part of our Photography Made Easy series, Jack Morrison explains a technique that (with a little practice) will allow you to capture darting marine animals in their entirety ...

AT LAST year's Scottish SubAqua Club Conference in Oban I was asked about taking pictures of fish with compact cameras and how if possible to overcome the problem of shutter lag. Shutter lag is the time between pressing the button and the camera recording the image.

In modern compacts it has largely been eliminated however older cameras, maybe just a few year's older, can have a shutter lag of over a second. This is quite annoying to say the least. It also means you more often than not end up with a headless or tailless fish (see illustrations) which is very frustrating and usually means sticking to static subjects like anemones etc.

So what can you do about it? Well there is a technique called panning which photographers have been using for years to capture moving subjects like racing cars, motorbikes and any fast moving subject. This is a technique everyone should use to photograph fish even those with DSLRs that don't suffer from shutter lag. Why? Because it is the best way to freeze the subject. Ok, so how do you do it?

First I should say it works best with subjects that are moving across your field of view horizontally or vertically. Like all photographic techniques you need a bit of patience and a lot of practice.

A good subject to start with are ballan wrasse as they are generally friendly and if you watch them for a few minutes their movements can be predicted, that's the patient bit. Once you've selected your fish, let's suppose every time it passes it comes from your right to your left. As the fish comes into view compose with the fish slightly to the right in the screen then track or follow the fish as it swims across. When it is almost in front of you release the shutter but, and this is most important, keep the camera moving smoothly with the fish. You must follow through so to speak or you will get a blurred shot.



Tailless fish

This time I followed the movement of the fish but it stopped and therefore I missed the tail.



Headless fish

This is a typical result of not following through; I stopped moving the camera and the fish continued to swim out of the picture.



Panned fish

Got it right this time! Followed the movement of the fish and pressed the button at the right time getting the whole fish sharp and enough space in front of and behind the fish to show it in its habitat. Pity about the distracting starfish but that can be dealt with in Photoshop. However the picture is still destined for the bin because the fish's dorsal fin is flat I really wanted that up to show the full colour. Ah well, a good reason to come back another day and try again. The pictures were all taken on the same dive off Calve Island in the Sound of Mull.

Easy peasy, well after some practice it is quite easy and the beauty of digital cameras you can take and delete as often as you like. So get out and practice taking your dog running in the park or cars passing on a busy street although that might get you arrested or punched on the nose so maybe best to borrow a dog and go to the park.

Anyway panning works but you can get different effects from different settings. I imagine most compact camera users have it on programme or auto mode and panning will work on these settings. However control of shutter speed will give you better results and, if you want, more creative results. For instance using a fast shutter speed anything above 1/125th will generally give you a sharp subject and if your flash is powerful enough a sharp background. Use a slower shutter speed say 1/30th and you will still get a sharp subject but the background

will be blurred which gives the feeling of movement and speed.

To get control of shutter speed you have to select shutter priority, aperture priority or manual setting on your camera. I would suggest start with shutter priority usually shown as an 'S' on the settings dial. Once selected you can set the shutter speed and the camera will automatically select an aperture or f number to give correct exposure. You might also like to set the ISO to 200 this will help keep colour in the background.

As I said before the great thing about digital cameras is the fact that you can see the results immediately and if you don't like it change settings and try again till you are happy with the result. After a bit of practice panning should get you good moving fish pictures even with shutter lag.

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