



# photo & video

Conger eel

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

Perhaps one of the most difficult, but also most rewarding aspects of all underwater photography is to be able to photograph an animal, or fish, in this instance, in its preferred habitat, without inducing any undue stress or obvious invasion of the creature's life space.

As always in underwater photography, you are moving, the element is moving, the (digital) film speed is usually slow—such as only 50, 100 or 200 iso equivalent—you are generally using flash at a slow shutter speed to get some colour into the frame, and you are trying to capture a creature that swims away from you if you get too close. "Fine," you say, just photograph fish that do not swim away or try to get the picture without getting too close.

Firstly, it is much better to stay well clear of the subject and its habitat, approach the subject slowly and sympathetically, and at least this way you are able to keep off the seabed or wall without causing any unnecessary damage. Use at the least a 60mm macro or 105mm macro lens or similar equivalent in an underwater waterproof housing on your SLR or Micro four-thirds camera. Most compact cameras also have superb zoom qualities, and you are easily able to



## Photographing Fish in Cold Waters

photograph a 'macro' subject using the camera's zoom and in-built flash capabilities. Fast tracking auto-focus is a distinct advantage as many small fish move in slight and subtle jerking movements, often as a territorial defence.

Undoubtedly the new style of cameras, which are available for underwater use in

their specifically made underwater housings, are a marked improvement on the old Nikonos amphibious system. Quite a number of manufacturers actually manufacture amphibious digital cameras, including Nikon, which now have a new amphibious camera called the Nikon1 AW1, which is waterproof down to 15m,

with a little more finessing; this may well replace the standard compact camera in its underwater housing.

### About the fish

So what type of fish are we looking for—from the smallest blenny or goby to one of the largest fish in our seas, the Basking

shark? We do have to have some appreciation of the habitat where you are looking for your subject—an idea about how fish behave is not essential, but there are a few easy pointers.

Some fish aggregations are seasonal such as sand eels, mackerel, basking sharks and blue sharks, others are seden-





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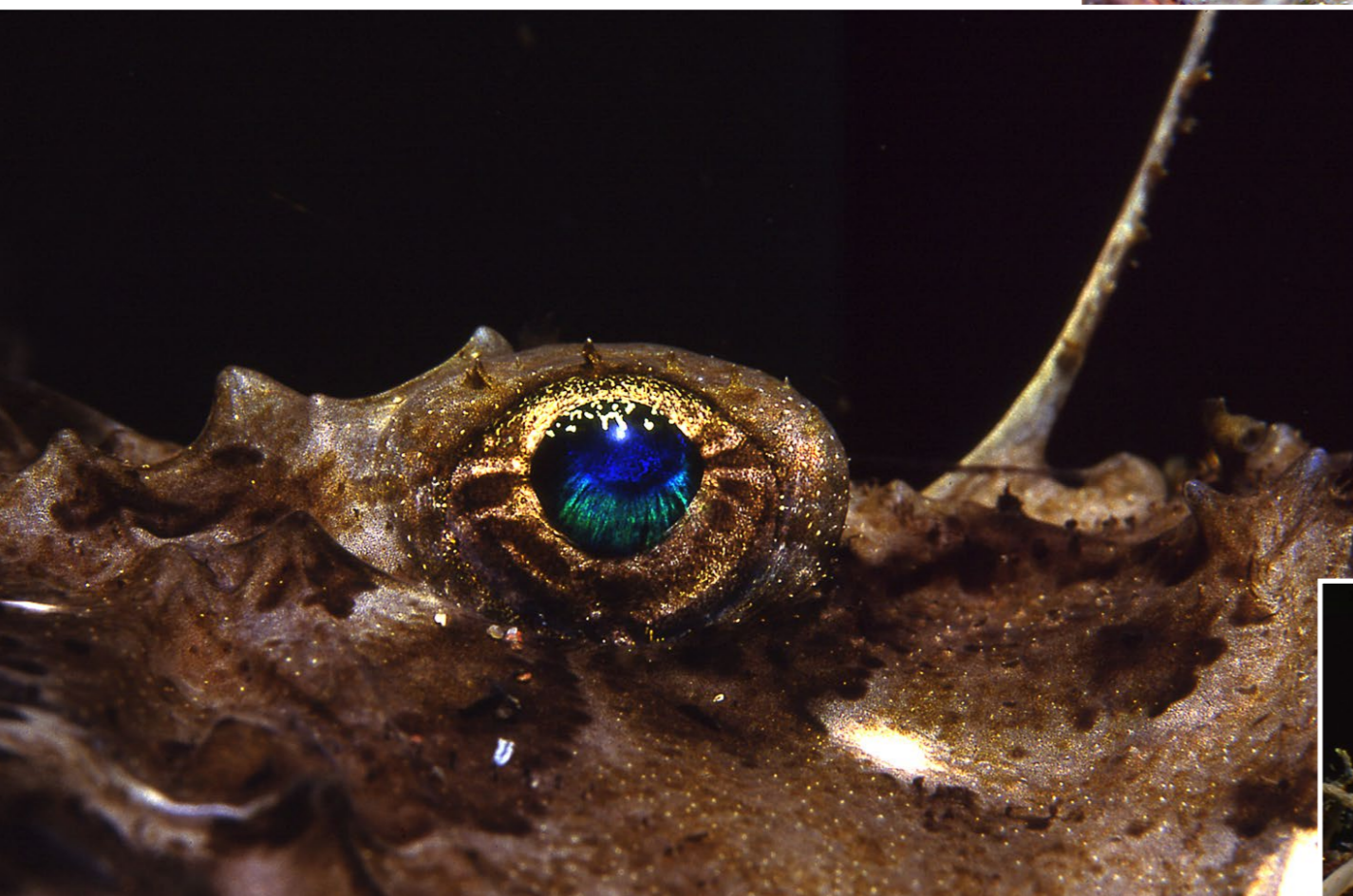
Black goby (right);  
Detail of the eye  
of an angler, or  
monk fish (below);  
Egg case from  
a lesser spotted  
dogfish (lower  
right)

tary. The habitats for fish finding are quarries; rivers and lakes; in open water; rocky reefs and cliffs; under piers; kelp forest and the seabed—sandy or muddy. [Some say that 'muck diving' was first invented in the Scottish sea lochs!]

Fish that swim away from you have little natural defence, other than hiding in a hole or burying themselves under the sand.

and by opening the large cavernous mouth suddenly; the prey is sucked within the jaws and snagged in the multitude of razor sharp teeth.

Flounders on a sandy bottom have superb chameleon like proper-



and the incredibly colourful topknot is quite at home on steep rocky reefs. Around British shores we can find Dover sole, topknot, plaice, witch, lemon sole and the dab—all of which make great photographic subjects, but all have to be approached with skill and empathy. The topknot is so sure of its camouflage, that it will sit quite still, even when photographed.

### Types of shots

Fishy photographs come in several different categories.

There are the open water shots with nothing in the background, often looking like the fish is frozen in time and although this can be regarded as a scientific or stock shot, it can be a superb photograph, yet tells nothing of the creature's life cycle. Basking sharks, the biggest fish in in our waters, are almost always found in open water, yet they are usually found in poor visibility as it is the plankton fuelled waters that are its life blood.

Behavioural photographs of fish feeding, being cleaned, acting oddly, fish with personalities and acting in a comical way all add a little sparkle to the finished photograph. Fish with camouflage such as scorpionfish



The kind of fish that do not swim away fall into two categories, those with additional protection such as sharp spines or superb camouflage such as the smaller scorpenfish, weaverfish or the anglerfish in these temperate waters. These fish sit still and wait for their food to swim in front of them

ties and will sit perfectly still allowing you to get very close to them, it is only when they discover that their camouflage has not worked (when you take their photograph) that they swim away and are quite adept at skimming over low rocky reefs. Not all flounders are bottom dwellers, of course,

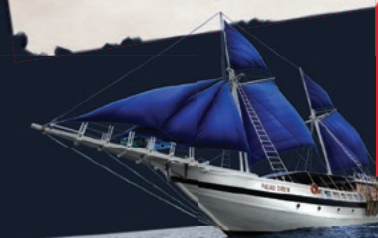


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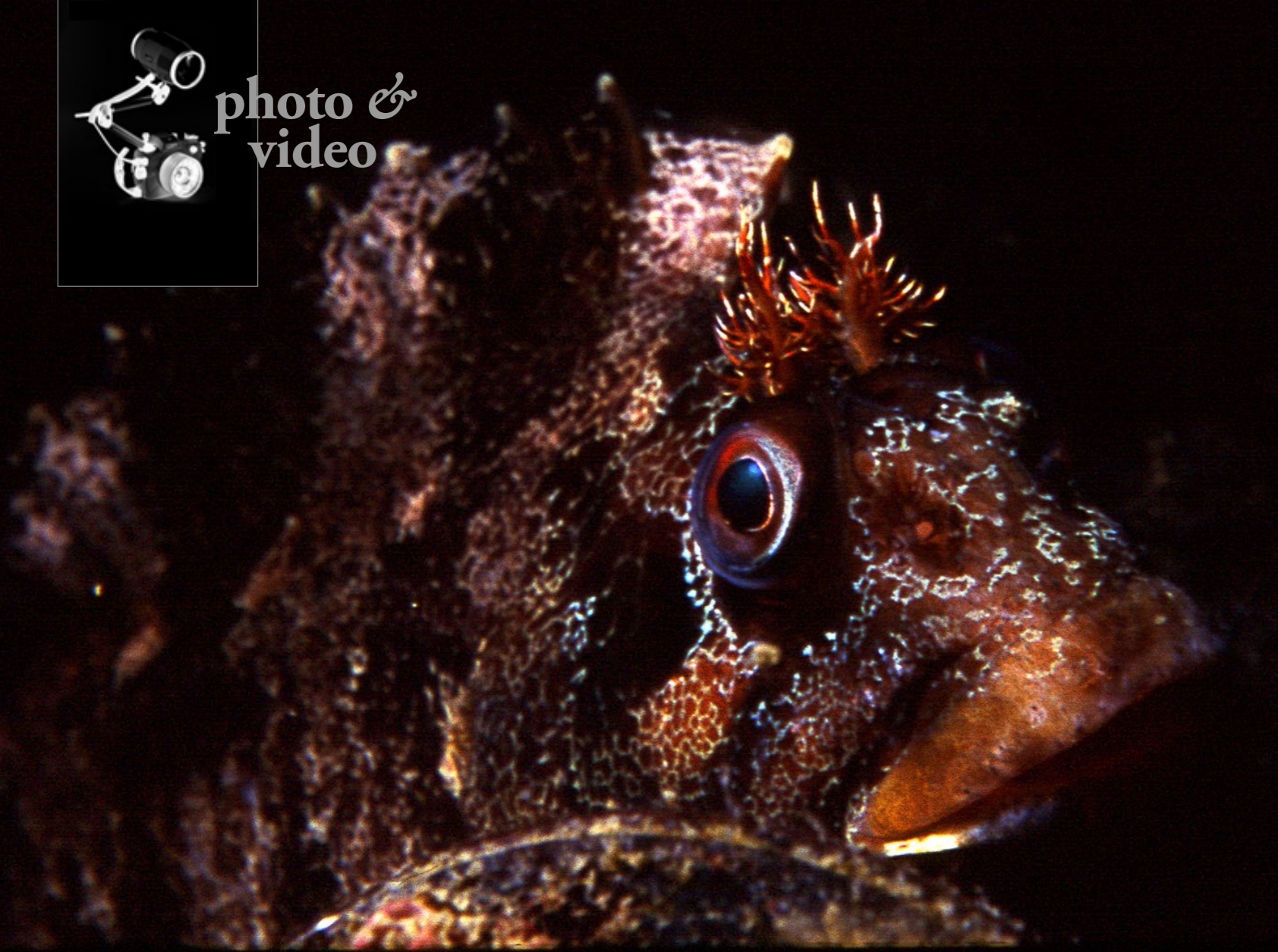
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Tompot blenny (left);  
Turbot (right); Saithe  
or pollock (below)

chumming of one description or another going on, but they can be unpredictable and care should always be exercised.

More sedentary species such as dogfish are easier to approach, and their egg cases make for an additional element when telling the story of the fish in question.

With all fast moving subjects the challenge is to freeze the action, therefore careful timing and panning with the subject



## Cold Waters



Male cuckoo wrasse

may also be camera-shy, others such as weaverfish hide under the sand with only an eye visible and part of the hinged upwards pointing mouth, difficult to spot, but they can be approached very slowly.

Sandeels will disappear under the sand to escape from danger, but they also assume that other great tactic of defence by grouping together in massive shoals.

Blue sharks are also pelagic and divers enjoy the offshore encounters in Cornwall during the summer months. They are easily photographed in situations where there is



assistant to 'herd' the subject fish towards the camera lens for those elusive head-on shots. By swimming parallel to the fish, the fish thinks that you are just swimming alongside it or even swimming past. You can then angle your camera towards it and take a couple of photographs before it realises that it has been duped.

Try to avoid taking photographs of fish if they are swimming away from you, unless of course there is rarity of the subject matter. The

should help to reduce the risk of 'ghost imaging'.

Some fish appear to have personalities, and in many respects, a photograph works best when it looks like the photographer and the fish have made eye contact. It also looks better if the fish's mouth is open—mimicking conversation—or if it happens that the fish is obviously looking away, then a highpoint of interest should form part of the overall composition.

The tompot blenny famously

photographed under Swanage Pier is not only colourful and comical looking, it is easily approached and appears quite happy in its old metal pipe home.

### Understanding behavior

Anticipating the fish's movements will also help to yield results, and with quiet controlled breathing, you can move up to a subject obliquely, without any obvious form of pursuit. You may also require the help of a buddy

more you pursue a fish for that elusive photograph, the more the fish will feel hunted and the faster it will swim away.

Unfortunately several things can happen with this scenario. The photographer can end up going too deep without realising it, or perhaps too far into a cave and become disoriented, and the fish (most of which are normally territorial) can end up in another fish's territory increasing the danger to itself and perhaps losing its nesting site or mate.





### Basking sharks

It took a while to understand some of the behaviour whilst photographing the basking sharks off the Isle of Coll on the Scottish west coast and to try measures to hopefully allow the sharks to get used to me. The more you swim after the shark, the more it is aware of you and the more it will turn away from you, necessitating you to swim faster and turn tighter circles with the shark until you are absolutely pooped! Closer observation showed that the sharks would turn circles anyway, when there were large concen-

trations of plankton, so by waiting quietly and conserving my strength, I could gauge which direction the shark was moving and try and head it off at the pass (but remember that the open mouth and nose are about

five metres in front of the pointed dorsal fin). Gradually the shark's awareness includes you in its forward vision, and by waiting (whilst swimming), the shark will come closer and will avoid you, just like it avoids the lion's mane jellyfish and give you (hopefully) the chance of the head shot with its mouth open, feeding on plankton.

### Night photography

One of the best times of day to photograph fish is at night when they are rest-



ing or asleep, allowing you to photograph some fish much easier than during daylight hours. Whilst there is the temptation to fire off lots of (digital memory) film on a particularly photogenic subject, it is imperative that their sleeping pattern is not disturbed.

Wrasse, for instance are always easily approached, but when you shine a light into their eyes, they can become spooked inducing fear and flight in the fish, causing it to blunder about the rocky, kelp fringed shoreline, damaging itself.

Try and line up your shot on a piece of soft coral nearby and then move quickly into position, take a couple of photographs as a maximum on each subject and then turn your lights away.

interfere with active night hunters and foragers as again this can interfere with their behavioural patterns. With most territorial fish, they will move out of their safe area when you approach, but will return when they realise that they are not being threatened and with careful watch of the repetition of their movements and any idiosyncrasies of their habits, you can position yourself to catch the subject as it returns. You will notice that some fish stay within a very small area, whilst others appear to follow a predetermined route, which will eventually bring them back to a start-



Basking shark

Thornback ray (left); Common skate (far left)

## Cold Waters

Fish such as wolf fish and Yarrell's blennies are quite timid and hide in holes or under rocks during the day, yet come out to feed at night. However, never try and

interfere with active night hunters and foragers as again this can interfere with their behavioural patterns.

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Two spot goby (left); Ruby sucker and kelp on sea urchin (above); Butterfish (right); Five-bearded rockling (lower right)



Cold Waters

ing point, other fish retreat into a hole or cave and again will come out; by waiting patiently you can focus on the area that the fish will move into and often have to compose your shot in the fraction of a

second before the fish realises that it has been duped—again!

Cuckoo wrasse in their mating colours are incredibly colourful, and as they are territorial, their movements can be fairly predictable and more easily photographed.

### Baiting

Some photographers prefer baiting the subject with small scraps of food. This is all very well, if those photographers were the only ones to visit the location (i.e. like in an aquarium). Sadly, when the next group approach this same reef, the fish automatically assume that the divers have food for them and soon start to act very aggressively when no food can

be found. It is also totally wrong to kill another underwater creature to 'set-up' a composition, such as breaking open a sea urchin to attract wrasse in to feed in front of the camera lens.

### Buoyancy

No special training is required to photograph fish, but underwater photographers should be even more aware of their buoyancy control to avoid damaging other delicate marine organisms. If you must steady yourself and touch the rocky reef, always choose an area of dead rock and only use one finger to steady yourself. Above all else, you must study the subjects and the photographs that you show must indicate that the fish has not been stressed in any way, that it is comfortable with the photographer, and with good timing,



Angel shark

you should be able to give a new dimension to your photography. Our underwater photographs must show that we are indeed guardians of the seas. ■

*Lawson Wood is a widely published underwater photographer and author of many dive guides and books. For more information, visit: [www.lawsonwood.com](http://www.lawsonwood.com)*





### Subal GH4 Housing

Subal has announced the release of their new housing for the Panasonic LUMIX GH4 camera. Machined from a single block of aluminum and manufactured to Subal's exacting standards, the housing is with the company's existing ports and accessories.



### Nauticam NA-7DMKII Housing

Nauticam has released their housing for the Canon EOS 7D Mark II camera. The new NA-7DMKII housing features a dual function lever for ISO and the M Fn focus area adjustment control, plus a button to allow the vacuum system to be reset from the front. Nauticam's multi selector pad is provided as standard and, for the first time on a Canon housing from Nauticam there is a lever to activate or deactivate the camera's flash. The NA-7DMKII is available now at a retail price of US\$3,400.

### Ikelite Housing for the Canon EOS 7D Mk II

Ikelite has released their new housing for the Canon EOS 7D Mark II. As usual with Ikelite they have released their housing very quickly after the camera's release. Manufactured from the company's trademark clear polycarbonate material, the new housing features their signature circuitry to enable TTL strobe triggering with compatible strobes. The housing is available now at a retail price of US\$1,800.



### Sony A7II Camera

Sony has announced the release of its new and highly anticipated A7II camera—the successor to the earlier A7 and the first full-frame mirrorless camera. Although only available in Japan initially, the new camera features the same 24MP "Exmor" CMOS sensor as the A7, but introduces 5 axis image stabilization which enables 4-5 stops of shake correction. The image stabilization is rumored to be the same as used in Olympus' highly regarded OM-D cameras. The A7II also claims improved auto focus, which Sony claims is 30 percent faster than on the A7, plus there are also significant improvements claimed on subject acquisition and motion tracking. Unfortunately for owners of existing A7 housings, the body on the A7II has been changed with the shutter release button moved and there is a deeper grip, which means it is unlikely the new A7II will fit in to earlier housings. The Japanese price of the A7II is 190,000 yen, which puts it around 1,300 Euro or US\$1,600 at current exchange rates.



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### Aquatica A7D Mk II Housing

Aquatica has announced that it will release its new housing for the Canon EOS 7D Mk II in early 2015. The A7D Mk II housing will feature improved ergonomics, large control knobs and will be fully compatible with Aquatica's port system and be available with optical, Nikonos or Ikelite strobe connections. The A7D Mk II will retail at US\$2,799.

### Three New 4K Camcorders from JVC

JVC has announced they will release three new affordable and handheld 4K capable camcorders in the first quarter of 2015. All three cameras will feature dual SDHC/SDXC card slots, 3.5-inch LCD displays and 1.56 megapixel color viewfinders. The LCD displays and viewfinders will both have smart focus assist functions, and offer two-channel audio recording. The GY-LS300 has a super 35mm sensor with a MFT lens mount and will retail at US\$4,450 and be available in March. The GY-HM170 will feature

a fixed zoom lens and the GY-HM200 can stream video via Ustream or other destinations, with both being available in February at \$2,995 and \$2,495 respectively.



### Ikelite D750 Housing

Ikelite responded quickly to the release of the highly regarded full-frame Nikon D750 DSLR and released their first new housing for the camera. Manufactured from the company's trademark clear polycarbonate material, the new housing features their signature circuitry to enable TTL strobe triggering with compatible strobes. The housing also features a rear control that allows adjustment of the overall flash output. The new D750 housing is available now with a retail price of US\$1,800.



### Nauticam D750 Housing

Nauticam was also quick to release their housing for the Nikon D750. The new NA-D750 housing boasts all the standard Nauticam features such as their excellent port lock, plus lever access to AF-ON, ISO, image review and video recording. It also has access to the D750's Function and Preview buttons, plus a small lever to access the Info button. The NA-D750 is available now at a retail price of US\$3,500.



### Nju System Housing

Andrej Belic, the inventor and owner of Austrian company nju system has announced two new and quite revolutionary housings called the slr and the pro. Both housings are completely controlled electronically using proprietary software developed by nju systems and are designed to be completely camera system independent—so you can use them with Canon, Nikon, Sony or Panasonic cameras. The housings are also designed to support all strobe manufacturers and, rather than utilizing the camera's viewfinder, use a monitor back to display the camera's Liveview information. The nju slr system costs €4,500 and the larger pro version is €5,000.

