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Pair of mating blue-ringed octopuses. This species of octopus is what I term "nomadic" by nature. They are constantly on the move, making them difficult to find on a regular basis, unlike other octopuses. Occasionally, you might happen across a subject, not realizing you might have disturbed or interrupted something. But once the action starts, the subjects rarely stop what they are doing and do not seem to mind being photographed while doing it.

Text and photos by Mike Bartick

**Recently, while visiting a photo exhibit, I overheard those familiar magic words, "Wow! Lucky shot!" coming from a couple standing next to me. This immediately caused me to fade away, drifting into my dream state, while contemplating that statement.**

Luck and chance encounters play heavily into our underwater encounters, especially as new divers. As we continue to dive, we also continue to gain experience and knowledge about our new oceanic surroundings, becoming more comfortable and curious. Soon thereafter, a thirst for knowledge suddenly develops, becoming very hard to quench. This wonderful lifelong journey of

discovery upon which we embark is furthered when we acquire a camera; and from that moment on, some of us never look back.

The importance of preparation can-

not be stressed enough for photography, whether it is on land or at sea. Reliance upon luck is a poor strategy to depend on and preparing yourself for that special animal encounter is paramount if

you absolutely, positively have to get the shot. The more we rely on the preparation portion of the margins, the more luck margin begins to dwindle, and when that chance encounter does happen, you will

be at the ready.

"Luck" is defined as "success or failure brought on by chance". Perhaps this is true, but I like to think of luck as the uncontrollable element that bonds the



# Best Behavior

— *Tips for Capturing Critters in Action*





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Bryozoan goby (*Sueviota bryozophila*) have only been described in Indonesia so far. They occur in the delicate, lacy, white bryozoan that cling to rocks or sprout from the sand. Even the smallest of these clumps can have the gobies in them, along with shrimp and even a crab—sometimes all of them sharing the same little bryozoan. The gobies pair up and spend their entire life cycles in the bryozoan, feeding on anything that drifts into its tiny domain. Their eggs can also be seen by searching the different clumps carefully with a light or by watching the paired gobies' movements.

The black, bearded goby, or dark coral goby (*Paragobiodon melanosomus*) pictured below, like other coral gobies in the class—yellow, red-headed, black-finned, etc.—are monogamous once paired. They rarely leave their partners' presences. They are found in the acropora coral heads and populate quickly, laying and tending to their eggs regularly. Setting up for these types of shots requires patience and care not to damage the delicate habitat of the subject.



actions of research, preparation and determination for that special encounter. The more we rely upon preparation, the less we need to rely upon luck.

Shooting animal behavior is the combination of all of the actions listed above, and action is what this entire article is about. Shooting the action is, of course, the end goal, and the culmination of events. Knowing your subject and its various behaviors ahead of the shoot will better prepare

you for that special moment.

It has been said many times before that if you want to see something special, go to the place where you will find them. This simple golden rule can be applied to locations and habitats alike, depending on how zoomed-in you are on your quest for success.

I am a huge fan of using metaphors: Imagine flying over a desert searching for animal life. Where is the first place you would go? A watering hole,

of course. Or a place where there is a food source upon which our subjects can feed or hunt—a place that is rich in resources for our targeted subject. This can be as big as an open ocean, or as small as a bryozoan or a sponge, taking into consideration the obvious, that habitats vary for different subjects. Once your subject has been located, try to refrain from eminent elation. You will now need to get the shot and keep it safe to show others—

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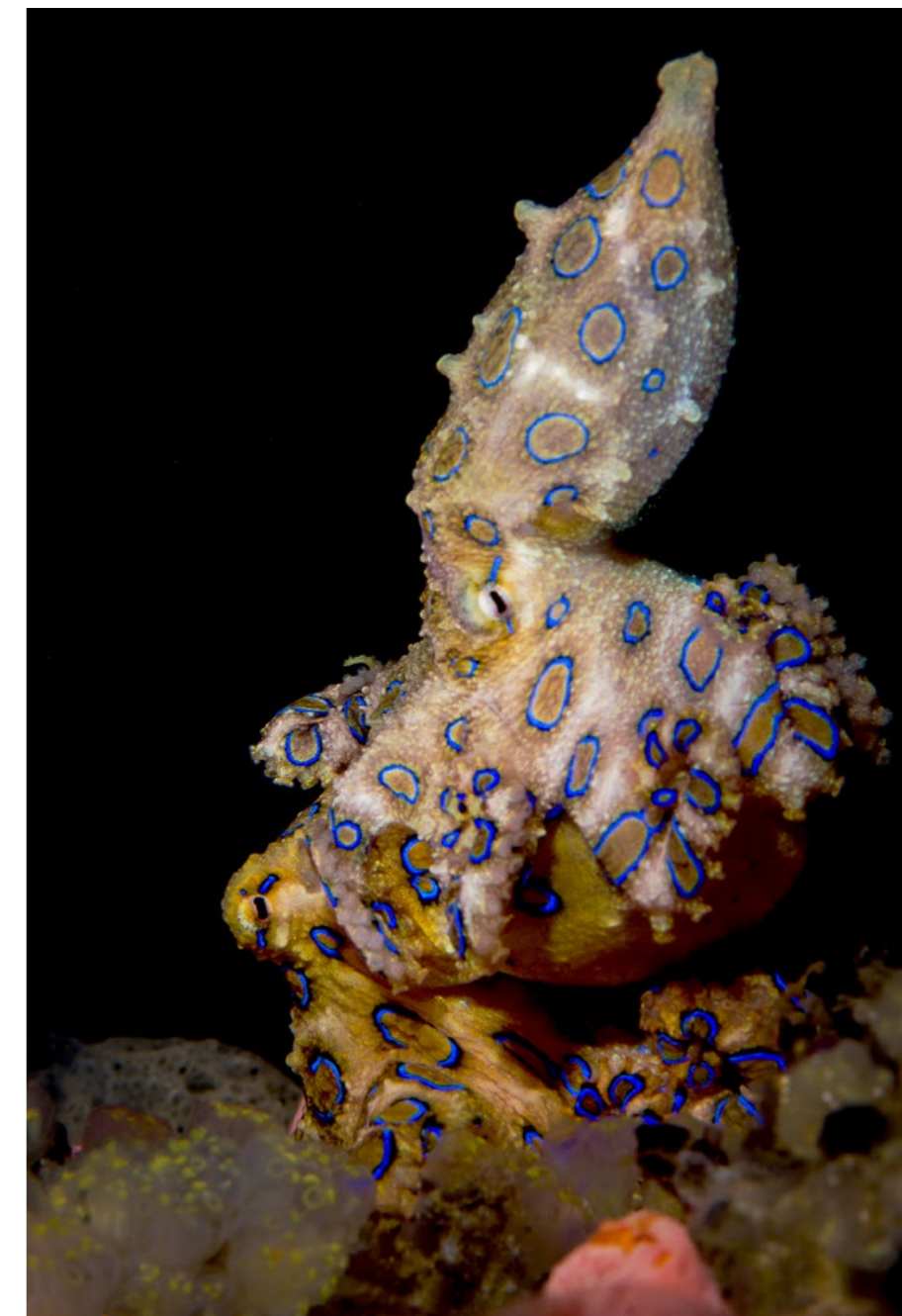


At sundown, crabs and squat lobster make great target subjects for a couple of different reasons, like the chance to capture molting and the hatching of their clutches of eggs. The action is fast and over in an instant, so be ready. I have missed many opportunities. By learning the behavior, I was finally able to capture the images. Crabs and squat lobsters will perch themselves in the open and are defenseless for just a few seconds before they release their eggs or molt. Knowing behaviors ahead of time will alert you to what is about to happen, so stand by.

When targeting a specific subject, such as the purple fire goby (*Nemateleotris decora*), learning about its unique habitat will help you to prepare for the hunt. Find out whether your chosen subject is located in specific places around the world, on a reef, sandy slope, estuary or at certain depths. The elusive fire goby in this image (left) required special preparation, as it lives below the 50m mark in the Anilao area, Philippines. Using a marine life identification book and discussing the subject with your local guides will also clue you in to what secret subjects might be found in the area. A local guide's intimate knowledge can be called upon for many reasons, such as finding out about currents, best times to dive for a subject, and of course, locations.

otherwise, it never happened.

Skill set and mastery over your camera system and dive skills both come into play once you are at the right spot and your subject has been located. At this point, many of us slip into a world of silence, with our eyes never leaving the viewfinder. Let's take a look at the things I refer to as my pillars of success for shooting behavior.



Pair of mating blue-ringed octopuses



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### Pillars of success for shooting behavior

**Research.** Doing some investigative work will help to clue you in on your targeted subject. Where does it live? How does it feed? How does it reproduce? Is it a mouth-brooder or does it lay eggs? When is it the best time of year to see them? These questions should be asked prior to embarking, and can also be asked in a reverse fashion after planning a trip.

**Preparation.** Preparing for a shot can begin hours, months or even years prior to setting out. Be sure you have the right gear to accomplish the task. Consider the ramifications and expense of traveling to a location, diving for days and finally finding that special subject—only to realize that you do not have the right lens, strobe or gear. Even physical training might be needed if your next adventure includes currents or keeping up with large animals. Preparation should not be overlooked, and you can never be over-prepared.

**Settings and lighting.** "Lights, camera, action!"—another simple set of words that string together easily and remind us of the shooting aspect, prior to engaging our subject.

**Lights.** Be sure your strobes are placed in the right position and set on the correct power settings. Take into consideration strobe position, distance from your subject and water quality.

**Camera.** Technical settings must be accurate and are vital, as you might never have a chance to recreate your



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Surprise! While photographing a small crab living in an anemone, the arms of the anemone snatched a passing fish right out of the water column and sucked it in.

I had no idea this was going to happen, but when it did, I adjusted and fired away. Sometimes, a subject will surprise you, so stay tuned.

Many subjects will enlarge themselves to appear bigger, in an attempt to thwart off predation, or become highly defensive when they are tending to their eggs. The striped fang blenny (*Meiacanthus grammistes*) also possesses venom that stuns its prey momentarily to confuse and prevent escape. Oftentimes, a pair will tend to their brood of eggs and work as a team, one protects while the other hunts or draws attention away from its nesting mate. When the nest is discovered, the tending mate will become extra agitated, occasionally flashing its teeth. This happens very quickly, so observation or several dives might be required to capture the right image with the desired technical quality.



ocean realm, and carries that survival instinct into its adulthood. Marine animals do not have any regard for their size, and can behave surprisingly timid or aggressive.

**Jump settings.** Jump settings for shooting behavior, or having a baseline, will help establish a foundation to which you can return, should things get out of control. If the technical settings are not correct, you have

Capturing the interaction between animal and animal, or diver and animal (above), is also a great way to insinuate your viewer's, or a diver's, connection to the subject in the image. Using a macro lens or wide angle lens, these types of connections can be made under many different types of circumstances and photographed with a variety of lenses. Macro with a model is fun and adds an unusual twist to a portfolio filled with single subject portraits.

opportunity. My mentor harped on me about this and would scold me for "missing a chance of a lifetime". Learning from one's own mistakes is a human trait, but learning from others' mistakes can help you immensely.

**Action.** "Wait for it, wait for it..."—now that you have finally found your subject, prepare yourself. Test fire on something with the same color values, make any adjustments to your aperture and work it in. Getting close to your subject will give you a better strobe saturation and colorful, sharp images. Keep your eye in the viewfinder and don't ever look away. Let your subject relax and behave naturally, not out of fear. Remember that everything starts out small in the

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Juvenile fish oftentimes look much prettier and much different from their adult selves. The juvenile emperor angelfish (*Pomacanthus imperator*) is a beautiful testament to this fact, although photographing them is another story. Shooting moving fish can be extremely difficult and will test your patience, dive skills and mastery over your camera system. Flasher wrasse, antheas, and many of the colorful reef fish we might encounter make very colorful images. Shooting fish is actually much harder than one would think, as they are always on the move. Occasionally, fish will halt abruptly to flash or display themselves, and it is at that moment we will have a window of opportunity.



## Behavior

Yawning and luring frogfish. What article would be complete without a yawning or luring frogfish? Agitation, stress or boredom—no one really knows why a frogfish yawns. The truth is, everyone is doing it. Lions to lionfish, this type of behavior is not unusual but still makes a great image. What the frogfish possesses, though, might surprise anyone. A frogfish is a true lie-in-wait predator that uses ambush tactics to overwhelm their prey and devour them in an instant. Sophisticated in many ways, they hunt without moving, attract prey without burning energy, and use chemical and visual stimulus to do so. Hairy frogfish are also highly photogenic, so give them a little time and you will see something fun.

missed the shot anyway. So, re-center yourself and begin again. Resetting yourself back to your baseline also helps when moving across the sand or from one subject to the next. Oftentimes, something will occur without any warning. Shooting from the hip, at this point, might be the only chance we have to capture an image, so anticipate the unexpected to close the gap on luck once again.

Jump settings for behavior are always different and dependent on what it is you are after. For instance, trying to capture spawning manderinfish might require a

higher ISO setting so that you can use a lower strobe power for faster strobe recycle time. The action can be lightning fast at times and may require rapid shooting. Setting up to shoot super-macro will require different settings, and big animal stuff will again present another choice of settings. There are no perfect settings for any situation, but having that baseline, which you can return to, helps to understand your starting point and builds an intuitive mastery over your tools, the lights, the camera and the action.

Our intended subject, once relaxed, will begin to do its thing.

When this happens, you know you are in for something really special. Many times, I have missed the initial attempt but quickly learned what the signals were. This information carried with me, and the next time I saw the signal, I could prepare myself for the show. Set the camera settings, strobe power and angle, approach slowly and relax.

To close the gap on luck, plan and prepare to capture images of animal behavior well before you jump in to shoot. Be sure the right tool is being used and the settings are correct. Observation is an overlooked tool that will serve

you well in this arena too, so be ready for that chance encounter and say goodbye to luck.

Remember to always have fun! ■

*Mike Bartick is a widely published underwater photographer and dive writer based in Anilao, Philippines. A small animal expert, he leads groups of photographers into Asia's underwater realm to seek out that special critter. For more information, visit: [Saltwaterphoto.com](http://Saltwaterphoto.com).*

