

Cornish Rockpools

by Jack Perks

Rockpools are an often-overlooked subject for the natural history photographer but provide great opportunities both above and below the water. Although there are rockpooling opportunities abroad the focus of this piece will be on the British Isles.

Being a wildlife photographer and filmmaker I'm always keen to find unusual and untold stories - hence the reason why rockpools appealed to me so much. Going to Cornwall to study on the BA Hons Marine & Natural History Photography course based in Falmouth gave me the ideal opportunity to do this.

Rockpool hot spots in the UK include the coasts of Kent, Fife and Northumbria, but in my experience Cornwall has always yielded some of my best rockpool photography.



Lighthouse and rockpool

Cornwall has over 300 miles of coastline to choose from with exposed shores bearing the brunt of the Atlantic to sheltered shores harbouring all manner of seaweeds and invertebrate life. One location in particular, the Helford River at low tide, is truly a fantastic place to get photos above and below the water. The mouth of the Helford estuary is a vast expanse of exposed and sheltered shoreline, with weeds and rocks providing habitat for species like Cornish Clingfish; Montague's crabs and Beadlet Anemones. Warmed by the passing Gulf Stream, the waters of the Cornish coast are slightly higher which means that species more at home in the Mediterranean climate can often be found here.

In April 2011 I took part in a three-month photographic study of Cornish Rockpools. The majority of the work involved scientific surveys and recording species numbers along different parts of the tideline as well as taking plenty of images. Having lived in Cornwall for three years I was spoilt for choice on dive locations but it was the rockpools that really interested me. Species in rockpools endure a daily struggle with predators, low oxygen and water level changes.

The cost of diving can be very expensive at times and is also weather dependent. When storms hit, the water clarity makes diving pointless with all the back scatter - another reason why I took to jumping in rockpools, as one only requires strong boots. - rockpools can provide an interesting alternative. Clear water is essential for successful rockpool images so areas near muddy river estuaries are mostly not suitable.

With underwater photography you need to get close to your subject as the water reduces sharpness, contrast and colour so long lens are useless this is why I only use macro and wide angle. Using natural light with the wide angles often gives a nice effect and if the light is right it can really make an image work. Working with a macro strobe (underwater flash) is advised as a lot of the subjects in rockpools really benefit from the flash. Intense sunlight can be a hindrance as most rockpool creatures shun it but flash illuminates the entire rockpool opening up an



Clingfish in rockpool

unseen world. A compact can be very handy for use in rockpools with small crevices, but shooting with a DSLR leads to more success in the larger rockpools.

Donning a wet suit and getting into larger rockpools means that you can compose the image a lot easier and don't have to lift a heavy housing which can be tiring after an hour or two. If you don't have an underwater housing don't despair there are still a few ways you can get shots.



Clingfish

Its good to have a plan for what on the shoreline you would like to capture and where to find it, as the furthest parts of the shore may only be exposed for a short time .

Wearing polarising sun glasses greatly increases the chances of you being able to spot species lurking in the pools and as with a polarising filter on your lens has the same effect in removing glare.

There's plenty for the macro photography with often ignored species like limpets, barnacles and whelks on a rocky shore which shouldn't be too hard to keep up with! Working with slow moving subjects offers more time to compose the shot and experiment with settings and exposures.



Velvet Swimming Crab

When photographing species above the water, such as birds, you need to be a bit more creative. The first thing you need to think about is that many areas with rockpools have been eroded by the daily passing of tides, meaning they are often low to the ground which means you're an easy target for any birds to see. Getting low helps but climbing over slippery seaweed is difficult at the best of times! If you are planning to photograph shore birds, the best thing to do would be to set up a hide at low tide and let the tide push the birds towards you. In winter you may find visitors such as Purple Sandpiper and during summer Ruddy Turnstone. Peregrines often like to patrol over rockpools due to the abundance of small waders that may be hiding around them. With the recent increase in Little Egret numbers, rockpools have become lifelines for them during winter months when inland lakes can freeze over.



Purple Sandpiper

Without a doubt rockpools come alive in the summer with the warm water waking up all kinds of species making it easier for the nature photographer to spot them.

Some areas can get quite busy in the summer so finding those hidden away areas may result in better images rather than including people in your shots (unless of course you want them in your images).

Salt and sand can be an issue, so its always a good idea to give the camera a quick check over and brush away and sand or debris before cleaning away any salt residue.

One particular rockpooling session always sticks out in my mind; a warm summers day in July and I was helping out on a rockpool survey on the south Cornish coast. I began by gently turning over some stones to see what I could find and after about 20 minutes of doing so I saw something unusual. A black shape was crawling away - I quickly grabbed it, I realised it was a crab when it nipped me but unlike any crab I had seen before. I left it with the other surveyors and ran home to get my camera (naturally I had forgot to bring it!). On my return I made a few exposures and then put the crab back where I had found it. I sent the image of to the Natural History Museum who later informed me it was a Marbled Rock Crab, the first ever in Cornwall and only the third in the UK. It was likely to have arrived in the ballast of a ship.

Overall, rockpool habitats hold a diverse range of species and offer photographic opportunities both above and below the water, whether you are looking for small marine species tucked away in crevasses or migratory birds coming to find food and shelter amongst the rocks.

My top five rockpool tips are:

- Wear steady foot gear as the rocks can be incredibly slippery.
- Take a buddy with you or your kids! Its great to get the whole family involved.
- There are hundreds of species living in rockpools so using online ID websites such as www.ispot.com can be helpful for correct identification.
- Avoid damaging your camera equipment on the rocks - carry a towel or gardening mat on which to rest it. Also good for your knees when kneeling on rocks.
- Get a tide table as you don't want to turn up at high tide!

