

Ireland as a Macro Destination?



By Maja Stankovski

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Flabellina pedata nudibranch. Photo by: Maja Stankovski.

Ireland is well known as an excellent and rich cold water diving destination. Divers flock from all over Europe, and many other places, to see the rich marine life and the abundance of wrecks. But how does it deliver as a macro destination? I've often shown macro pictures taken in Ireland to friends and family and their first question is, this was taken in Asia, right? The sheer variety of small creatures and colours always surprises them. Unfortunately not enough is known about the variety of species and small critters here.

We have all, as divers, enjoyed the cheeky nature and colours of tompot blennies, admired the colours of cuckoo wrasses, the beauty of dahlia anemones and marvelled at jewel anemones. How about going even smaller? How does Ireland deliver? We've all heard about the wonderful macro destinations in Indonesia, the Philippines or even Gulen in Norway, but Ireland? What miniature creatures could you find here? How unusual are they? Are they as colourful and unusual as their warm water cousins? Will we observe the unusual behaviour that we often see in documentaries and magazines showing exotic destinations?

According to Dr. Alex Mustard the most precious gems come in the

smallest packages, and I couldn't agree more with him. When we slow down and explore the reefs and wrecks in detail, we can find an abundance of the tiniest creatures and, if you look at them closely, you'll be amazed at their variety, colours and behaviour. There hasn't been a dive that I have done in Ireland that I haven't found at least a few, and if you spend a few minutes observing them, you will be amazed at what you'll spot. From nudibranchs that come in brightest colours from white to bright pink, to the smallest of shrimps, shiny gobies, colourful sponges and patterns. It is quite common as well to observe the nudibranchs mating or creating egg masses, skeleton shrimps quarrelling or annoying other small crabs, sea spiders

trying to find the best place to blend in with their surroundings, squat lobsters peeking out of their hiding places, cuckoo wrasses dissecting kelp and feeding smaller fish. If you go for night dives, you might find little cuttlefish, squid, and lots of small crabs that you might not be able to spot during the day.

But knowing that there are a lot of small creatures in Irish waters is not enough. How do you find them? Where can you see them? How do you even spot them?

If you are looking for a specific animal, it is always best to do your research first to find out what areas they like, whether you find them in shallow or deep water, in sandy areas,



Tompot blenny. Photo by: Maja Stankovski.

on walls or on wrecks. This will help in discovering them. It also helps if you are diving during the season, and in the area where they are most common, but that's not always necessary. If you haven't managed to do that, just take your time and observe, keep your eyes open and explore the reef. Wrecks and walls will be full of small critters like nudibranchs, small shrimp, cowries, pipefish, worms, sea spiders or

even amphipods. Look closely into anemones and you will notice that there are a lot of small amphipods hiding in their tentacles. If you look at the water around you and the small life that is swimming there, you can see swimming sea slugs called "sea angels" or "sea butterflies", swimming prawns, lots of various jellyfish, from gooseberries to their bigger cousins like compass jellyfish and moon jellyfish.

Remember to look at starfish in detail, you could find sea spiders on them or small flat fish. Always inspect the dahlia anemones thoroughly, you will find all sorts of life in them; sometimes you will even spot them digesting small crabs or fish. Scallops, when open, are amazing to observe filtering water, and, if you look even closer, you might see the multitude of eyes or even observe them swimming.

Even though kelp by itself appears pretty unappealing, sometimes if you look at it closely, you can see blue rayed limpets on it that are a beautiful blue colour, or even sea hares. Sea grass might look barren and lifeless, but, again, if you observe it in more detail, you might be able to find stalked jellyfish on it, or long-legged spider crabs, and sometimes even pipefish. Dead man's fingers are a pleasure to see by themselves, but they deserve a second glance and you might spot different nudibranchs on them.

Sponges are a joy of colours to see on their own, but if you spend a couple



Nudibranch on dead man's finger with jewel anemones. Photo by: Maja Stankovski.



Snakelocks anemone. Photo by: Maja Stankovski.





Nudibranch creating an egg mass known as ribbon. Photo by: Maja Stankovski.

spot tiny shrimp, sometimes almost transparent, peeking at you. It might take a while to spot them, but think small and move slowly and you'll train your eye to see them straight away.

So what are the best locations to see all these tiny creatures? Is there a preferable spot where you could see them? In short, no, and although the areas where there is a little bit of current are best, that's not always the rule. You might find small critters on walls, on wrecks, in sandy or even kelpy areas if you look closely enough. All you need to do is keep very close to the areas that you're observing and you'll start noticing all the jewels of the sea. So go to the dive site that you enjoy and like, be prepared to spend a bit of time pottering around slowly and you will start to notice the tiny world that exists beneath the waves and see the large variety of life and colour that Irish waters offer. You do not have to go to the tropics to be treated to a feast of colour and life. With patience and observation you will find it all here. ■

of minutes observing them, you will see European cowries resting on them, baby shrimps trying to blend in, skeleton shrimps doing their antics and even baby whelks and baby brittle stars. And if the sponge is bigger, you might even find a crab or tompot blenny peeking out of its hole.

Sandy areas might appear to be barren but again upon closer inspection, we can find the so called flowers of the sea, more commonly known as sea anemones. You may see fireworks anemones or burrowing anemones and, if you check out the area around them in the sand, you can

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