



THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EYE

column & photographs
by Tony Wu

Taking photographs of lionfish isn't a particularly challenging task. After all, these flamboyant predators are plentiful throughout the Pacific region, and they tend to be relatively bold, often approaching close enough to touch. Taking *good* photographs of lionfish, however, is another story altogether. Many lionfish, especially the *Pterois volitans* variety prevalent on reefs, tend to be dark with white stripes (or white with dark stripes, depending on your point of view), which is just about the most frustrating situation a photographer can face. Expose the dark areas correctly, and the whites might be overblown. Expose for the whites, and you might lose all detail in the dark areas. If, like most people, you use two strobes—one on either side of the housing—and blast away straight ahead, you'll usually end up with blown-out whites. Some people might not mind this, but it annoys me to no end.

Lionfish are called lionfish no doubt in part because they're always on the prowl, reminiscent of lions stalking prey on the savannah. Just as photos of lions on the hunt give the best sense of what it means to be a lion, photos of lionfish that convey their environment and predatory prowess are more meaningful than a plain portrait, however pretty. On Christmas Day in 2007, I found myself among a "pride" of hunting lionfish at Suzie's Bommie, one of the premier dive sites accessible from Loloata Island Resort in Papua New Guinea. Here are some of the thoughts that went through my mind as I prepared to take this photograph.



28 WETPIXEL



This is what the visibility can be like at Suzie's Bommie, due to a high concentration of nutrients in the water.

CARPE DIEM: The waters around Loloata are bathed in nutrients, both from the deep ocean and from outflow from nearby rivers, so visibility is often limited, meaning the area is best known for a wealth of macro photography opportunities. While diving the day before, I'd noticed some improvement in visibility, so I arranged with the dive guides to visit Suzie's again the following day. I "bet the house" on my intuition that visibility would be good when we went back, and fortunately, I was right. The water was crystal clear for the first time in weeks, just perfect for wide-angle photography. As it turned out, the clear water lasted for just one day, reverting to a milky blue the next day and murkier still after that. Taking advantage of narrow windows of opportunity is critical for any type of nature photograph.



The lionfish is right up against my dome port (Lionfish, *Pterois volitans*).

GET UP CLOSE: Underwater photography veterans will know that one of the simplest things you can do to improve your photos is to reduce the amount of water between your subject and the lens by getting as close as possible. For this reason, one of my favorite lenses for underwater use is the 15mm fisheye. This lens allows me to focus just in front of my port, and provided I have a cooperative subject, there's virtually no water between us. The 15mm fisheye is not a particularly easy lens to use, given the potential for perspective distortion, but when you nail a shot with this lens, the results are outstanding. Without going into too much detail, minimizing the subject-to-lens distance means you'll get the best quality of light possible. This rule of thumb applies even when the visibility is good.



Good visibility makes it easy to see the many fish that are always at the top of Suzie's, which can be distracting if you're trying to focus on a specific subject (Diagonal-banded sweetlips, *Plectorhinchus lineatus*).

AVOID DISTRACTIONS: Diving Suzie's Bommie is like jumping into a fully stocked aquarium. There's so much going on that it's difficult to concentrate. If you're fortunate enough to dive someplace like this, avoid the natural temptation to snap a few photos, rush to the next subject, snap a few more, then move on to the next fish, snap away, etc. More than likely, you'll end up with a lot of mediocre snapshots, but few high quality images. On this dive, there were so many sweetlips and other fish milling around that I had to force myself to look only at the lionfish—definitely not easy to do, but an absolute must for creating memorable images.

ISOLATION IS GOOD: With so much activity on the reef, one of the biggest challenges was isolating a single fish and “lifting” it from the background. This was made all the more difficult by my self-imposed objective of photographing a lionfish in its natural setting, rather than just taking a fish portrait. To be completely honest, I tried—and failed—many times. Nature is chaotic. Marine life, scenery, and currents rarely do what you want or expect, so it may take many attempts to get everything just right—another reason why it’s important to avoid distractions and stay focused on a single task.



Too much activity in a photo results in needless clutter and lack of visual clarity.

A NEW DOME

One of the biggest frustrations I’ve had for many years with my Japanese equipment is that there were no good domes. Japanese macro gear is second to none, but I suffered from constant dome envy, particularly on trips with friends who have European housings.

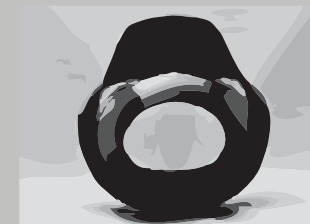
My endless whining and complaining finally convinced some friends in Japan to develop a new dome just to shut me up, resulting in the recently-released 175mm Pro One dome. Naturally, I helped test the dome. I insisted that it be high quality, multi-coated optical glass, and provide corner-to-corner sharpness.

The dome is definitely a contributing factor to the pleasing mood of the lionfish image, and the warm light rendering is due in part to the excellent light transmission with this dome. I finally have a dome that I’m happy with, and I can bug my friends to develop more stuff for me.

Find more information at:

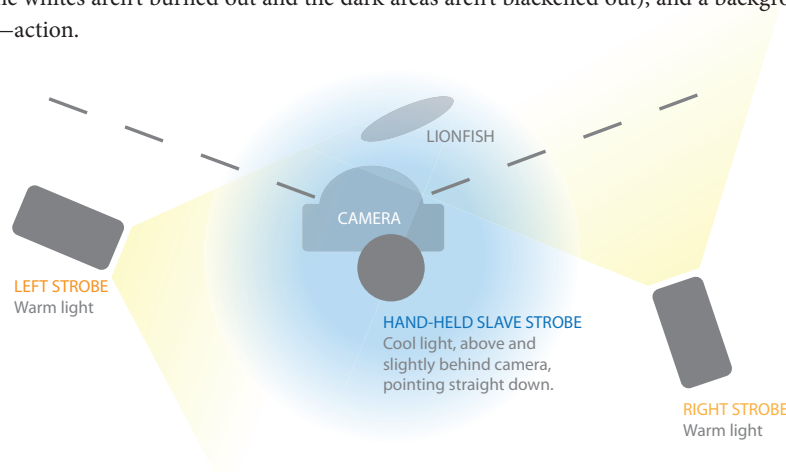
<http://pro-one1.com>

(The site is currently in Japanese, but should be translated soon).



LIGHTING IS THE KEY: Even though you can't control the millions of fish swimming through your field of view, you can control the light in your photograph, which is the key to isolating your subject and making your viewer look at what you want to emphasize. In the featured photograph, I was able to concentrate light on my main subject, “brushing” the foreground with sufficient light to bring out the natural setting. Too much light on the reef would have overpowered the main subject, while too little would have meant lack of detail.

Finally, I saw that the sweetlips were swimming in formation behind the lionfish I had chosen to follow, so I waited until they were lined-up to complement the lionfish and main reef. I slightly underexposed the background to increase saturation of the vibrant blue color, and also to reduce light, and hence emphasis, on the far background. The end result? A well-lit foreground, with emphasis on the main subject (note that the whites aren't burned out and the dark areas aren't blackened out), and a background filled with flowing—though not too distracting—action.



Lighting Details: To light this scene, I used three Inon Z-220s strobes—two on arms, and one as a hand-held slave. On two of the strobes, I used gelatin filters* to create a slightly warmer color temperature for the reef foreground. The third strobe had no filters and lit the lionfish with white light. As you can see in the diagram, I aimed the strobes to make use of the soft edge of the light. This achieves two things. First, it's easier to avoid the “burnout” of white areas that occurs when you aim your strobe directly at your main subject and avoids lighting everything all at once. Second, the soft edge of your strobe is just that—soft. Used correctly, this technique helps avoid harsh lighting and gives a “warm, fuzzy” feeling. Soft lighting isn't appropriate for every situation, but in this case, I felt it was the best way to communicate my visual point. Finally, when you're trying to capture complicated images like this with many moving parts and variables, practice first on something that doesn't move. Here, I used a rock that was about the size of a lionfish, fiddled with my exposure settings, played with lighting, etc., until I had everything exactly the way I wanted it. There was very little current and there were no divers around, so from beginning to end, it only took me a few minutes. By the time I picked my main subject, I was ready to go, and just needed to concentrate on lining up the lionfish, the reef, sun, and sweetlips in the background. Simple, right? ▣

For more of Tony's work, visit: <http://www.tony-wu.com>

* I have no idea what the filter numbers are. Just go to a photography store and get some yellowish gelatin if you want to try this.

The final product:
Lionfish (*Pterois volitans*)
with reefscape.



