PHOTOGRAPHING YOUR JELLYFISH

By Steve Haddock

Taking great photos of jellyfish comes down to controlling 3 things: the tank, lights, and camera. These tips will help you reveal the stunning beauty of your jellies through photography.

As with all creative processes, these rules are made to be broken as your artistic impulses dictate. Motion-blurred images of softly focused jellies can be as beautiful as crisp shots on a clean black background.

If you do collect wild jellies and get good pictures, be sure to submit them to jellywatch.org!

Tank
For a black background, put a piece of velvet behind the tank, or put a piece of black acrylic inside the tank in the back.

For illuminated backgrounds, you can play with different colors, but you’ll want to use a low depth of field to make sure the background isn’t in focus. You can use a second light source to illuminate the background, so that you can control the exposure independently.

Camera
You can use either a fancy SLR or a cheaper compact camera. If you want a dark background, set the exposure manually — most cameras will try to expose to a uniform gray. If your camera doesn’t have manual exposure settings, then you’ll want to set the exposure compensation to –3. This will also make a shorter exposure to avoid motion blur.

Set the focus manually on the SLR, and depending on the shot, use macro mode on the compact. With an SLR, initially set the focus so the jelly is the right size in the frame. Then, instead of constantly turning the focus ring, move the camera closer or farther from the tank to get the subject into focus.

You’ll typically get better results if you underexpose the images relative to what you think they should be based on the camera’s preview. You can’t recover overexposed areas, but you can bump up the levels of underexposed shots.

Depth of field in macro shots can be a problem. If you can set the aperture, the higher numbers will give you greater depth of field (more things in focus).

Lights
An external light source is the most important element — you can’t use an on-camera flash to get good pictures.

You can use a strobe or a clip lamp as a light source. Position it so it shines in from the side of the tank, farther from you than the plane of the front window. If you’re using a clip lamp, set your camera’s white balance manually to “incandescent” (the light-bulb icon). Otherwise your pictures will all have a yellowish tint.

Make a cover out of cardboard (for the strobe) or foil (for the lamp), to narrow the beam of light. Ideally, the slice of light will illuminate just the jellyfish, and not the back of the tank or the front surface (or you, reflected in the front). Turn off the room lights while taking pictures, and use a flashlight or the clip lamp to focus. This will prevent capturing your reflection in the glass.

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