

Whales, Tails and Leprechauns



Anybody staring into the Editor's mansion-house or garden over the past few days might have been tempted to phone for the little men in white coats to come and collect him. During the day this crazy Editor chappie was to be seen running about the garden with a camera in one hand and a set of step ladders in the other. At night he could be seen at the kitchen table photographing the *little people* in a model photographic studio. Just what was going on?

Well, dear readers, we were testing the Gary Fong light modifiers specifically for use in macro illumination. In the garden we were chasing Holly Blues, a tiny but pretty little butterfly with a subversive nature and an inability to sit still for more than three seconds – hence the neighbours never actually saw any pictures being taken. At night we were photographing at macro scale and using a leprechaun as a model (he lives on the fridge, is cheap and does not need a model release form).

Given that no Holly Blue was ever going to sit still long enough to test seven variants of light modifier, we elected to test under more controlled conditions. We set up a miniature studio complete with walk-out back drop (an A3 sheet of inkjet paper) and soft box (if you are leprechaun-sized a Lightsphere is about the same scale as a six-foot soft box!).

Compare the effects of the various flash options in the combined image. The bare Nikon SB800 is quite harsh and directional even though it is relatively quite large sized. The shadow becomes progressively more diffuse with the Lightsphere Clear, the Lightsphere Cloud and finally the WhaleTail. The ChromeDome creates the strongest lighting at these macro distances. The on-camera SB800 produces very 'toppy' lighting as you would expect. Comparing the close-up detail of our model's beard shows the same effects as the main shadow.

Having got our bearings with the devices, we next wanted to know how much penalty we would have to pay for diffusing the flash. A more efficient diffuser will spread the light without wasting it by 'spilling' light into unwanted areas. Thus you would prefer the light directed at the floor to be redirected towards the subject and, unless there was a wall close behind you, you would not want any light escaping in that direction either. By its very nature, diffusion reduces the available light, our quest was to measure how much.

Power Output

We set up a Nikon SB800 flash in a 'typical' domestic environment consisting of a flash to subject distance of 3m and a flash to ceiling distance of 1.5m. The ceiling was white emulsion, the surrounding walls were either dark green or a dark oak, floor-to-ceiling bookcase – hardly ideal, but typical situations that sometimes confront a social photographer.

For all practical purposes, the loss of light power was around two stops with little difference between the various devices. That is not to say that the visual effect of the various modifiers is different, just the total power output in the direction of the subject.

In the Field

It is typical of the nature photographer's lot that just as our copy deadline approached, the weather turned cold, the wind and rain arrived and the Holly Blues stopped flying. It will now be August before the second brood of the year appears (and they are a different colour anyway!). The example shown is not the best of the shots we got (about four after three days running about) but it does show the way that the Lightsphere Clear produces soft wrap-around lighting on such a small subject. The wide area around the Blue has been left so that you can see the effect – note the soft shadow detail underneath the leaves and the absence of any eye-catching, specular highlights. We were able to work at f16 (about f22 effective), 100 ISO and a magnification of 1:2. One thing we were unable to determine was whether the large white

Flash Set-up	Aperture
SB800 Forward Facing	13.0
SB800 45° Upwards	6.0
SB800 45° Upwards with Flap	6.7
Lightsphere Clear Flat	6.7
Lightsphere Clear 45°	5.0
Lightsphere Cloud Flat	6.7
Lightsphere Cloud 45°	5.0
Lightsphere ChromeDome flat	9.5
Lightsphere ChromeDome 45°	5.0
WhaleTail Closed	5.0
WhaleTail Flap Open	5.6



{& Brackets}

Ian Stewart and Mike McNamee
test gadgets



area of the dome itself was spooking the insect, we got the distinct impression that the species was more skittish than usual – regular nature buffs will understand the scenario, the insects sit posing in the sunlight while you are watching over breakfast, but dare to step outside with a camera!

In the Studio

One of the most effective improvements that any of the Gary Fong modifiers confers is to lift the flash slightly higher than normal, even when the camera is rotated to portrait orientation. If this is still insufficient for your taste then your only option is to move the flash still further away from the lens using either a free-standing flash (on its own stand) or by holding out the flash with your spare hand whilst operating the camera with the other. For the female wedding photographer, holding a metal-bodied D-SLR with an f2.8 zoom is a challenge in itself, without trying it single-handed! We looked at a couple of flash brackets this issue, along with two tripod rotation devices. The benefits of the latter should be self-evident. It is frequently a real pain having to rotate the camera using the trip head. Often the movement also displaces the camera sideways, requiring additional fiddling to get things both on the level and aligned. Both the Bellwood bracket and the Custom Bracket (imported by Bob Rigby Photographic) are well-engineered, well thought out pieces of kit, which work a treat. Bear in mind that they are specific to your camera body (and motor winder or battery pack, if appropriate) if optical alignment is to be maintained as they rotate.

The rotation concept is carried forward to both the 'pro' version of the Custom Bracket and the Bellwood 'rotating' bracket. They maintain the position of the flash as the camera is rotated about the lens's axis. Both have 'feet' so that the assembly may be put down while the photographer goes through the inevitable running about to adjust the pose of their subject(s). This shows the 'breeding' of both accessories;



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the designers are obviously aware of the problem of clattering your bride with great chunks of camera and metal! The Custom Bracket even protects the photographer's clothes, by means of a foldaway set of feet. Engineering on all the brackets we tested was first-rate.

Which to Choose?

This is a difficult one. Many photographers go through a succession of flash 'accessories' before arriving at a solution that fits both them and the way they work. Personally I have used both brackets (with two guns attached) and the Lightsphere type units under field conditions. The problem with the brackets for all-day use, in light summer clothing, is that they eventually grind their way into your skin. They also catch onto foliage (we once ripped a gun clean off the mount chasing a dragonfly).

For the social photographer the bracket has the advantage of marking out the user as the 'professional' - that is, the one the group should be paying attention to. Others may hold the view that looking like a Christmas tree is not for them. Perhaps there is a compromise. If you are using flash to add a little sparkle to the eyes, then on-camera flash is quick and simple. If you are shooting in a mixed light situation where flash is the primary illumination source, the Lightsphere or WhaleTail are perfect. If you are after a no-compromise solution the bracket provides it, with the penalty of being cumbersome. One of Gary Fong's modifiers atop a bracket is just one stop away from setting up a small stand and broly - all tastes can be catered for!



ABOVE: Mike Bellwood's shot shows the striking difference obtained from moving the flash gun upwards

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ABOVE: The WhaleTail operates in both landscape and portrait formats
LEFT: The CB Digital Pro is provided with neat fold-away legs.

FAR LEFT: The Bellwood bracket illustrating the rotation collar in action.

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In a previous issue of *Professional Imagemaker* I reviewed a flash diffuser called the 'Lightsphere', design by Gary Fong. This unit has gestated over the years from a very hard, white plastic dome, to a squishy, clear version, called a 'Photo-journalist', then an opaque one, for portraiture, called a 'Cloud'. Then they were given inverted domes in white or amber and the Cloud had its own chrome insert to give it an extra kick of light – the ChromeDome.

And now the latest incarnation of Flash Diffusion is also from the Gary Fong stable and is called the 'WhaleTail', which Gary points out, came as a result of feedback from owners of the Lightsphere, who wanted a more compact unit but, more than anything else, a diffuser that would stay on the flash head without gaffer tape (which was not very professional looking at a wedding).

When I saw it launched and demonstrated by Gary at the WPPI trade show in Vegas in March this year, I was impressed enough to place an order, with show special price and free shipping to the UK – how could I refuse. It arrived a few weeks ago (needless to say I paid the VAT on entry, it was the Parcel Force handling charge that was scandalous – I even had to pick it up at the Liverpool depot). (Try www.bbjimports.com 07812 161795 – they deliver direct, same day despatch. Ed.)

The unit is called 'The Reporter' and, as you might expect, resembles a whale's tail (mind you on some web forums it's been likened to an up turned gent's urinal). It is, in fact, one of two styles that have the WhaleTail design, a second much larger, whiter model, called the 'Studio' will be launched soon. The moulding material of the Reporter is different to that of the Lightsphere – hard plastic of a milky, opaque appearance which came in a nice box ready assembled with what can be described as two moveable fins/flaps back and front, also a black archival rubber band, two white plastic spacers and instruction leaflet.

Also there are two DVDs, the first is a tutorial aimed at getting the best from the WhaleTail, and the second is an overview of Gary's other products, including the original Lightsphere. I would recommend looking at the first; you will get a comprehensive overview of the WhaleTail in a live photo-shoot, but also the assembly and fitting on your particular flash as a 'one-size-fits-all' unit – this is a departure from the Lightsphere, which was made in various sizes to accommodate different flash units.

A word of advice – don't lose the rubber band, as this is placed on your flash head, in order to act as 'anchor' to the WhaleTail which is secured by a Velcro strap. You'll easily sort it out, but watch the DVD first and read the leaflet. I did not find the need for either of the two spacers included, but don't throw them away.

Having tested it with my set-up and 'got a feel' for the WhaleTail, it was brought into use at a portrait session. In the picture shown, the flap was opened at 45° and a soft shadow of model, Stacy, allowed to form on the background. Confident from the initial testing I brought the WhaleTail into real use, as second-shooter at a wedding with Tom Lee. It passed this tougher test and I have to say that I am impressed with it for the following reasons.

- The compact shape makes it less obvious than the Lightsphere's larger dome.
- The ability to 'sculpt' the light by using the flaps is an added bonus in certain situations, where you may wish to direct more or less light on the subject from the flash or 'foof' the flash, as it is known.
- The fact that the WhaleTail stays attached to the flash unit. (In fact, dependent on the flash and camera you can hold both by just holding the WhaleTail.)
- I found that the light has an even spread especially with groups with no visible hotspots, or fall-off at the edges.

All shots were made using aperture priority on various ISOs to suit conditions, I always have the 580EX flash set to 'High Speed sync', and ensure that the rechargeable batteries are replaced at least once during the wedding. All images were recorded in RAW, and the 5D is set to centre weighted, and set a third of a stop less exposure – my preferred settings.

A set of filters can be obtained which are designed to fit into a slot at the bottom of the WhaleTail. There are red, blue and green colours (which will give a coloured background with a second unit, (this is explained in the DVD), and a amber filter for use in tungsten lighting).

I feel that Gary has built on the strengths of the Lightsphere with the added features of the WhaleTail to come up with another practical and effective unit. With so many diffusers to choose from, you pay your money and takes your choice – I'm happy with mine.



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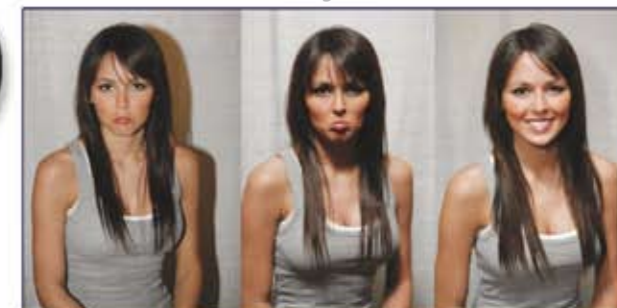
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