

My Favorite Underwater Portraits

Contributors' Picks from Around the World



Text and photos by John A. Ares, Larry Cohen, Anita George-Ares, Frankie Grant, Jennifer Idol, Kate Jonker, Celia Kujala, Matthew Meier, Brandi Mueller, Gary Rose, Michael Rothschild, Don Silcock, Olga Torrey, Claudia Weber-Gebert

We asked our contributors what their favorite underwater portraits were, and they sent us photos and tales of intriguing marine life. From sea lions to hammerhead sharks, manatees to sea turtles, dolphins to pilot whales, lemon sharks to pufferfish, wrasse and seahorses, and even kids, *X-Ray Mag* contributors share their favorite images showing a range of faces and personalities found under the waves.



Gentle Soul (left). Exposure: ISO 100, f/11, 1/200s; *Three Friends* (above). Exposure ISO 100, f/16, 1/200s; *Peek-a-boo* (previous page). Exposure: ISO 100, f/11, 1/200s; *Best Buddies* (on the cover of this issue). Exposure: ISO 100, f/14, 1/200s. Camera gear used for all images: Nikon D500 DSLR camera, Tokina 10-17mm fisheye lens, Nauticam NA-D500 housing, dual Sea&Sea YS-D2J strobes

Australian Sea Lion, Jurien Bay Marine Park, Western Australia, Australia

Text and photos by Celia Kujala

Jurien Bay Marine Park in Western Australia is home to several colonies of Australian sea lions. Their playful and curious nature, and the clear turquoise waters in which they live, make them a delight to photograph. They are always ready for their time in front of the camera, but I believe that the most special images involve more. It is only with research and time observing them that I am able to understand my subjects and most accurately and intimately tell their stories.

These portraits are my favorite because they are moments when I was able to connect with the indi-

viduals and capture something special about each sea lion's personality. I hope viewers feel a connection with the Australian sea lions in these portraits, motivating people to care about this species and the environments they call home. Sadly, Australian sea lions are one of the most endangered pinnipeds in the world, and their population is decreasing. Once heavily hunted, today they are protected, and their biggest threat is entanglement and dying as bycatch. Visit: sealpeace.com



Manatee, Crystal River, Florida, USA. Exposure: ISO 100, f/4, 1/100s. Camera gear: Canon EOS 10D digital SLR camera, Tokina fisheye 10-17mm lens at 10mm, Ikelite housing, Ikelite DS-160 strobes

Manatee in Florida & Abigail in New Jersey, USA

Text and photos by John A. Ares

It was a manatee portrait taken in Crystal River, Florida, that made me fall for these sweet creatures. Our group of divers met at the dock to get on the boat at sunrise. You want to be on the first boat because it sometimes gets crowded later. Note that we were there just as the manatees were waking up. The two manatees in the background were snoozing. The one on the right had a satellite tracking device because it had recently been released from rehabilitation, following treatment for boat injuries.

A friend of mine in New Jersey had been asking me for a long time to photograph her daughter, Abigail. I thought the idea of doing a photo shoot in the family's pool would be a perfect setting. So, I got into the pool with basic snorkeling equipment, and I asked Abigail to jump off the diving board and swim toward me. The resulting image was taken with a Canon Powershot G9 camera with camera flash, the lens set at 7.4mm, in a Canon G9 housing. Visit: JohnAres.com



Abigail in swimming pool, New Jersey, USA. Exposure: ISO 400, f/5, 1/125s. Camera gear: Canon PowerShot G9 camera with flash, lens at 7.4 mm, Canon G9 housing



Olga Torrey swimming at Dutch Springs, Pennsylvania, USA (above). Exposure: ISO 200, f/5.6, 1/180s. Gear: Olympus E-620 camera, Olympus 7-14mm lens at 7mm, Olympus housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes; Bloch's bigeye fish under ledge at Dahab in Egypt (top right). Exposure: ISO 100, f/11, 1/250s. Gear: Olympus E-520 camera, Olympus 50mm macro lens, Olympus housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes; Bluespotted ribbontail ray photographed off Pom Pom Island, Malaysia (far right). Exposure: ISO 200, f/8, 1/125s. Gear: Olympus OM-D E-M1 camera, Olympus 60mm macro lens, Aquatica housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes



Olga Torrey on the *Stolt Dagali* wreck, off the New Jersey coast. Exposure: ISO 400, f/5.6, 1/30s. Camera gear: Olympus E-620 camera, Olympus 7-14mm lens at 7mm, Olympus housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes

Olga, Bluespotted Ribbontail Ray & Bloch's Bigeye

Text and photos by Larry Cohen

A portrait image has to concentrate on the face and eyes, capturing the personality and mood of the subject. It does not matter if the subject is human or not.

The photograph of my dive buddy, Olga Torrey, swimming underwater without dive gear was a challenge. This image was shot at Dutch Springs, Pennsylvania in the United States, and the water was cold because it was late autumn. Olga was still willing to get out of her drysuit for the photo. She wanted me to suffer for my art, and I was wearing just a bathing suit. I had to ignore being cold and focused on getting the correct lighting to feature Olga's eyes. We also wanted her blonde hair to flow in the water. To do this, she had to surface and

dive down repeatedly until we got an image with the correct look.

The environmental portrait of Olga was captured on the *Stolt Dagali* shipwreck off the coast of New Jersey. The idea was to concentrate on Olga's face framed with the wreckage and the exquisite marine growth on the wreck. Since the foreground is dark, I used a slow shutter speed to get a bright green background. Her yellow-green mask augmented the green backdrop.

Whenever I happen to have a macro lens on my camera, I undoubtedly encounter a large, impressive subject. When diving off Pom Pom Island in Malaysia, I saw this exquisite bluespotted ribbontail ray.



Portraits



However, this gentle creature did not seem to mind me getting close for a headshot, focusing on its eye.

While shore diving off Dahab in Egypt, I spotted this Bloch's bigeye under a ledge. The stunning red color of the fish's body and the dark eye added contrast to the image. Since one of my strobes stopped working, I had to adapt my lighting to one strobe. So, I positioned the flash above the subject to create a strong shadow. Please visit: liquidimagesuw.com



ANITA GEORGE-ARES

Blue-spotted puffer, Dauin North, Negros Island, Philippines. Exposure: ISO 100, f/11, 1/200s. Gear: Canon EOS Digital Rebel XT camera, Canon EF 50mm f/2.5 compact macro lens, Ikelite housing, two Ikelite DS161 strobes

Puffer, Unicornfish & Sea Turtle

Text and photos by Anita George-Ares

I like to observe and photograph cleaning behavior. It is interesting to watch the interactions between different species. The bignose unicornfish portrait from Gabet Point in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, is one of my favorites, because it includes two species of cleaner wrasse. The bluestreak cleaner wrasse is on top of the unicornfish's head, and the bicolor cleaner wrasse is probing the gills. The strong blue and yellow color patterns of the fish make a nice contrast with the muted texture of the background coral.

It was dusk and I was finishing my dive at the Dauin North dive site off Negros Island in the

Philippines, when I came upon a large blue-spotted puffer spinning in the water column. Perhaps it was trying to shake off the remora clinging to it. The puffer made no attempt to leave, and I was able to capture a portrait. I like the concentric rings around the eye and the network of dark lines on the blue face.

At Ali Thila dive site in Ari Atoll of the Maldives, I was finishing my last dive of the day, and it was getting dark. I was in the shallows when I saw a juvenile hawksbill sea turtle. I took the turtle's portrait as it slowly ascended towards the surface. Please visit my Facebook Page at: [facebook.com/profile.php?id=100016947967639](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100016947967639)



Bignose unicornfish with a bluestreak cleaner wrasse and a bicolor cleaner wrasse, Gabet Point, North Sulawesi, Indonesia (above). Exposure: ISO 200 f/8, 1/200s. Gear: Canon EOS Rebel SL1 camera, Canon EF-S 60mm f/2.8 macro USM lens, Ikelite housing, two Ikelite DS161 strobes



ANITA GEORGE-ARES

Juvenile hawksbill sea turtle, Ali Thila dive site, Ari Atoll, Maldives (left). Exposure: ISO 200, f/11, 1/160s. Gear: Canon EOS Rebel SL1 camera, Canon EF-S 10-18mm f/4.5-5.6 IS STM lens, Ikelite housing, two Ikelite DS161 strobes



Great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*), Guadalupe Island, Baja California Norte, Mexico. Exposure: ISO 500, f/11, 1/250s. Gear: Canon EOS 7D Mark II camera, Tokina 10-17mm fisheye lens, Sea&Sea housing, ambient light

Great White Shark, Guadalupe Island, Mexico

Text and photo by Frankie Grant

Every year in the Eastern Pacific, great white sharks of all sizes converge on a small island off the coast of Mexico. Isla Guadalupe stands tall, like a monolith in the sea, creating its own clouds, which burn off just as quickly.

Taking almost a full day to arrive at Guadalupe Island turns away some adventurers, but for those who make the journey, it is always well worth it. The island boasts clear blue water, lots of bait, tuna, yellowtail and of course, great white sharks. Seemingly appearing out of the blue like magicians, the sharks will leave

in one direction and return from one's blind spot only moments later.

This particular trip was especially challenging, as a school of mackerel remained tightly against the submerged cage we were in, impeding our vision. Sharks would come into view as the mackerel slowly departed from the sharks' course. I was lucky enough to capture a combination of mackerel and shark, giving the image a different feel than the standard image one often sees of a great white shark against a clean blue background. Visit: frankiegrant.com

Local Dive Shops are the backbone of our sport. They are the gateway to training, the place where you meet dive buddies, get your tanks filled, book dive vacations, and of course purchase new dive gear. Being a small family run business ourselves, we understand that dive shops need your support now more than ever. We encourage you to support them any way you can to help keep our beloved sport growing.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL DIVE SHOPS



*Safe Diving,
Team Dive Rite*





The Weird and Weirder

Text and photos by Jennifer Idol

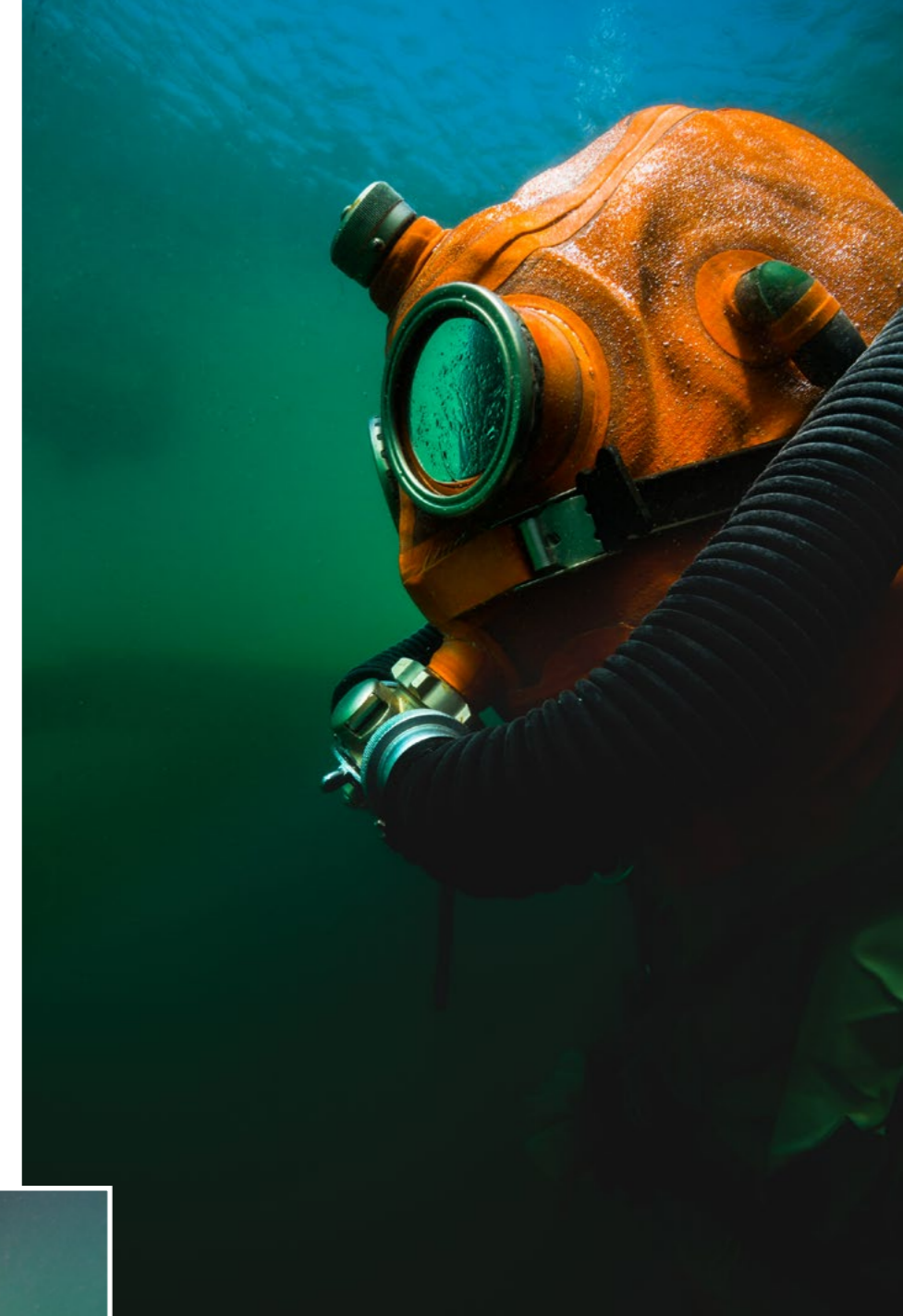
While every photo is truly a collaboration, portraits are especially so because the model contributes to the imagery through their creativity as they position themselves. This connectedness makes portraits profoundly personal creations.

I document a number of people underwater, but it is the more unusual context I find particularly compelling. In this case, Drew Lapointe, one of my favorite models and friends, posed in a Russian submarine escape suit owned by Fred Barthes of the Northeast Diving Equipment Group. We encountered this suit during the Hard Hat Rally at Dutch Springs in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

These suits were used from the 1960s as an attempt at providing submariners with the ability to self-rescue from a submarine at 300m depth and purportedly even to 600m. The orange suit is bizarre in appearance and resembles a gas mask from WWII more than a safety device.

I love highlighting the history and detail in these uncommon, historic diving units. They photograph dramatically, even in an innocuous selfie. This equipment required a tall model to fit the suit and someone comfortable with claustrophobic gear. Since the gear is historic, finding appropriate breathing equipment is challenging.

The big round eyes are the most dramatic feature, so I focused on the face and how it changes the character of the scene. The suit then becomes more sculpture than human model. Each year I am able to, I attend the rally and love connecting with the group that sets up this complicated equipment. Visit: uwDesigner.com



In the shallows of Dutch Springs, Drew Lapointe poses on one of the training platforms (far left). Exposure: ISO 400, 15mm, f/22, 1/100s

Like a statue, the historic gear appears differently from all angles (above). Exposure: ISO 400, 14mm, f/416, 1/200s

Drew and I celebrate our photo shoot together with a selfie (left). Exposure: ISO 400, 14mm, f/16, 1/160s

Gear used for all images: Nikon D610 camera, Nikkor 14-24mm lens, Nauticam housing



Red Sea Dolphin

Text and photos by Kate Jonker

The first photos I ever took underwater were of my husband's Open Water students. I loved capturing their expressions as they took their first breaths underwater. When you look at a diver, the first thing you see is their eyes peering back at you from their masks—and their eyes can tell you a lot about how they are feeling! Some were amazed, some were overjoyed, and some were simply terrified! From then on, I started to think of eyes as windows to the soul.

That has always stayed with me, regardless of whether I am photograph-

ing a shark, a fish or even a nudibranch. We are drawn to the eyes, we are drawn to human characteristics of our subjects, and the more human the characteristics, the more we seem to connect with them. Because of this, I feel a great connection with many of the marine animals I photograph, and I always try to bring out their own individual personalities in my pictures.

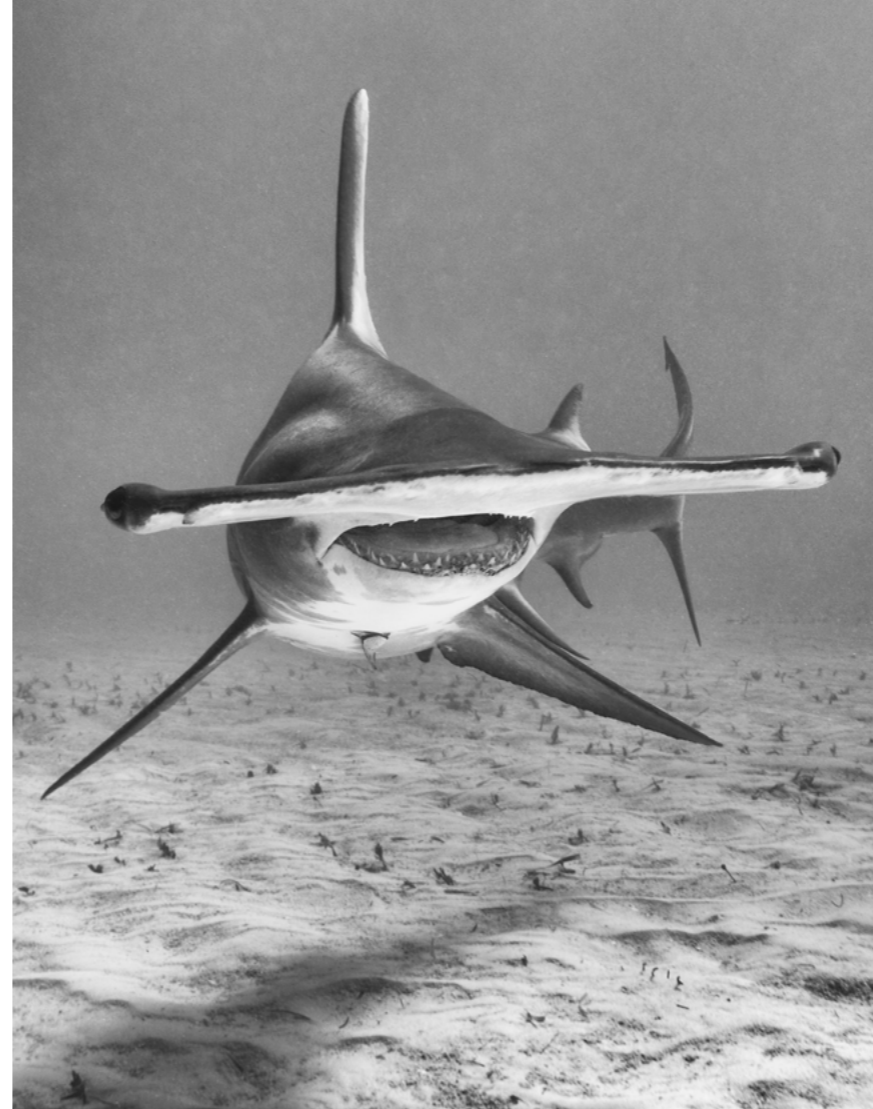
Looking back at the portraits I have taken, my favourite and most memorable is of a juvenile dolphin I encountered whilst diving Gubal Island in the Red Sea. Our group had been joined by a very excited and playful pod of dolphins, and for some reason, I seemed to be a source of entertainment for a smaller

group of four.

We swam the reef together, the dolphins darting around me as I photographed their antics. Eventually, three of them grew bored and swam away, leaving the smallest behind. The two of us continued to explore the reef together like old friends, while I surreptitiously took portrait photos of my companion as she watched what I was up to. I felt as if I was going for a walk with my favourite puppy! It was one of the most incredible experiences I have ever had underwater.

I will always remember taking her photo and looking into her eyes—they were smiling. An incredible connection, and one that will stay with me forever. Visit: katejonker.com

My favourite underwater portrait—that Mona Lisa smile stole my heart! (top left) Exposure: ISO 200, f/6.3, 1/250s; The small group of dolphins that played with me for 20 minutes on a dive at Gubal Island in the Red Sea, Egypt (top right). Exposure: ISO 200, f/3.2, 1/250s; My companion that stayed with me throughout the dive (above). Exposure: ISO 320, f/4.5, 1/250s. Gear used for all images: Canon 7D MK II camera, Tokina 10-17mm fisheye lens, Sea&Sea housing, two Sea&Sea YS-D1 strobes



A scalloped hammerhead swimming amongst a school of Pacific creolefish, Cocos Island, Costa Rica (left). Exposure: ISO 800, f/6.3, 1/125s. Gear: Nikon D3 camera, Nikon 24-70 lens, Subal housing, Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes; Great hammerhead portrait, Tiger Beach, Grand Bahama Island (center). Exposure: ISO 400, f/9, 1/200s. Gear: Nikon D810 camera, Nikon 16-35mm lens, Subal housing, Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes; Great hammerhead and shadow, Tiger Beach, Grand Bahama Island (right). Exposure: ISO 200, f/8, 1/160s. Gear: Nikon D810 camera, Sigma 15mm fisheye lens, Subal housing, Sea&Sea YS-250 strobes

Hammerhead Shark

Text and photos by Matthew Meier

I love photographing sharks and the hammerhead is one of my favorites. They are graceful and agile and have a wonderfully unique shape, which lends itself to distinctive portraits. I have been fortunate to be in the water with both scalloped and great hammerheads at numerous destinations, though I think my best portraits have come from Cocos Island and the Bahamas.

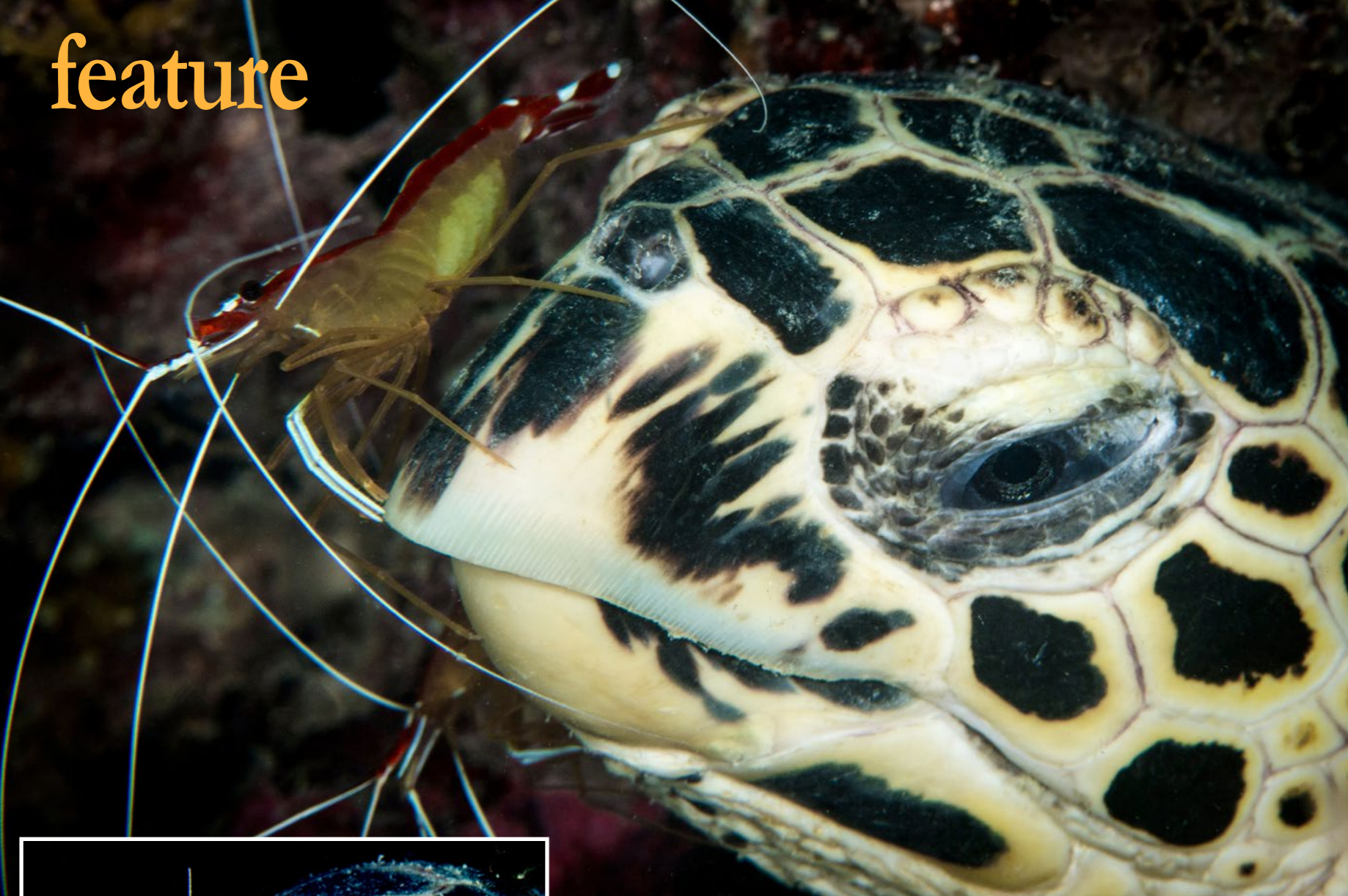
At Cocos, you can see scalloped hammerheads hovering at cleaning stations, swimming along the rocky reef and

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often alongside or overhead in large schools. Close interactions are an exercise in patience, good behavior by you and your dive partners, as well as a little luck. In the Bahamas, the great hammerheads are a little more curious, and there tend to be more reliable photo opportunities. I also enjoy the longer dives in shallow water, where the white sand helps to light the shark's underside and create graphic shadows.

All of these images were shot in color and converted to black and white to simplify the composition and highlight the elegant profile of these beautiful animals. I would like to thank the Undersea Hunter Group (underseahunter.com) and Master Liveaboards (masterliveaboards.com/bahamas/) for hosting these adventures. Visit: MatthewMeierPhoto.com



Sea Turtle Spa

Text and photos by Brandi Mueller

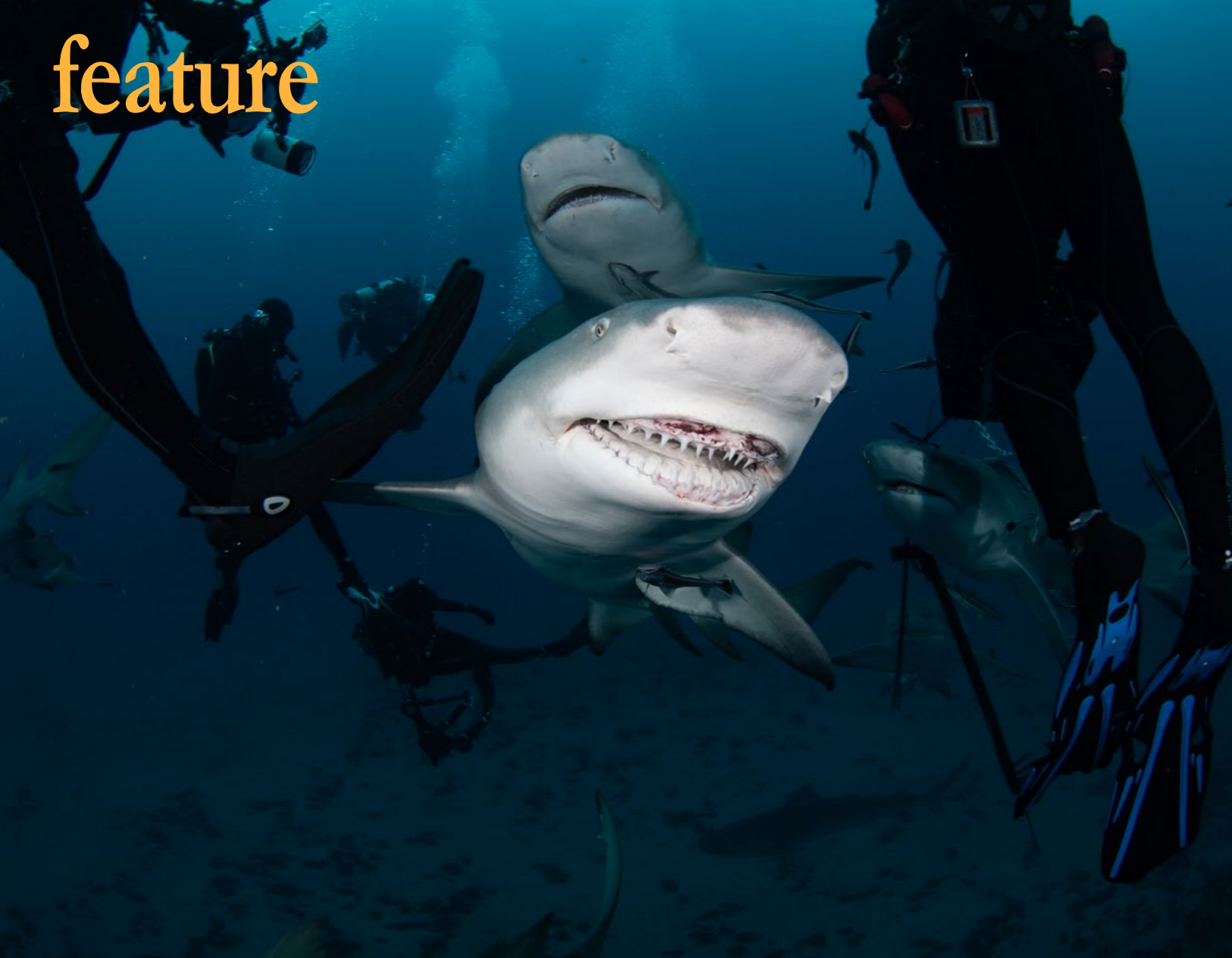
On a dive in Yap, located in the Federated States of Micronesia, I came across a hawksbill sea turtle under a coral ledge. Stopping to take a few photos, I realized it had several scarlet shrimp cleaning it, and the turtle sat perfectly still as it received its spa treatment.

I had never seen a turtle being cleaned by this type of shrimp, which I more commonly knew as the type of shrimp that would climb on divers' fingernails and perform a manicure or jump into the open mouth of a diver to perform a little dentistry. In the past, I had seen fish

eating the algae off the shells of turtles, but I had not seen this up-close-and-personal treatment in which the shrimp worked around the eyes and face of the turtle.

As I stayed to snap as many photos as I could, the turtle and shrimp seemed to pose for me. But I was also watching my no-deco time countdown (I was at 28m), and after getting a few portraits of the turtle and shrimp, I finally had to leave the turtle to complete the rest of its spa day without my documenting it. Visit: brandiunderwater.com

THIS PAGE: Hawksbill sea turtle being cleaned by scarlet shrimp, Yap, Federated States of Micronesia. Exposure: ISO 400, f/10, 1/125s (top left); Exposure: ISO 400, f/6.3, 1/100s (top right); Exposure: ISO 400, f/18, 1/160s (lower right); Exposure: ISO 400, f/18, 1/160s (bottom left). Gear used for all images: Nikon D7100 camera, Nikon 105mm lens, Ikelite housing, dual Ikelite DS161 strobes



Miss Snooty

Text and photos by Gary Rose, MD

Every year during November through March, they come from all over the Eastern Seaboard, and descend upon Jupiter, Florida, in the United States for the balmy weather and the deep blue sea. I bet you are thinking that I am talking about obnoxious northern snowbirds. Nope. I am referring to the annual lemon shark aggregation.

There are always plenty of locals. Mixed in with the locals, there is one lemon shark that stands out above all the rest. People come from all over the world to see her and photograph her—our local and resident MISS SNOOTY!

She is a character. Her charm matches her beauty. Because of a congenital birth deformity, she has a perpetual smile. She knows that she is special and

has become quite the “Diva”. Trust me, she will put on a show for you and for all the divers in your group.

If you have a camera, just float in the water, control your buoyancy, and I promise she will come to you and pose. Left-side, right-side, wide-angle, facial, and then she will circle back for a brilliantly posed body shot. She is also an expert at “photo bombing,” so be prepared.

The key is to be patient and let her come to you and put on her show. You will have plenty of photo ops. Again, I emphasize patience. Lemon sharks, and particularly Miss Snooty, are a combination of puppy dog—they will poke you, push you, and even nip at your strobes—and boa constrictor. Please visit:

garyrosephotos.com

Classic Miss Snooty (top left). Exposure: ISO 100, f/8, 1/125s; Miss Snooty up to her antics (top right). Exposure: ISO 100, f/8, 1/125s; Inches from the dome port (above). Exposure: ISO 200, f/8, 1/125s. Gear used for all photos: Nikon D500 camera, Tokina 10-17mm lens, Nauticam housing, Inon Z-330 strobes



Gear used for all images taken at Manasquan River railroad bridge, Point Pleasant, New Jersey, USA: Canon EOS 7D Mark II camera, Tamron 60mm macro lens, Nauticam housing, dual Inon Z-330 strobes. Feather blenny (far left). Exposure: ISO 100, f /20, 1/250s; Hermit crab (left). Exposure: ISO 500, f/10, 1/250s; Oyster toadfish (below). Exposure: ISO 125, f/20, 1/200s; Winter flounder (bottom right). Exposure: ISO 125, f/14, 1/30s

Manasquan River, New Jersey, USA

Text and photos by Michael Rothschild, MD

These portraits were all taken at a shallow shore dive site off the New Jersey coast, the Manasquan River railroad bridge. I love hunting for little critters in spots like this, and the bridge rarely disappoints. Underwater macro photography is very different from wide-angle, where lighting and strobe placement are so critical. With macro, once your settings are dialed in, it really becomes more about you and your subject. A good nature photographer needs the same skills as a hunter—you need to know your target well, and position yourself precisely to get the best results.

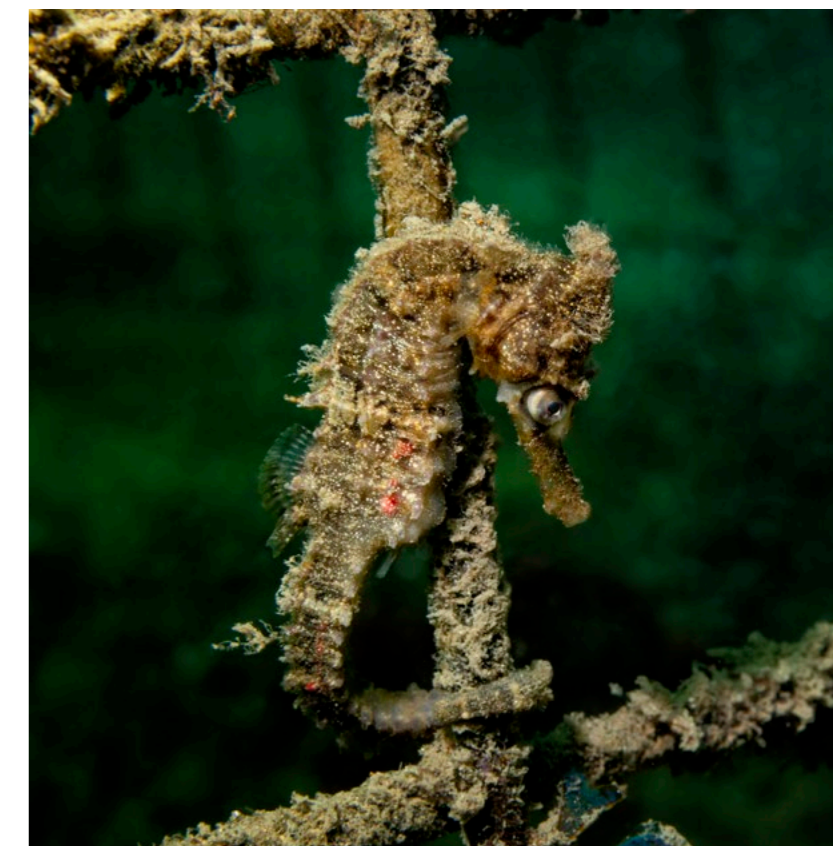
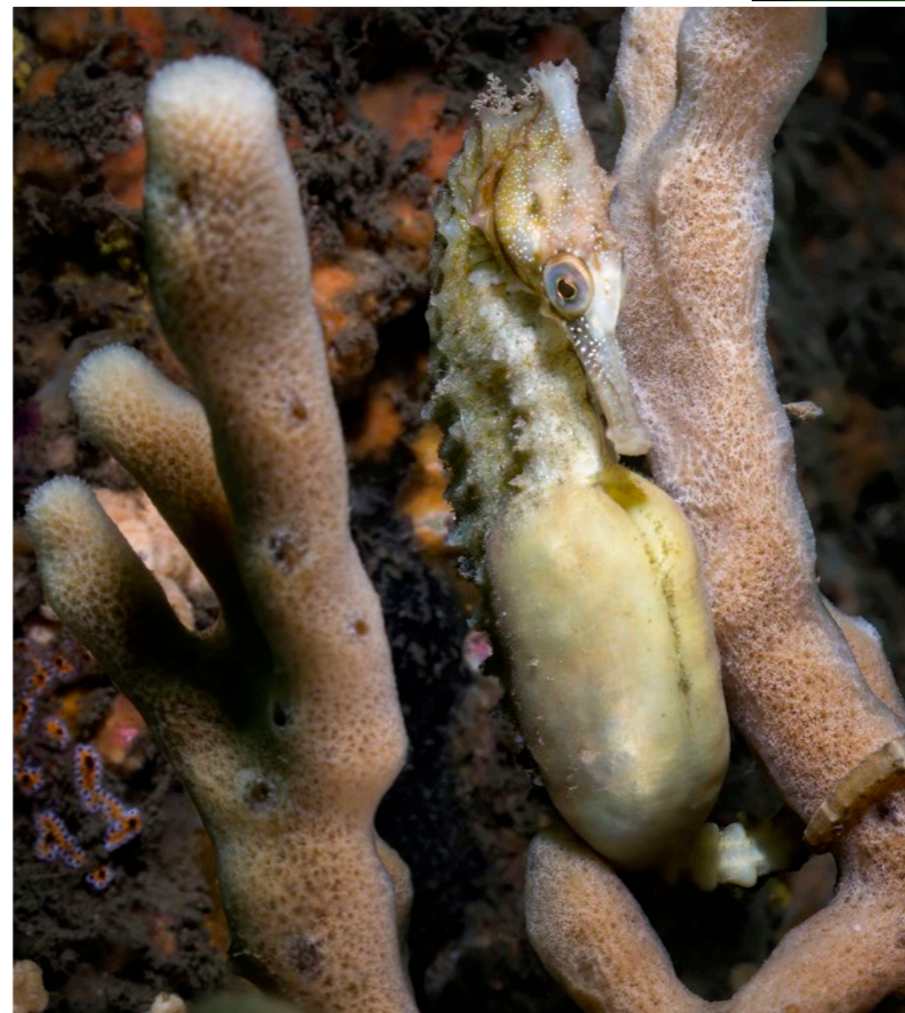
Every species reacts differently to the camera, so getting to know your local marine environment is crucial. Juvenile tautogs seem to be born wary of humans—it is almost impossible to get a face-on shot or even a reasonable three-quarter profile. On the other hand, blennies are the Instagram influencers of the undersea world—they will pose for you until you get bored and move on!

I am always amazed at how portraits make these creatures seem so expressive and emotive. Even crustaceans can capture your gaze when those eye stalks turn in your direction. Yes, some beautiful aquatic animals—like jellyfish, hydroids, and nudibranchs—do not have faces, and they still make good subjects. But once you find a great model who will throw you an engaging expression, you will really appreciate the work that our colleagues in fashion photography do every day. Visit: dive.rothschilddesign.com





Gear used for all images taken of White's seahorses at Clifton Gardens, Sydney, Australia: Nikon D500 camera, Nikon 10.5mm lens, Nauticam housing, twin Inon S2000 strobes. Portrait 1 (left). Exposure: ISO 400, f/14, 1/250s; Portrait 2 (bottom right). Exposure: ISO 400, f/18, 1/100s; Portrait 3 (below). Exposure: ISO 400, f/9, 1/60s; Portrait 4 (right). Exposure: ISO 400, f/9, 1/60s



White's Seahorse, Clifton Gardens, Sydney, Australia

Text and photos by Don Silcock

If this awful pandemic has achieved anything, it would possibly have to be an appreciation of what you have... And, as far as the underwater world of Sydney (where I have personally been hunkered down since March last year) is concerned, that would be Clifton Gardens in the uber-upmarket suburb of Mosman, where it is said

that if you listen carefully, you can hear the gentle sound of money rustling!

But that noise does not disturb the most well-known underwater inhabitants of Clifton Gardens—the resident population of White's seahorses (*Hippocampus whitei*), also known as the Sydney seahorse. These wonderful creatures are named after John White, the Surgeon General to the First Fleet, and are one of four species of seahorses

known to occur in New South Wales. In Sydney, population pressure has caused their natural habitats to decline, and as a result, they are now most commonly found on man-made swimming nets within the harbour. Naturally shy, the swimming nets afford the creatures the seclusion they need but also make for some wonderful backdrops for portrait photography! Visit: indopacificimages.com



Dive buddy Larry Cohen, framed by strawberry anemones on HMCS Yukon (left). Exposure: ISO 640, f/5.6, 1/80s. Gear: Olympus OM-D E-M5 camera, Olympus 12-50mm lens, Nauticam housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes; Pink skunk clownfish on sea anemone, Kimbe Bay, Papua New Guinea (below). Exposure: ISO 400, f/8, 1/125s. Gear: Olympus OM-D E-M5 camera, Olympus 60mm macro lens, Nauticam housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes; Sand tiger shark on Aeolus wreck shows her best profile (right). Gear: Olympus OM-D E-M5 camera, Olympus 12-50mm lens, Nauticam housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes; Female sea lion and her pup check out the reflection of themselves in the camera port (bottom right). Exposure: ISO 640, f/8, 1/160s. Gear: Olympus OM-D E-M5 camera, Panasonic Lumix G Vario 7-14mm f/4 ASPH lens, Nauticam housing, dual Sea&Sea strobes



Larry, Clownfish, Shark & Sea Lions

Text and photos by Olga Torrey

Just like a portrait photographer at a wedding, underwater, I consider my subject's expression extremely important. This is true even if it is a fish in the image, instead of a bride. I was astounded by the diversity of colorful wildlife in Kimbe Bay, Papua New Guinea. I knew that I was in the right place to practice shooting underwater. The pink skunk clownfish was the perfect model for this environmental portrait, showing its habitat where a sea anemone protects it. I focused on the eye and facial expression of the fish, which showed curiosity and no fear.

Diving around the Coronado Islands in Mexico, I was approached by a dozen California sea lions. The first rule of underwater photography is that when you think you are too close, get closer. These playful

creatures took this to the extreme. Even with a 7mm wide-angle lens, I had to get farther away. I wish I had used my fisheye lens. With all the chaos, I was able to isolate a mother and her pup for a family portrait. They were like a pack of friendly wolves! It was challenging to capture the image with them joyfully nipping at my fins and strobes. They were very interested in the attractive sea lions they saw reflected in my dome.

Diving off North Carolina in the United States on the shipwreck Aeolus is a shark-lover's dream. There are so many sand tiger sharks inside the wreck that the locals call it the "shark ballroom." As I observed the behavior of the sharks, I waited until an individual swam close to me, turning to the left. Waiting for the perfect moment, I was able to take a headshot of this exquisite

animal in profile. I focused on the shark's eye, teeth, nose and the marine growth around its mouth.

On another US wreck, the HMCS Yukon off San Diego, I took an environmental portrait of my dive buddy, Larry Cohen, while diving. I needed to concentrate on close-ups since the visibility was poor. I wanted to frame his face with the colorful strawberry anemones that blanketed the wreck. Seeing an opening, I asked Larry to swim behind the wreckage and move in close. Even with the lavish red in this image, the focus is on his piercing eyes. Visit: fitimage.nyc





Pilot Whale Calf, Tenerife, Canary Islands

Text and photos by Claudia Weber-Gebert

A few years ago, I got a special permit from Madrid to film the pilot whales around Tenerife in the Canary Islands, where there was a population of around 400 resident pilot whales. I asked Sergio Hanquet, a well-known photographer with more than 30 years of experience with whales and dolphins around the Canary Islands, to organize the filming for the project.

I was so excited about the trip, and we managed to have three days on the Atlantic Ocean to film the pelagic animals. The most emotional encounter we had on the trip occurred on our last day with a nursing group of pilot whales, which had three adult animals (one of them was pregnant and stayed in the background), and four youngsters that frolicked like playful kids.

We saw this group approaching our boat, got ourselves into the water, and waited for them. They saw us, came closer, and then the adults in the pod wanted to move on. At first, the younger ones followed the baby-sitting adults, but one of the youngsters kept turning back to look at us. As the group had now really travelled quite a distance away, we were going to go back to the boat when this little fellow turned around and came back to us. The adult whales had

no other choice but to follow the little runaway.

The four young pilot whales then started to swim around us and under us. We kept calm, watching the reaction of the adults at first, as they wanted the young ones to come with them. But the youngsters all refused, as they were curious about us. Several times, the adult animals tried to gain back the attention of their young, to no avail. After some time, the grown-ups seemed to accept us, as we were no danger to the youngsters, and so they allowed the youngsters “to play with us”—but the adults always kept an eye on us.

So, all there was left for me to do was to float on the surface and wait for the young pilot whales to come near and I could take photos of them with their lovely smiling faces—especially of the most curious little one, which we later nicknamed “the crazy one.” This one came back to us three or four times, when all the rest of the group wanted to move on, still playfully swimming around us and under us, allowing us to take wonderful pictures of those beautiful and intelligent animals. It was really sad then, when the group finally left, after spending at least 45 minutes with us. Such a great encounter—it stirred up a lot of emotions! Even Sergio admitted, that in his long career, he had never had an encounter like this one... so long and intense—so special. Please visit:

design-buero.org/Unterwasser-Fotografie



THIS PAGE: Several views of the curious young pilot whale coming in close to have a look at me, Tenerife, Canary Islands. Exposure: ISO 200, f/8.0, 1/180s. Gear for all images: Olympus OM-D E-M1 Mark II camera, with wide-angle lens, Nauticam housing, ambient light