

Blackwater bounty

by Mike Bartick

It's late in the evening and with hardly any moon to speak of, but instead of thinking about sleep, we're thinking about diving, not just any dive though, blackwater diving.

Jumping into the open ocean at night certainly isn't for everyone. Just the mere thought of diving in open ocean can sometimes create a bit of anxiety with some divers, adding in the caveat of diving in the open ocean at night and it positively spooks them.

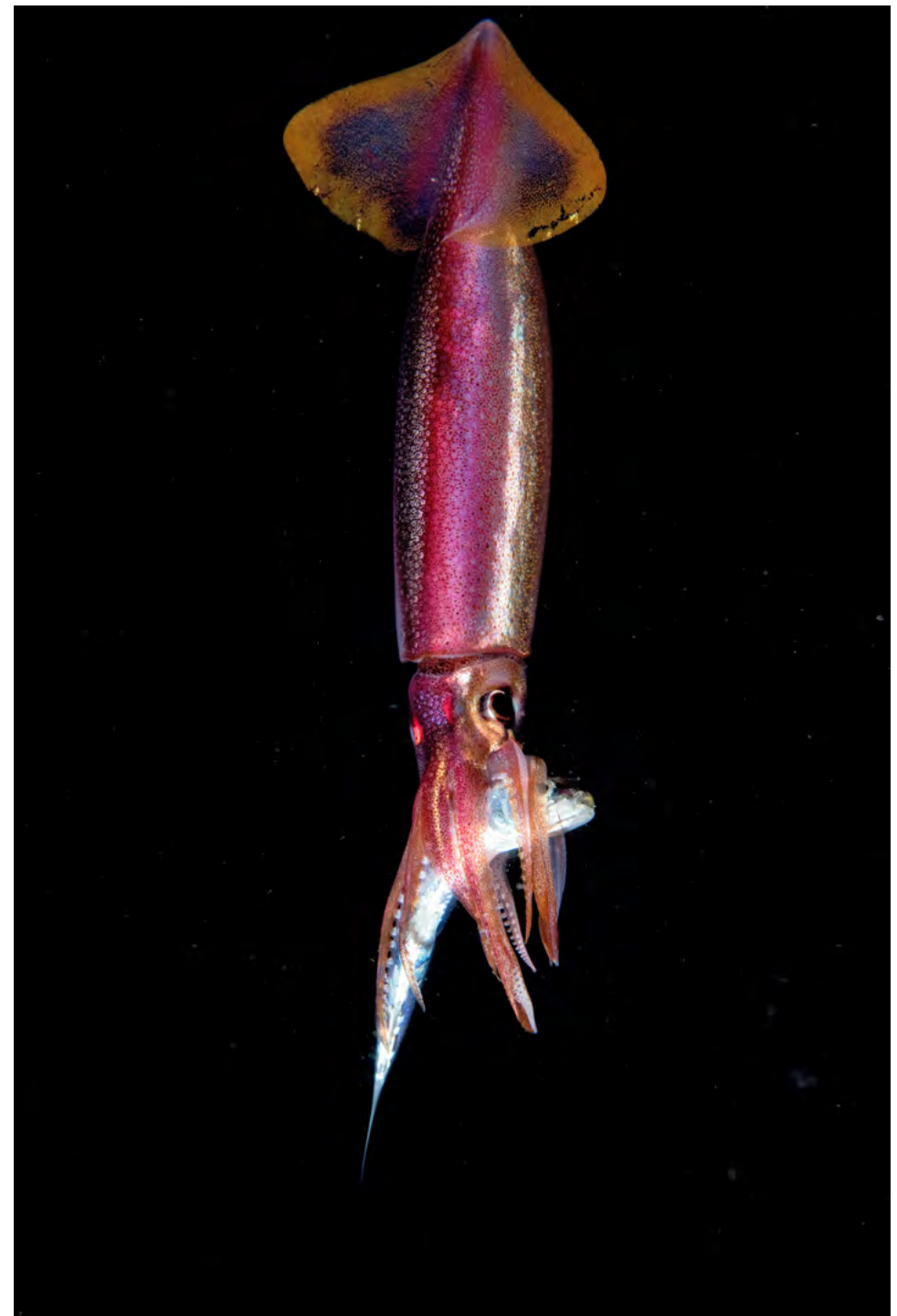
Blackwater diving is not your typical night dive and we're not heading to the bottom to explore the sand. In fact the bottom is the last place you would want to find yourself on an open ocean dive like this, exploring however is what BW diving IS all about.

Blackwater diving is an advanced style of diving that is done well off shore, over deep water and away from any structure. The target subjects on a dive like this are planktons. Each evening as the sun sets, the planet's largest animal migration begins as planktons move up from the depths to disperse and feed. This vertical migration carries with it many incredible ocean oddities that would never be seen on a typical night dive. By inserting ourselves directly into the food chain and with a little luck,

we might be able to see some of this action and hopefully capture a few unique frames. Vertical migration is one of the buzz word's enthusiasts involved in BW diving will use to describe the upwards movement of planktons from the depths to the shallows. The deeper the water, the stranger the subject's, is one school of thought on this. The truth of the matter is, if you don't get out there and explore, you will for sure, not see anything.

BW diving takes a bit of practice and requires a little dedication. Late nights are the norm so resting during the daylight hours becomes a part of the daily routine. Because the experience is so unique, new dive skills must be learned in addition to learning how to shoot in this

Hunting squid- Squids will grab the stunned fish right from the ink cloud and for a few moments pause. It's at this time that you can grab a quick photo but be ready for it. Once the strobes start flashing, the squids will quickly dart away, catch and all. Nikon D500, Sea&Sea housing, 60mm lens, 1/320th @ F22 with ISO400



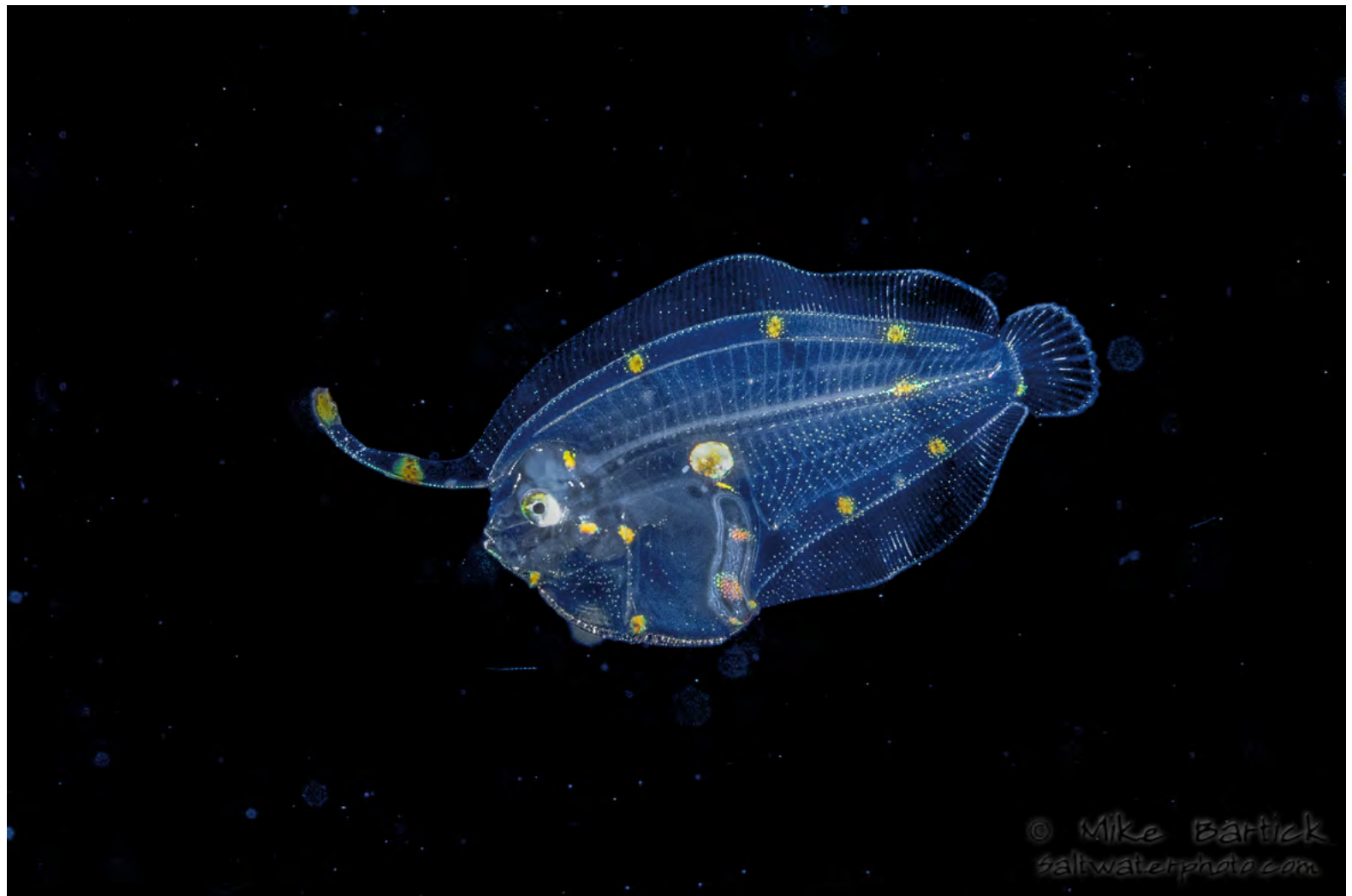
sometime turbid environment. The other skill that must be learned is how to hunt for your subjects while drifting in the black night sea with nothing more than a torch to light your way. After a few BW dives though you will feel it all coming together and the whole routine becomes second nature. Soon, regular day dive's will seem like fluff and everything, including the computer you use will be adapted for BW diving, at least that's what happened with me.

The equipment needed to do a BW dive safely can be organized in several ways. We've developed a rather extravagant "Downline" set up over time that offers a great visual reference, both above and below the water line. Our downline has a lit orange buoy on the top with a 33 meter weighted rope. The rope has several high powered lights attached to it that helps to attract the planktons and allows the divers to free swim at any depth, without being tethered.

Three basic tips for Blackwater diving:

Dive skills

Safety first for BW diving. Be sure to have great buoyancy skills before venturing out. On the dive move slowly and try not to fin too much as it creates a pressure wave. Each movement creates



A larval sole shot in open ocean. Notice the eyes on this sole compared to the first one. They have not migrated as of yet indicating that this sole still has some time before it settles to the sand. In this open ocean world, transparency rules the night or so it seems.

Shooting these guys can get tricky as the water is often turbid. Strobe's, angled in and nearness to your subject work well. Strobes facing slightly outward also helps but can leave your subject in the shadow if too close.

Nikon D500, Sea & Sea housing, 60mm lens, 1/200th @ F16 with ISO320



During the cooler water temp. months in Anilao (January-March) we are treated to a plethora of jellyfish and salp chain's. After seeing a small larval octopus on a salp chain i was intrigued. I had never seen this before and began researching the relationship between the two. Little did i know at that time that this wasn't an octopus at all, but Male paper Nautilus, or A. hians. It turns out, the male paper nautilus (5-7mm) do not produce a shell, this is exclusively for the female. The female A.hians will trap air in her shell at the surface and use it for buoyancy, coming to the surface in the evening when it is safe. The males also travel up to shallow waters using the salps, mollusks or anything else they can for protection from predators in hopes of meeting a female.

Blanket octopus- Talk about an insane photo op!, again this would never be seen near shore or on a regular night dive. The blanket octopus uses its webbing to trap the nautilus and other ocean going subjects. This one, photographed at 30 meters danced a bit for me then dashed away and into the dark. Again, extreme sexual dimorphism occurs between the male and female. The male is measured in centimeters as the female can be measured in meters. The webbing on their arms can also be casted off when they feel threatened, in an attempt to escape and evade by diverting the predators attention.



turbulence and many of the delicate creatures could be destroyed outright or sent spinning away, curl up or dash off.

Photo skills

Much of what will be seen is very small. I suggest using a 60mm macro lens on an APSC camera, 100/105mm on a full frame and without diopters. Float arms and a clip to secure your camera to your BC just in case you need both hands. Using a soft focus light trained over your lens port for fast focus and using strobe angles that will help to eliminate backscatter.

The hunt

Hunting for your subjects in the water column during your BW dive is a skill that most of us don't have but can develop pretty quickly. Using a torch with a tight beam will allow for better water penetration even if the water is turbid.

Jump Settings:

ISO 400
F22
1/200

Compact shooters:

ISO 400
F5
1/200-500



It's not always the subject that gets excited on a blackwater dive. I was very lucky to have this subject swim straight at my lens and pause long enough for me to capture something a little more special than an I.D. photo. Shooting at a higher F-stop will help to knock down the reflectivity of your subject and allow for more control over your exposures, revealing the colorful details. Nikon D500, Sea & Sea housing, 60mm lens, 1/200th @ F16 with ISO320

Soapfish in their adult phase aren't all that attractive but the larval soapfish is quite amazing. With a small body, extremely long pennants and gold/green pectoral fins, they are fast swimmers that can change directions quickly and often. I prefer a 60mm lens to help track my subject through the viewfinder and offers a slightly wider angle of view when close to the subject. Nikon D500, Sea & Sea housing, 60mm lens, 1/200th @ F16 with ISO320

I prefer to shoot at a higher ISO and higher f-stops to gain better depth of field on the subjects. If my subject is reflective, i'll roll the f-stop up to a higher number. This helps to bring the exposures back to where i want them and if i need more light, ill roll it back down. Unlike standard macro shooting, depth of field isn't as much of a worry as is overexposures. Dont get too hung up on the aperture settings, just use it like a dimmer switch.

Your camera will be able to pick up the little details and colorations that can only be revealed in post so exposures are everything.

Backscatter is also inevitable, again, dont get too hung up on backscatter unless its critical and



destructive to your image. Having some backscatter in the image gives the subject a sense of space in my opinion, although your's may be different.

Blackwater diving offers a bounty of new and unique subject/photo ops for the adventurous photographer. Concentrate on your

dive skills and the rest will quickly fall into place as you gain a comfort level in the open ocean. Look for the small subjects first and if something a bit larger appears, do your best to capture the action. Remember to save some air for the surface too, flying fish and other incredible larval fish are often times in the last few meters.

Have fun and enjoy the adventure!

Please visit the Blackwater photo group on facebook for more images from around the world.

Mike Bartick
www.saltwaterphoto.com
www.diveCBR.com



Blackwater Photo Safari Gathering

Join group leaders Mike Bartick and Alex Tyrrell at Crystal Blue Resort, as we

Explore the Larval Settlement period in Anilao.

Imagine, Larval Octopus, Squid, Nautilus and more.

Blackwater is the ultimate in exploring and natural photo ops.



January 27-Feb. 4th

8 Nights stay / 7 nights of diving-14 BW dives + 6 afternoon dives

- 3 Chef Prepared Meals Daily
- Nitrox on all dives
- A/C Room
- Camera Room
- Boat/guide/park fees
- Organized Dive Deck
- R/T land transfer in a group
- 4 guests per boat

Advanced diving skills are recommended

\$1802.00 Dbl. Occ.

\$2162.00 Solo

Photo coaching and downline gear included

Contact: Mike Bartick - mike@Divecbr.com

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