

Blackwater Cozumel

by Mike Bartick

Cozumel is known to be a quick get away dive destination throughout the US with many of the divers repeating the same trip several times each year. Exploring the lush, sponge covered reefs while drift diving is the norm for this area and I must say, it is easy diving and very beautiful. I recently spent 12 days shooting there, mostly wide angle and some macro during the daylight hours but that wasn't really the primary reason for my visit. The main goal for this trip was to train a dive operation in the fine art of blackwater diving, or drift diving in the open ocean, at night.

I enjoy blackwater dive in any location that I visit as I feel exploring the night sea offers a unique perspective of the local environment. BW diving also provides local divers and DM's the chance to see another layer of their home turf and elevates their own ability to understand the reef systems that they frequent daily. Imagine being a dive guide and having the opportunity to learn about an area that you've been diving for years or the opportunity to see something new.

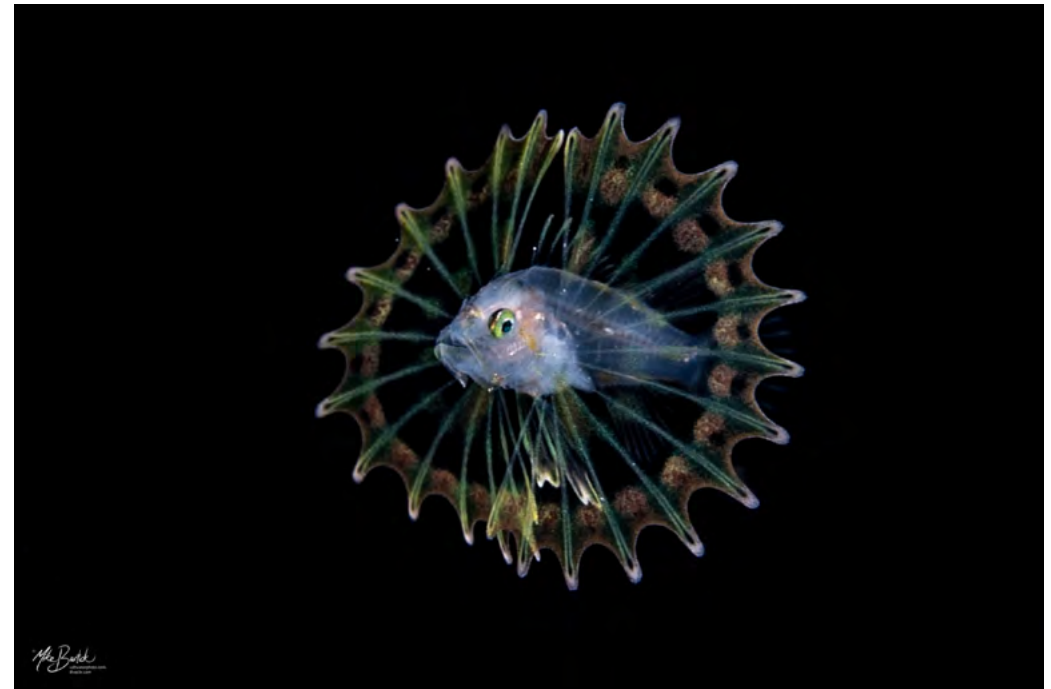
This is the main appeal for myself and other BW divers of course

but sometimes it can take a little convincing when you're the listing team.

One of the biggest challenges in doing blackwater in a new location is getting the dive operations to get "on-board" with the idea. The common feeling of blackwater being a novelty style dive, is still relevant so there is a little (or a lot) of convincing that needs to be done which often times runs right to the wire. Fortunately, I was introduced to a dive operation where the owner was not only interested but fully supportive and was instrumental in providing us with the proper platform, boat crew, captain and guides.

Jumping into the water in a new area is usually done with a little tension build up from the planning phase. Months of chatting, putting the gear together, being sure the team is lined up (repeatedly) and then the travel logistics. Finally stepping into the water for the first time is a true relief, which is again replaced with the self imposed pressure of finding subjects.

Due to the swift and legendary down currents in Cozumel, it was important for us to select the location



Lionfish larva- Its not uncommon to see larval fish hunt or drift vertically in the water column. With their dorsal fins extended they resemble small jellyfish and with their designs, can make some incredible images.

that would keep us away from impending peril but close enough to benefit from the moving water. We discussed the possible target points by using google earth and my trusty navigation app and with the help of local divers, DM's and most importantly, the boat captain, we identified our first jump location. We then dropped a pin on our nav map and set out just prior to sundown. Not knowing what to expect, It was important to check the water and to make any adjustments to our position

***All images:
Nikon D850, Sea and Sea housing,
60mm lens. 2 YSD-3 Lightning strobes-
domed diffusers. Kraken Hydra
3500s-focus light. f14 @ 1/250, ISO
320, Strobes half power.***

per the Captain's advice.

Configuring a downline isn't always as easy as slapping a couple of lights on a rope either. First, we must consider wind and the size of the buoy. If the buoy is too large is



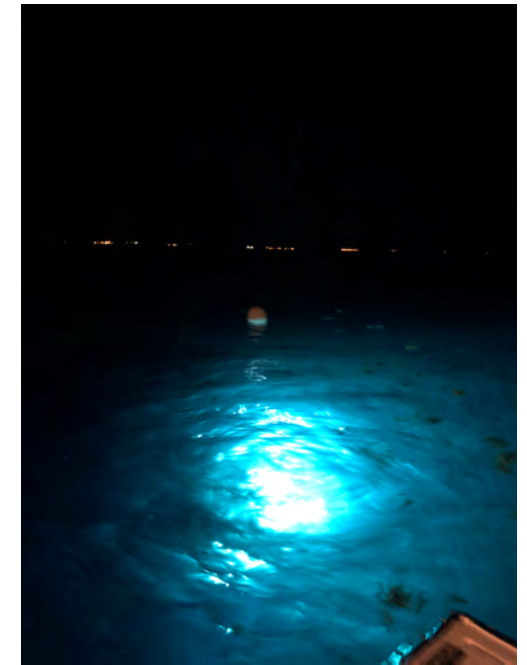
Unexpected company on our first blackwater dive. Nearing the end of the dive, I saw a large fish near the downline and as I approached, I realized it was a shark. This poor guy was scared out of its mind seeing us and after a few minutes of investigating us, took off as fast as it could. Contrary to fear based ideals, sharks are hardly ever seen on blackwater dives and was most certainly as surprised to see us, as we were to see it.

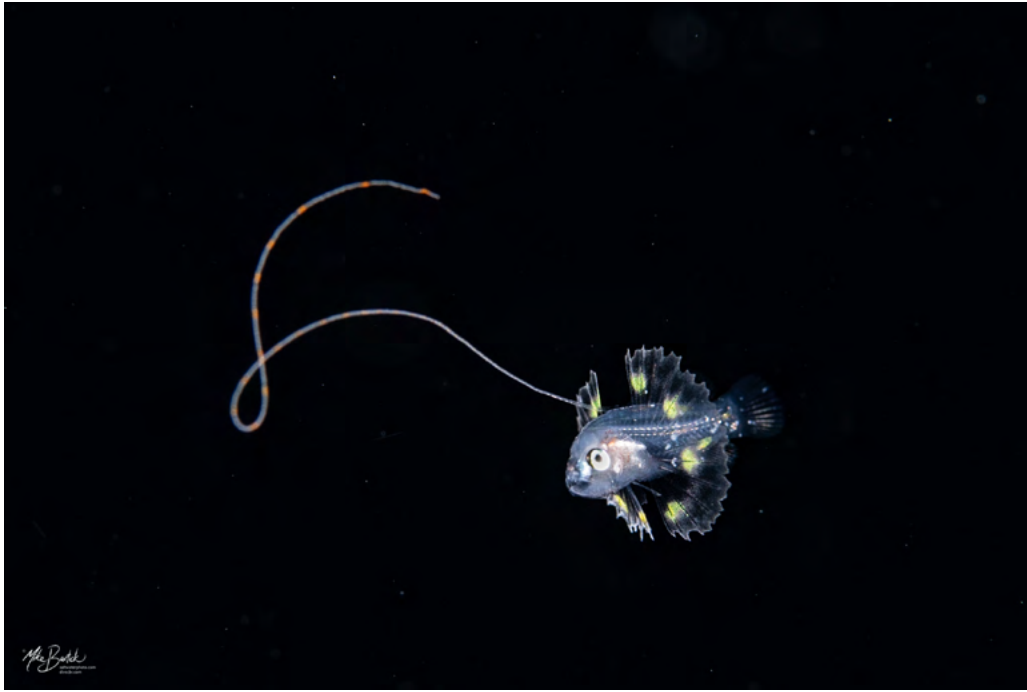
*Deep water fish such as this Pudgy Cusk eel (*Spectrunculus grandis*) is known to settle in depths ranging from 2000-4800 meters. Cusk eels are a very diverse group of fish that can also be seen worldwide.*

becomes a sail and the wind will push the light system through the water too quickly. Second we configure the line which includes lights and arms and of course, weight at the bottom to slow the drift and to keep the line taught.

The idea is to allow the light

system to move through the water fast enough to explore, yet slow enough for us to keep up, stop and shoot photos and to attract planktons. Tethering is not an option. Having safety and action plans in place is also of primary importance so setting up





Soapfish larva—Unlike their adult selves, the soapfish larva is very pretty. With a circular dorsal fin design and elongated pennant on its head. They swim quickly and erratically avoiding predation.

some kind of protocols are something that should never be overlooked when you're planning any kind of exploratory dives.

Arriving at our pinned destination, the captain gave us the nod so we fired up the lights, threw the line in the water and waited for sundown. The feeling onboard was pure anticipation at this point, so I began to run through images on my phone to help with shape recognition. Finally after everyone checked and re-checked the gear, it was time to jump.

Once we got into that clean, Cozumel water things warmed up quickly. The water was so clear that the flashing the strobes in the distance reminded me of twinkling fireflies in a dark garden. The pace was right and the line was perfect and after a short period of time everyone settled in, relaxed, and had a great time exploring and shooting.

We experienced large salps chains with male Argonaut hians, jellyfish, even deepwater fish which indicated to me that our site selection



The exotic looking Cerataspis montstrosa is an uncommon subject too. One of the difficulties in properly assigning identity to a subject found on BW dives is that the larval subject often appears to be something completely different from its adult self. This zoa, was actually linked to a more commonly known shrimp in the last decade through raising the zoa into its adult stage.

was right on the money.

Sticking to our plan, we all surfaced at 90 minutes to find our captain was positioned perfectly for our pickup and the surface crew managed to get us all back onto the boat without issue. Soon we all debriefed and excitedly chattered about the dive and what we had found. After exchanging intel with the captain we learned that we had drifted nearly 6 miles!

One of the things that I've

noticed about the subject matter seen on BW dives, is that in many locations the subject matter can be very similar, I call this the baseline. Planktons like sea butterflies, pteropod, heteropods, crab and shrimp zoa in addition to other sea faring subjects. This baseline is a great foundational point for strong blackwater diving and indicates that the choice of the location is a good one. We continued to go back to the same patch of water for the next few nights, according to our GPS and



Common baseline subjects like sea butterflies, pteropods and salp chains play an important role in our oceans ecology and an important role in discovering new locations for blackwater diving. The salp in this image actually has a male paper nautilus riding along which is also somewhat common and is a strong indicator that the coveted shelled females will be in the same waters.

enjoyed some great dives together as our team began to bond.

In all we are able to do 5 nights of blackwater dives and came away with a great collection of images. My impressions is that Cozumel has really strong potential for this style of diving and so, I am planning a return trip in just over a months time for another go. Hopefully at the end of the second round the local dive operators will begin to see the value of offering blackwater dives to their normal

curriculum of diving.

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