

Blackwater in Thailand

by Alex Tyrell

Blackwater diving is gaining in popularity at many dive destinations around the world, for one simple reason; it gives us access to marine life we simply would never encounter on a standard night dive. This makes blackwater photography a way of adding some unique images to your portfolio of rarely encountered deepwater and larval stage creatures.

The critter-list has been revised and now extends to Blanket Octopus, Paper Nautilus, Diamond Squid, Ribbonfish and more. I would however like to offer a potential warning - it is also very addictive. Even after completing hundreds of blackwater dives, there is still a high level of anticipation every time I'm entering the water as you simply never know what you will encounter!

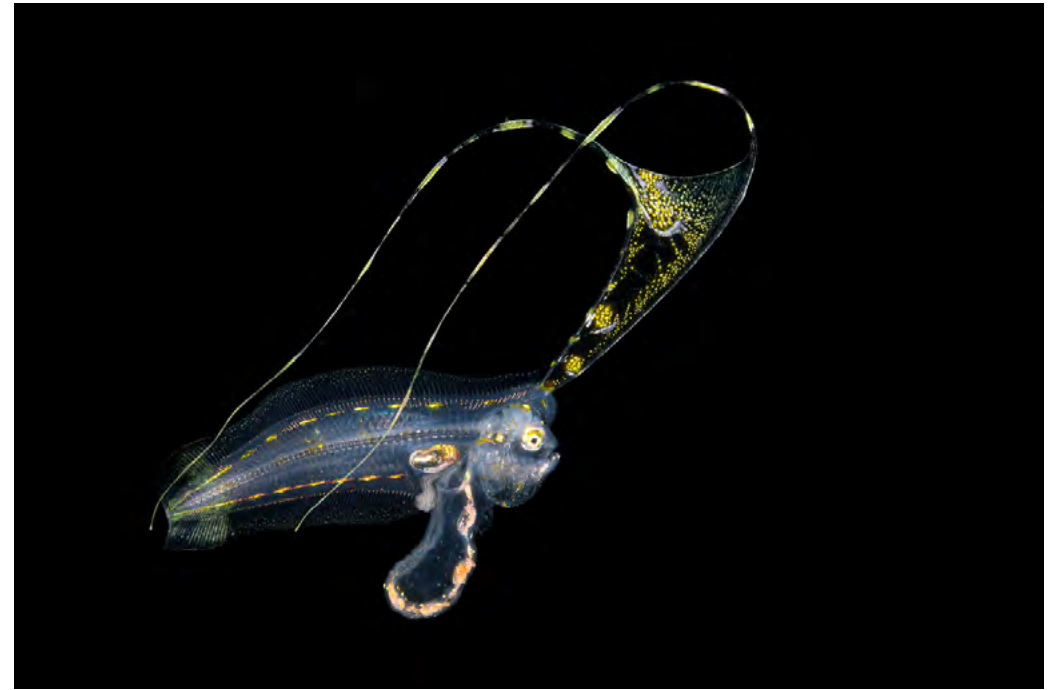
I got my first taste of Blackwater when visiting NAD Lembeh Resort in April 2016 when we completed what is now called a Bonfire Dive by placing a high-powered light/lights onto the bottom to attract creatures in, basically in the same fashion insects are attracted to the light cast from a bonfire. We didn't encounter any really special subjects that dive but I

saw the potential and I couldn't wait to try it again.

Without any overseas tripped planned for the immediate future, I decided the best way for me to get shooting was to get my own high-powered light and test out my local waters of the Gulf of Thailand. We do not have any deep water close to Koh Tao, but I knew we must have larval stage creatures, so jumped on a dive boat and went out on a normal night dive. But instead of heading to the reef with everyone else, I swam off the dive site into the sand that surrounds it at about 18m, set the light on the bottom, Bonfire-style, and waited to see what would show up.

As expected, tiny Zooplankton were duly attracted to the bright light, forming a swirling ball around it, which in turn attracted plenty of shrimps, some post-larval reef fishes and a few different small squids to feed. This showed that there was some potential even without deeper water, so I went back out a number of times over the next few months trying a few different locations.

The next step was for me to get myself more lights and build a



Tonguefish (Cynoglossidae sp.)

All images taken with a Nikon D500 in Subal housing with a 60mm lens and Retro Pro Flashes set to TTL using the TRT-Electronics Smart Turtle LED Trigger.

Downline so we could get off the dive sites and into open water.

Downline Set-Up

The downline is a weighted line suspended beneath a buoy with lights attached to it, which is then left to drift. The set up I use, a combination of what I had seen used at NAD and with Mike Bartick at Crystal Blue Resort in Anilao, has the first light attached to the buoy at the surface,

making it glow and therefore be visible from a distance allowing the boat to easily stay in contact. Then at 3m / 10ft I have a 5k Video Light facing up towards the surface in the hope of attracting surface-dwellers, like Flying-fish.

The next set of lights is at the safety stop depth of 5m / 15ft where I have a pair of Kraken Hydra 8k Video Lights facing downwards, but slightly angled outwards, and then the same at 10m / 30ft. The final set of lights

are at the bottom of the line at 15m / 45ft where I have one Kraken Hydra 8k plus a pair of Weefine 6k lights that shine a lot of lumens into the depths.

With no references in open water, the illuminated downline forms the centre of the dive site, that then expands outwards in 360° as far as visibility allows the downline to still be visible, and then down as deep as you feel comfortable while keeping it safe. You need to ensure that you can always see the lights of the downline, as if you can't, and don't know what direction to swim then, then you are lost and need to ascend for a pick-up. Bad visibility will increase the chances of lost divers, as does having underpowered lights that are only visible from a closer proximity.

So with a new set of lights attached to the downline, speedboat chartered and divers ready, it was time for Blackwater Koh Tao. The dives proved to be much better than the bonfire dives on the actual dive sites, and we started to see larval stage flounders, phronima amphipods, larval stage anemones, comb jellies, sea butterflies, larval mantis shrimps and crabs, plus lots of squid and a few post larval octopus. It wasn't as good as what I had previously experienced in Anilao or Lembeh, but it was on my doorstep so I could get out anytime I could round up enough divers to cover the cost of boat rental.

We tried various different spots around the island to see if any proved more productive, but I knew the Gulf of Thailand didn't have deep water, Navionics was showing I might hit close to 60m, but the majority of the time we would be diving in 40-50m. The generally flat, featureless bottom of the gulf (apart from the dive sites) means there are no formations that would create upwellings, so my strategy was to go out before it was dark to look



Post-Larval Mantis Shrimp

for current lines on the surface that indicated there was some water movement. My theory was that any current would suck in the plankton and less able swimmers, and therefore diving in the current would give us the best possibility of finding them. This proved to be a better approach than the random drop points that I started with, but it can still be a bit 'hit or miss'; some nights there's loads of action, other nights not so much. But that's nature for you!

Phase 2 in my Thai Blackwater Exploration was to get over to the west coast of Thailand where there is deeper water on offer, potentially providing the opportunity to see some different creatures.

So in early 2021 I put together a short liveaboard trip aboard the Smiling Seahorse that



Larvel Flounder

I'd chartered, and after explaining the logistics of blackwater diving to the owners, said they were happy to try it out. So in early March the trip went ahead that I had filled with fellow underwater photographers/videographers.

The itinerary I had scheduled was to hit only the three best sites; Koh Bon and Koh Tachai for chances of Manta Rays and Richelieu Rock that, for me, is the most photographically productive site in Thai waters.

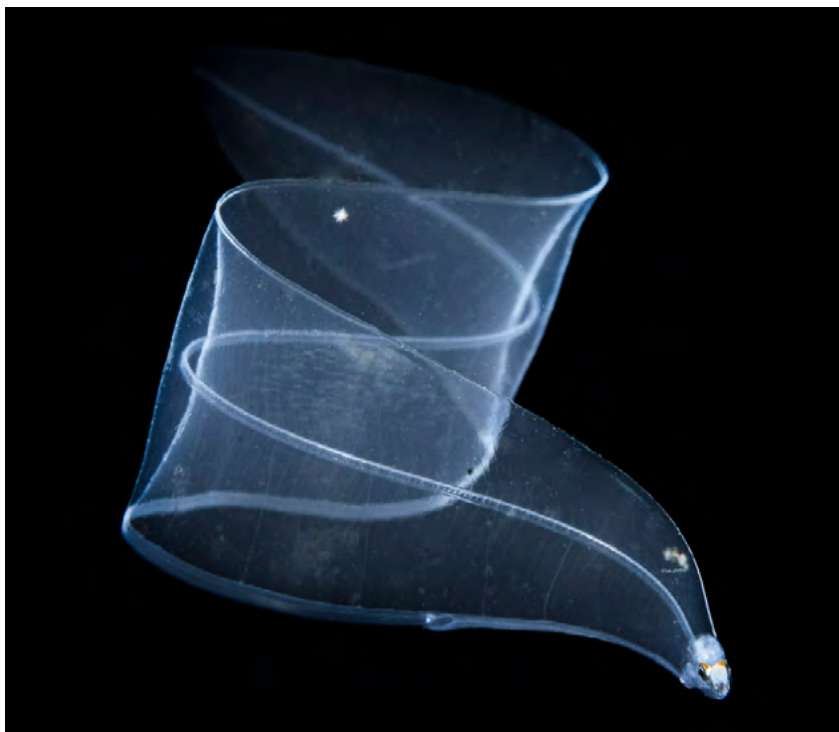
After some amazing dives at Richelieu we headed west towards Koh Tachai and deeper water. This is where I wanted to conduct the blackwater dive and where we jumped in the bottom was approx 80m / 260ft below us.

The visibility was great and the marine life varied, so everyone had a great dive encountering a pelagic sea snake, larval snake blennies, a variety of juvenile box and pufferfish, plus the cruise director and owner Franck saw a larval Tripodfish.

The highlight was that everyone saw at least one of the many juvenile Sailfish that showed up, which I had been hoping to see for some time. Following the success of the first blackwater dive in deeper water, the owner Franck who is also a very keen photographer, asked if I could come back on board on a subsequent trip to conduct more blackwater dives. So a week later we managed another three dives and right at the end of the last one, with only Franck and I left in the water, I spotted the familiar shape of a female Paper Nautilus at the top of the downline. It was fairly co-operative, allowing both Franck and I to shoot it, which I'm pretty sure resulted in the first photos of a female Paper Nautilus taken in Thai waters.

Over the two trips we managed to conduct five blackwater dives and the area certainly looked promising for more exploration. Luckily the now 'Blackwater Addict' Franck, was well up for it, and wanted to offer a blackwater dive on every trip for the following season. So I set up a line for the boat and they invested in a batch of high-powered lights so we were ready to explore in different areas of the Andaman Sea.

We were however restricted to specific nights on each cruise where we would be in an area suitable for blackwater diving, so it only gave us one opportunity per trip, possibly two on the longer cruises. This would obviously mean it would be slower to work out the best spots, tides and moon phases, in comparison to a resort based operation doing the equivalent that could go out on a nightly



Larval Garden Eel (Heteroconger sp.)

basis. But we had the whole season running from October to April that gave us lots of time.

Over the course of the 2021/22 season we did manage quite a few blackwater dives in deeper water, mainly in the north Andaman closer to Koh Tachai and Koh Bon, plus the northern Similan Islands, and we also did a few down south closer to Koh Haa and Hin Deang / Hin Mueng.

As expected, some dives were slow, others started slow then picked up as the dive progressed, and the odd few had action throughout. How productive it was appeared to be more to do with the tidal state rather than moon phase, which is a more traditionally indicator of the optimum times for blackwater diving. The run up to the New Moon and the period after, basically when there is less



Veliger Gastropod

moonlight, is generally considered to be best, however we didn't really see this to be the case. An incoming tide was generally more productive for us and for our trips where, for logistical reasons, we needed to dive between 7-10pm, the incoming tide tended to fall in this window around the time of the full moon.

All of these locations we dived had been in a depth range of approx. 70-80m. The water depth closer to the islands/dive sites maxes out around 60m and then the seafloor is a gentle slope gradually dropping off to 70-80m as you headed west into the Andaman Sea. However, the charts showed a ridge running from north to south where it then dropped off to 200-300m, and from what I had ascertained from both Mike Bartick at Crystal Blue and Simon

Buxton at NAD Lembeh who have extensively explored their respective local waters, these steeper depth changes cause currents to upwell, bringing plankton up from the depths and, in turn, this also brings along with it the creatures that feed on the plankton, and the creatures that feed on them. And these were what we were hoping to see, so it seemed sensible to head out to the drop-off to check it out.

The only issue was it the approx. 3-hour steam from Koh Tachai or Koh Bon, so we needed good weather to venture out into open water at night that far from land.

There were a number of trips that we had planned to go, but frustratingly had to cancel with the waves being too big to safely dive. It wasn't until March 2022 that we finally made it out to the Drop-Off. Using a combination of the nautical charts and the depth sounder to get us to around the mid-point of the slope in a depth of approx. 200m, but with the incoming tide we should gradually drift eastwards to shallower water.

As soon as we entered the water it was immediately obvious that the marine life was richer, the dive was productive from start to finish, the visibility was better and there was that feeling of increased odds that a special subject might make an appearance. The following trip the



Larval Pearlfish (Carapus bermudensis)

weather allowed us to get back out to the drop-off and once again the dive was great.

As soon as I descended I saw a Paper Nautilus at the bottom of the line and over the course of the dive saw another seven. We were also seeing a variety of other post-larval and juvenile fishes that we hadn't encountered in shallower water. It seemed like we had found our spot! The only issue was the proximity. With 6 hrs of fuel consumption getting there and back, most operators would have weighed up the costs and decided that it wasn't financially viable. But having a passionate

underwater photographer as the owner of the boat meant that Franck wanted to be out there as much, if not more, than everyone else. So we went anyway!

Over the course of the season we perfected the blackwater dive procedures, which needed to be a little different for a 25m liveaboard compared to entering from a small speedboat. Having a large group of divers around a single line isn't ideal, so if we had more than 10 divers total for a blackwater dive, we used two separate lines to avoid overcrowding. But whether we used one or two lines, the dive procedures were identical, the

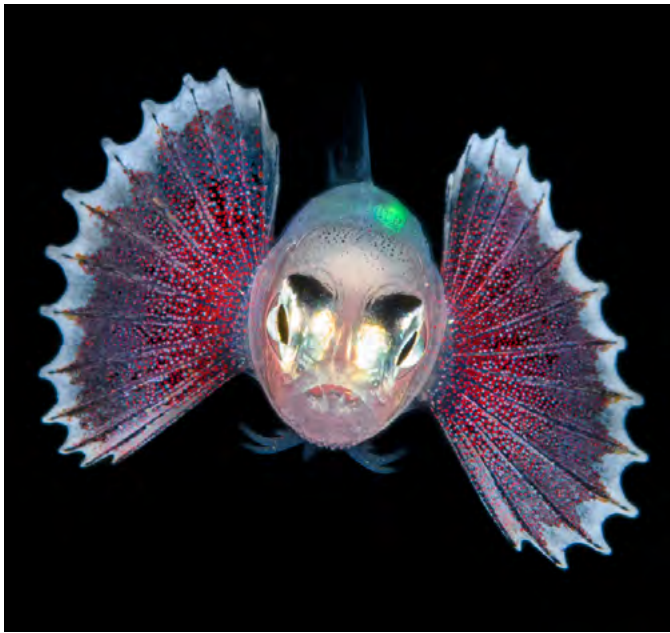


Paper Nautilus (Argonauta hians) - 1st Photo in Thai Waters

only difference was having the zodiac supervise one line, while the boat stayed with the other.

All of the blackwater dives were conducted as unguided, so divers would be in buddy pairs for this dive, but we always had staff in the water to keep an eye on things plus point out any cool critters they found.

Our entry procedure was to have the entire group ready on the dive deck, and when everyone was in their kit the downline would be deployed from the back of the boat and left to



Post Larval Blenny

drift. We would then ensure everyone was ready to enter the water, whereby we notified the captain we were good to go. He would then pull the boat up alongside the downline, maybe 10-15m away, and then signal it was safe to enter.

Once the divers were in the water they would swim at the surface away from the boat towards the downline, giving the boat space to safely move away, and then descend in buddy pairs.

We normally had a max. dive time of 60-70 mins, but if divers wanted to finish the dive early they could, they just needed to ascend next to the downline then swim 20-30m away from it before signalling

to the boat for a pick up. The same procedure was completed at the end of the dive for pick-ups. This avoided a large vessel coming close to the downline that would likely be directly over divers.

During the dives visibility was generally good, letting you see the downline from a distance, but if you loose sight of the downline the first thing to do was cover your own dive light and then look for the glow of

the downline lights in all directions.

With photographers in the water you had the added benefit of flashes going off, so these were also a good indicator to help you get back to the line. If you couldn't see either, then it was time to ascend for a pick up and if time/air supply and NDL's allowed, a drop back to the line.

The dive season all too soon came to an end, temporarily pausing our blackwater exploration. But will recommence as soon as the Smiling Seahorse kicks off for the 2022/23 season.

I won't be working on the boat this season though, but they will be offering blackwater diving to their guests on every trip. I do however

have a special blackwater cruise planned for January 5th to 11th 2023 where we will dive the stunning sites of the Andaman Sea during the daytime and then complete a Blackwater Dive every night, heading out to the Drop-Off if possible. And the following trip I am running a Photo Workshop concentrating on the rich marine life of Richelieu Rock, with a few dives at Koh Bon and Koh Tachai in case the Mantas are out to play.

Obviously we'll squeeze in a couple of blackwater dives on this trip too. If you fancy joining one or both trips please contact me at email: alex@dive4photos.com or get in touch with The Smiling Seahorse direct quoting Discount Code: Dive4Photos.



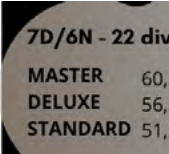
Alex Tyrell

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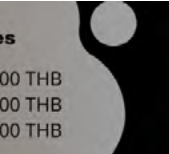


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