

Blackwater Photography

by David Fleetham

There are few challenges in underwater photography that come close to the demands of shooting semi-transparent apparitions at night, a few miles out to sea with the bottom several thousand feet below your flailing fins. I spent two weeks off the island of Yap in Micronesia doing exactly this every night. The boat would depart the dock around 7 PM and I was lucky if my head got to the pillow before 3AM after shooting for two dives.

I am not a novice to blackwater diving and had participated in this activity many times around Hawaii, where the idea of open ocean night diving really took hold and began to spread throughout the world. On my previous trip to Yap as a presenter for their MantaFest photo week, I introduced blackwater diving to the Manta Ray Bay Resort. The dive guides had never heard of, or ever dreamed of this experience and although I had frequented the resort for a few decades and was good friends with the owner/operator Bill Acker, several of them, including Bill, questioned my sanity when I first proposed how this would work.

This last 2023 MantaFest

was followed by two weeks of BlackwaterFest and as a bonus, I was on the boat with Mike Bartick, who literally wrote the book on Blackwater diving (available on Amazon) and was our fearless leader for Yap's first BlackwaterFest. Mike tweaked our set up of a float with a light and a line down to 65 feet that included several sets of lights at various depths to attract creatures and give our boat captain a reference for keeping track of everyone.

I was shooting with a Canon R5 mirrorless camera in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a pair of DS230 strobes. I alternated between the Canon 100mm macro and a Sigma 70mm macro. Both lenses were very close in performance with a few very slight differences. The 70mm was a bit better for larger subjects, while the 100mm excelled with the most tiny of the drifting entities.

Some of the subjects are extremely challenging to focus on. I

Both images: Canon R5, Ikelite dry-lock housing, 2 x Ikelite DS230 strobes. Sigma 70mm macro lens. 1/160th @ F14. ISO 320.





Canon R5, Ikelite dry-lock housing, 2 x Ikelite DS230 strobes. Sigma 70mm macro lens. 1/200th @ F18. ISO 320.

have used the R5 extensively on reef subjects and found the autofocus to be the best I have ever shot with. That said, on some blackwater creatures I found the system searching for a lock on the more transparent organisms.

Often when subjects are illuminated with your focusing light, especially larval fish and mollusks, they will tend to begin their migration back to the depths and one finds oneself with a dive profile that resembles the graph of a heartbeat monitor that



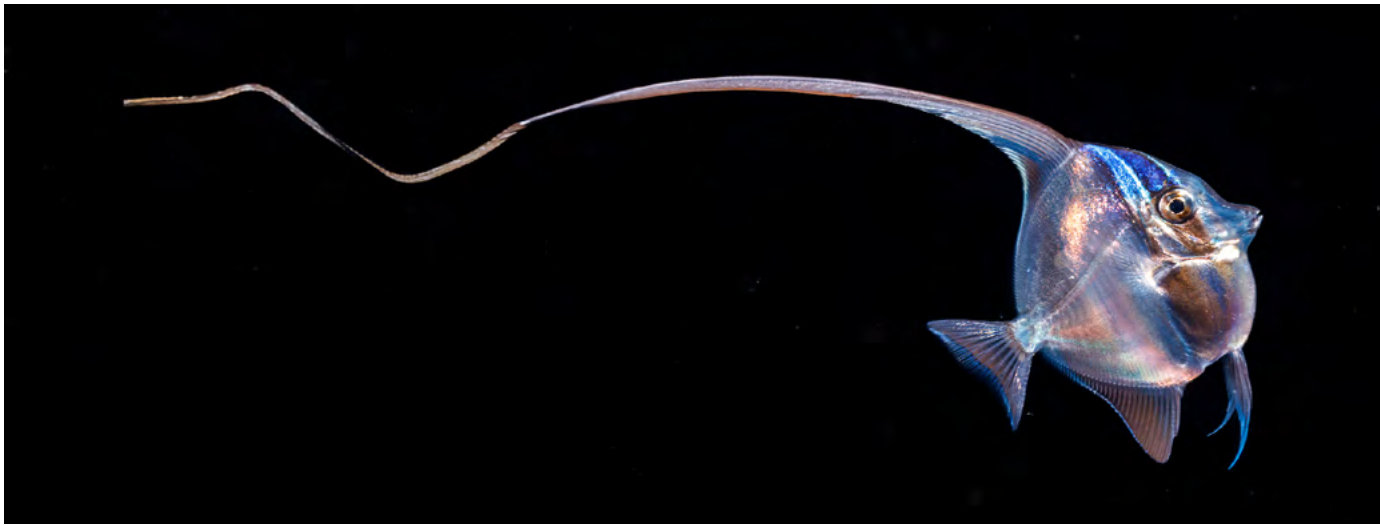
Canon R5, Ikelite dry-lock housing, 2 x Ikelite DS230 strobes. Sigma 70mm macro lens. 1/200th @ F13. ISO 320.

would leave your PADI instructor with thoughts of revoking your dive certification.

On the third evening I tried to stay fairly shallow in order to gain some bottom time (well not really the actual bottom) and shoot for well over an hour. The down side to all this extra time working the focus motor on my macro lenses was my camera battery would be expended in the middle of the next dive. Luckily for me I had just installed the new USB charging & data transfer bulkhead in my Ikelite

housing. On all the rest of the nights I brought along a small rechargeable battery bank that is typically used to charge your iPhone. After the first dive I popped off the o-ring sealed bulkhead to access the USB-C outlet and charged my camera battery without ever opening the housing, something I adamantly avoid on a small rocking vessel several miles out into open ocean.

We had a few nights with strong winds and pouring rain. On these occasions I sacrificed my dry



(Top left) Canon R5, Ikelite dry-lock housing, 2 x Ikelite DS230 strobes. Sigma 70mm macro lens. 1/160th @ F22. ISO 320.

(Far left) Canon R5, Ikelite dry-lock housing, 2 x Ikelite DS230 strobes. Canon 100mm macro lens. 1/160th @ F9. ISO 160

(Left) Left to right: Mike Bartick, Bruce Shafer, Marty Snyderman and David Fleetham.

towel to cover the housing and external battery. It is worth noting that the USB-C outlet is not water or air tight and while charging I would lose the vacuum I had pulled out of the housing. I was not too concerned as I had previously checked the vacuum and the housing had just been in the water for a successful hour and a half. Just to be on the safe side I did bring the vacuum pump with me on subsequent outings and pulled the vacuum after

the battery had done its job and my camera was good to go for another hour and a half of focusing calisthenics.

I have also utilized the USB-C connection to download the images from my camera to my MacBook Pro without removing it from the housing, then charging the battery and been ready to go for the next dive. This is not done on the boat, but when I am back at the resort in more controlled

surroundings. It is a mute point if I am going to remove the camera from the housing to change lenses, which was frequently the case for the next day of reef diving. I do look forward to using this unique device more on my next live-aboard dive trip.

David Fleetham
www.davidfleetham.com