

Interview :

Andrey Ryanskiy

by Colin Marshall

Andrey Ryanskiy is an observing naturalist and expert underwater photographer. He has the highest possible diver's certification levels (Divemaster, Adv Trimix, Full Cave) and has logged over 5,000 dives. He has written a large number of marine identification books – see advertisement on page XX. Underwater photography for him is an instrument to promote the education and care of the oceans and its inhabitants.

“20 Questions” interview by Colin Marshall (author of UWP’s “Marshall’s Mysteries”).

1. You have written many books for many regions (Red Sea, Indonesia, Coral Triangle, Philippines) and also superb books on Nudibranch, Seashells, Crustaceans, Flatworms and even, my favourite, Starfish and Other Echinoderms, which hold hundreds of images of species that certainly I have never seen recorded before in ID books. What are the main platforms for your books?

My books are sold on three major marketplaces - Amazon, Apple Books and Gumroad. You can order printed books on Amazon. Apple Books are great at working with photos that can be displayed on the full screen of the iPad. Those who buy books on Gumroad receive the opportunity to update for free. This is especially important with nudibranchs as my book on them has been updated at the end of 2023. Here is a link to my ReefID page -

<https://reefidbooks.com/about-the-author/>



2. You recently posted on Facebook about your “Maldivian Fish Guide” App, to complement your Maldivian book guide. Do you have apps for any of your other books?

Apps for me are, first of all, a beautiful product with instant update features. It only takes a few minutes to add a new species or change the name. No need to reformat a chapter. I’m just starting the game here.

In the future, there will be an option to select regions, an educational game, and the ability to classify and upload your own photos.

3. Most of the images in your books are taken by yourself, but you do not call yourself an Underwater Photographer, and you don’t submit images for

Life on the Reef: Corals, Sea Squirts, Sponges, Bryozoa, Comb Jellies, Marine Plants

Indo-Pacific Field Guide



Andrey Ryanskiy

competitions these days – why is that?

I just found other ways to share the unbearable beauty of the underwater world. Besides, I basically don’t compete with anyone. There are no losers and no winners in my endless game of learning ocean animals. Underwater photography for me is a tool, not a goal.

4. What are your “top three” favourite dive sites or general locations, and why?

- Sangeang Volcano north of Komodo National Park, Indonesia
- Alotau, Papua New Guinea
- Anilao, Philippines

They are beautiful under and above water. Colorful biodiversity exceeds the perception limit.

5. What image of yours are you most proud of and why?

I was lucky to be the first to photograph dozens of species of fish, nudibranchs, etc, in their natural environment. But for some reason *Amblygobius sewardii*, Seward's Goby, immediately comes to mind. Relatively large, with beautiful coloring. Described in 1867. And so secretive that it was first photographed underwater only two years ago, when I was working on a book about the Red Sea. It took me a lot of time and luck to take this photo in Wadi Lahami, near the border of Egypt and Sudan.



Amblygobius sewardii, Seward's Goby

6. You live in Sharm El Sheikh on the Red Sea in Egypt. Why Egypt, and not, say, Indonesia?

Excellent climate. We live without air conditioning for half of the year. It is impossible anywhere in Asia. Well-developed infrastructure and availability of quality Western-style housing. Nice people around. The underwater world is not as diverse as in the Coral Triangle but also much less studied, as strange as it may sound.

7. What is your most "life-threatening" experience you have had underwater?

Shark attack. Four silky sharks in Sudan. Everything ended well, but it was an unforgettable 40 minutes.

8. Do you do most of your diving solo, to avoid others disturbing whatever you are investigating or photographing? Or are you a strict "buddy" diver?

In recent years I have been diving mostly with my wife or alone. It's luck when you can dive with

people of the same interests. If they are critter-spotters, double luck.

9. I know you have many contacts in the academic world, i.e. highly qualified scientists such as marine biologists. Can you explain, for the layman, which specialists are involved in the process for getting animals scientifically described and classified?

I have been fortunate to work in the laboratory and underwater on expeditions with many outstanding marine biologists. Take for example Arthur Anker, an expert on crustaceans. He can find and catch a tiny and very fast shrimp on the reef, take magnificent photographs, study it under a microscope, find specimens of related species in museums and compare with them, fix the specimen and analyse molecular genetic data. And also prepare and publish a description of the new species. This is a one-man band. But more often different people do this. Not all marine biologists dive. Not everyone takes good photographs.

10. Whilst on the subject of the academic side of the underwater world, why and how do some animals occasionally get re-classified, i.e. a change of scientific names and even families? And why are there so many animals, some fairly common, that have not yet been fully classified?

Changes in taxonomy indicate that this branch of marine biology is alive. It's worse when nothing changes there for decades. The fact that hundreds of common species are not described is easily explained. This is not the case among fish, for example. Because fish are a subject of human interest. Nudibranchs or tunicates are not consumed by humans. This is where funding is cut. All scientists complain about this. But they do nothing to popularise science and explain its significance. They live in an ivory tower and publish in non-public journals.

11. I believe you call yourself a "marine life encyclopedist", i.e. someone who has photographed and identified different underwater species without being a highly qualified academic biologist? What recommendations can you give to someone who wants to follow a similar calling?

If you use the word Encyclopedist to mean "Try to learn something about everything" then this is about me. When I swim underwater, I can quickly understand that I am seeing something rare or even new. This applies to fish, nudibranchs, and crustaceans. I am gradually gaining competence in corals as well.

This is easy to achieve. You just need to identify what you see underwater. And collect your own collection, nudibranchs for example. If you have a hundred species in it, for example, then you are a first-year student. If five hundred - you are a



Halgerda iota

graduate! There are more than a thousand species in my nudibranch collection. I am well acquainted with more experienced specialists in this field, so I do not consider myself a “professor”.

12. I get the impression you are more interested in rare creatures, rather than the standard “big and dangerous” animals that attract others. What is the rarest animal you have seen underwater?

I don’t have a size preference. Sharks are no less beautiful than nudibranchs to me. But I don’t overestimate the chances of finding something new among the “big and dangerous”

The rarest animal? Hard to choose. For example, nudibranch – *Halgerda iota*. Try Google to find a photo. Oops. But I have quite a few such “first and only” photographs. And I remembered this *Halgerda* only because it was a very memorable dive in the Maldives which ended with a rapid flight in the “washing machine” along a kilometer-long candu. The transparency of the water was



Hypselodoris peri

incredible, and you could admire hundreds of sharks while “swinging” at depths from 9 to 19 meters.

On the other hand, *Hypselodoris peri* and *Tylodina* sp. are no less rare and beautiful - just a few people saw them before me.

Also included here are the rare nudibranches *Armina variolosa* and *Kaloplocamus* sp, and the Harp Comb Jelly, *Lyrocteis imperatoris*.

13. I believe you still enjoy snorkelling as well as diving. Do you find interesting animals for your books “just” while snorkelling?

Yes, I do. But I’m learning even more about behaviour, about seasonality. Or just admiring it. I snorkel every day except diving days.

14. Many divers start focusing more on behaviour as they become more familiar with the underwater world. What is the most memorable behaviour that you have witnessed?

I once watched a two-meter shark bang its back against a reef, trying to get rid of a sticky



Tylodina sp.



Armina variolosa



Kaloplocamus sp

fish. This happened a couple of meters from my wife, who at that time was enthusiastically photographing a tiny nudibranch.

15. I know you have trimix qualifications – what is the deepest you have dived?

I was a photographer for the Ras Mohammed Nature Reserve's deep cave exploration project. I then limited myself to a depth of 120 meters with a bottom time of 15 minutes, for reasons of camera safety.

16. I feel that if one was willing to go deeper and deeper, one would find more new or at least unusual species, but do you have a depth limit beyond which you don't explore for animals to include in your books, on the basis that most people would never go that deep?

In my books you will not find photographs taken at a depth of more than 65 meters. Long-term operation at great depths is only possible with the help of closed-cycle rebreathers. Luis Rocha's team is a perfect example. They find on average one new species per dive, working at depths of up to 130-140 meters. My friend Sameh Sokar told me about nudibranchs at a depth of 100 meters in Dahab and I'm thinking about refreshing my tech diver skills.

17. What is your biggest "lesson learnt" about diving or photography that you would pass on to others?

"Úrbi et órbi"? (CM – I had to look this up, and apparently this is a Latin blessing given by the Pope in Papal addresses which means "to the city of Rome and to the world", ie a message for everyone). I am a learner, not a teacher. I learn on every dive and always find something new. This requires the most basic knowledge of the underwater world.



Harp Comb Jelly, Lyrocteis imperatoris

18. We often hear depressing stories about how dive sites are getting more damaged year on year as hordes of tourists damage coral, touch everything, chase turtles and manta rays, etc. More optimistically, what areas have you been most impressed by in terms of minimizing environmental damage?

This is an important issue. But the task of preserving the ocean will not be solved by restrictions on tourists alone. It's a two way street. I've read pseudoscientific articles about how the whale shark show in Oslob, Philippines is harming the local coral reef. But I saw the remains of this reef and knew for sure that it had been destroyed long ago by dynamite fishing, not feeding whale sharks. Divers hear about the "no gloves policy", pay marine park fees, dive and see huge nets with dead fish and corals killed by dynamite and cyanide.

This is why the best pristine places are those with the lowest population density. Raja Ampat, Komodo Islands, Brothers Islands and Daedalus Reef in Egypt are just examples.

19. What do you think are underrated destinations for underwater photographers?

Underrated destinations? There are many. Just a few examples.

- Gorontalo is a small town in the Gulf of Tomini, Sulawesi. Magnificent drop offs, full of life, charming bays. Everything from resident whale sharks to macro life can be found here.
- Mactan, Philippines, is well known as a popular diving tourism destination. Less known is the fact that this is a great place for macro and super macro photography underwater.
- The Red Sea also has many very interesting places. Dahab, Abu Dabab. During the workshop in Wadi Lahami, on our first dive we spotted four different species of Costasiella, Leaf Sheep.

20. What does the future hold, i.e. what project(s) are you planning?

I'm full of ideas, I don't have enough time for everything. This book will be published in March: "Life on the Reef: Corals, Sea Squirts, Sponges, Bryozoa, Comb Jellies, Marine Plants". This will be the final book with 1,400 species in a series of guides to marine animals of the tropical Indo-Pacific. Then I will continue working on educational programs and Apps.

Many thanks, Andrey

Colin Marshall
colintrmarshall@yahoo.com

We've got you covered!



Magic filters are now available in 3 options. Original Magic for use in blue water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance, Auto-Magic for compact cameras in automatic point and shoot mode. GreenWater Magic for use in green water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance. Prices start at just £25.

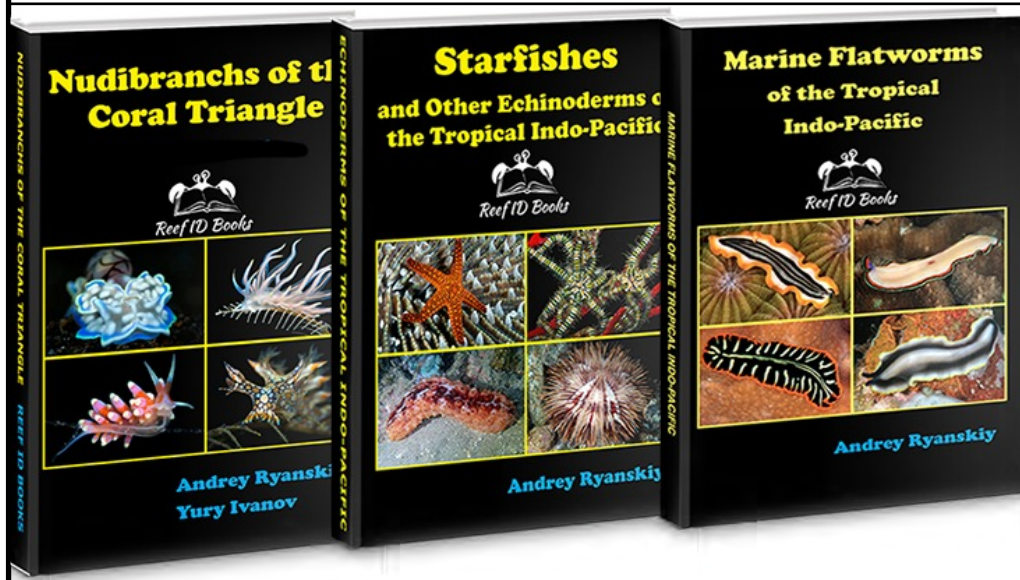
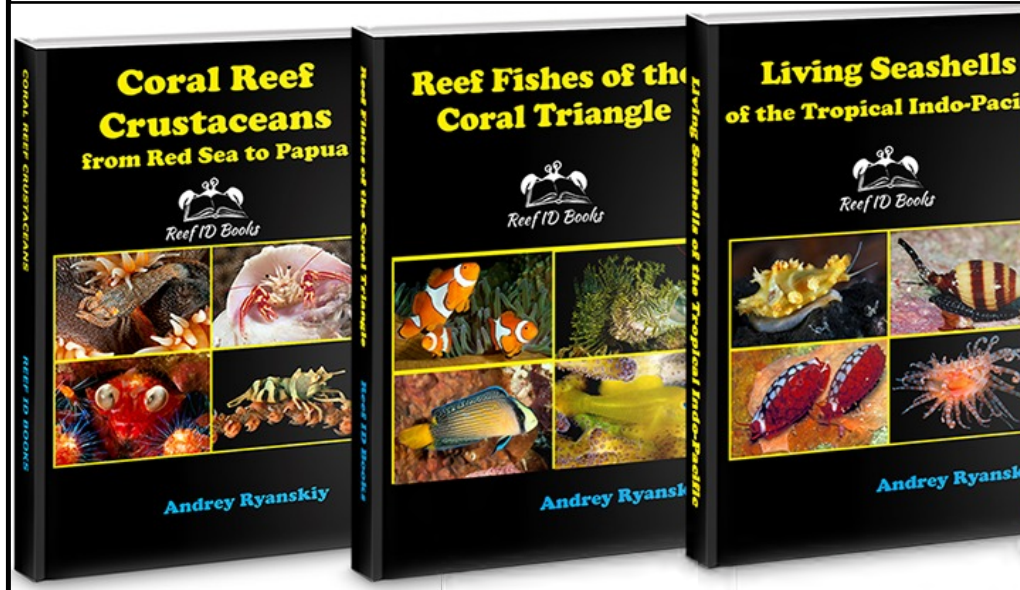


The Auto-Magic formula is now available in a Plexiglass filter that can be added or removed underwater.

Simple and inexpensive yet so effective

www.magic-filters.com

Reef ID Travel Set with 6240+ species on fishes, nudibranchs, seashells, starfishes, flatworms, crustaceans. Up-to date taxonomy. Paperback, iBook, pdf.



<https://reefidbooks.gumroad.com/>

www.uwpmag.com