

Mike Bartick

interview

with Peter Rowlands

You are currently resident photo pro at Crystal Blue Resort in Anilao, Philippines and we'll come back to that later but have you always been in the dive industry or were you following another career path beforehand?

Actually, this is my second career. I was a trained chef working in Southern California for more than 20 years. Working in a busy kitchen forces you to be creative and find solutions quickly while keeping your cool. It was a challenging career path, but it was very rewarding and beneficial to my current career in many ways.

Did diving and underwater photography start about the same time; was it in the film era or have you always been digital?

I did shoot film, but I don't think that really counts. I lived near the ocean and traveled with my parents to Hawaii on family vacations. It was in those early years that I fell in love with tropical environments.

I snorkeled first and always carried my little Minolta Sport. That camera was an indestructible 110 Instamatic, perhaps even the original point-and-shoot. I learned many things with that camera, like how to shoot fish butts through a snow globe.

It wasn't until around 2004 that I got my first digital camera for underwater photography. I had been saving money to buy a complete RS system



and had a trip to Fiji approaching. I stopped by a shop to fill my tanks when I spotted a small Sony, 3-megapixel camera looking up at me. On a whim, I decided to buy it, and soon afterward, I was drifting through the SoCal kelp forest snapping photos. I got published right away, with an image of a beautiful batray drifting through the kelp forest.

In those early years what was the appeal or reason for taking underwater images?

Photography and diving have always been linked for me. Being underwater allows me to escape my demons and quiet the noise in my head. It gives me a sense of calm and freedom. I love exploring and experiencing the unknown. Being in nature is a part of the human experience that everyone should experience.

There is nothing like being underwater, and I want to share that experience with others.



Stacked Argonauts. Nikon D850, 60mm. ISO 320. f/25 @ 1/200

Female Argonauts (Paper nautilus) stack together and form chaons during the height of the spawning season. Knowing their behavior and having extensive experience helped me figure out the best times of year to hunt for Argonauts.



Mototi Octopus - Anilao, Philippines. Nikon Z8, f/105, EMWL + 160° objective lense. ISO 200, f/11 @ 1/60, Sea and Sea YS-D130R

Knowing marine life well helps me anticipate a shot and stay prepared when the action occurs. Using innovative gear like the EMWL system gives me an intimate edge that I aim for in all my work.

And how did you learn how to improve?

I am self taught. Improvement arises through repetition, mentoring, experimenting, and learning from mistakes.

I dove two or three days a week in a local cove and taught myself how to shoot. After some small successes, I met Joe Liburdy, a professional underwater photographer, at a dive club. After his presentation, I asked if we could meet again, and soon he

became my mentor. My path suddenly changed.

We met twice a month to review images and talk shop. These meetings became a crucial step in my learning process as it taught me critical thinking and the value of being calm underwater.

Joe was an incredibly creative and generous guy. He had a way of telling me exactly what I needed to know in a brutally honest way.

He never gave me any special



Leafy Sea Dragon, South Australia, Tumby Bay. Nikon Z8, F105mm + MFO-3. ISO 100 f/16 @ 1/200. Dual Backscatter Hybrid strobes-Inward lighting

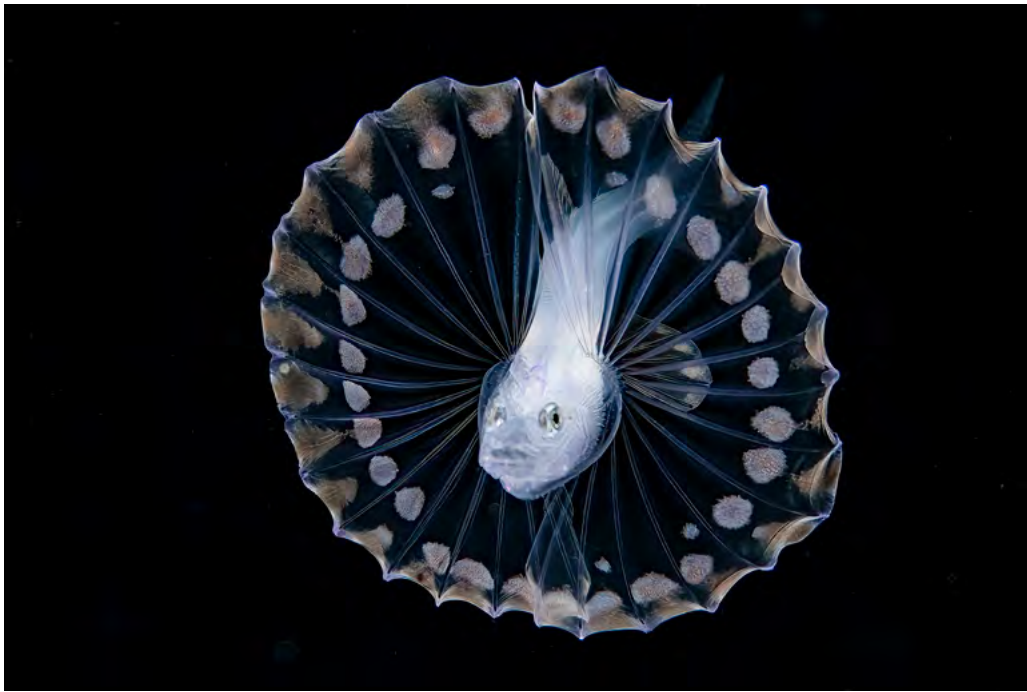
After flying to Hong Kong with Edward Lai from Nauticam, he handed me the MFO-2 (now MFO-3) to test while I was in South Australia. The meeting on the plane was pure serendipity, as we missed each other in Anilao but ended up sitting next to each other when flying to HK later that evening.

Using a piece of gear that can change how you shoot or let you shoot differently is very special. I can honestly say, without the MFO, this shot might never have happened.

settings or a secret strobe angle; he would make me think and ask questions, rather than point things out.

Some of my favorite responses during these sessions still ring in my head when the pressure is on. On more than one occasion he exclaimed I missed another chance

of a lifetime. Then he'd follow up with 'think, think, think, slow down and think!' Another really good one was, "ahuh, interesting" or even better, "Where's the story in that". I still hear his voice in my head today, and I love that man for not sugar-coating anything. He pushed me to look harder to be a quick study, to never



Tripod fish, Cozumel Mexico. Nikon D850, 60mm. ISO 400, f/18 @ 1/250
The Tripod fish lives well below recreational dive depths, around 5 to 6,000 meters. However, the larval form can be seen feeding near the surface. They are striking, hunt vertically, and resemble a balarena in a tutu.

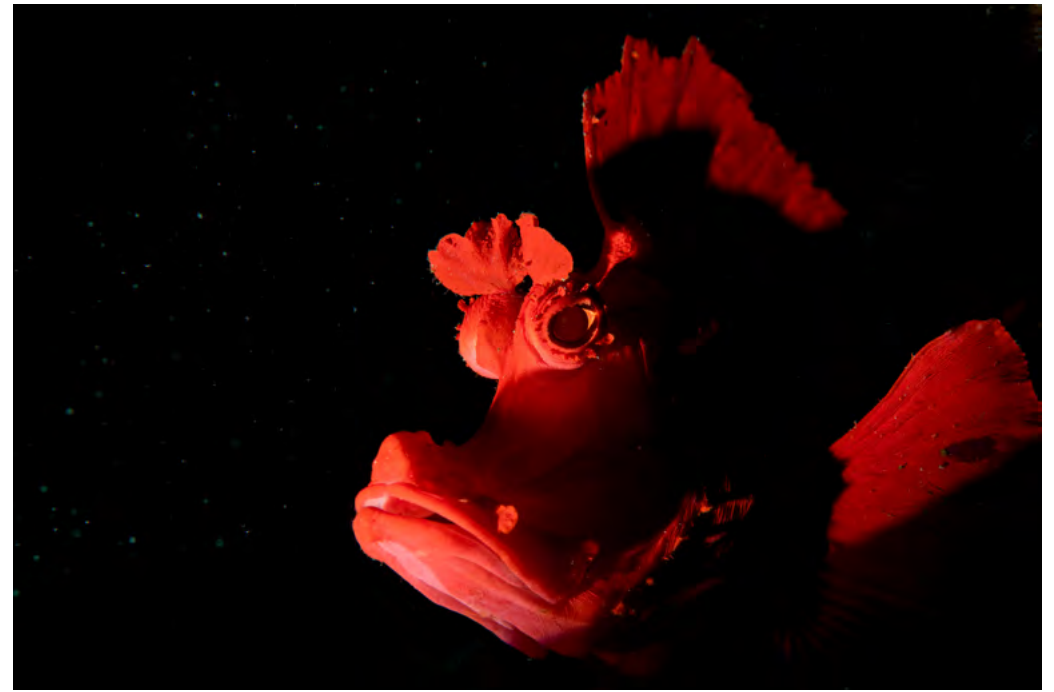
give up, and always to bring it back.

One day, when I angered Joe during a photo review, he told me to “Keep my day job.” Then he cited the guys he also mentored as an example, Stuart Westmoreland being one of them. He told me Stuart quit his day job, and now look at him. Of course, this was a really bad example because “Stuey” was one of the biggest names at the time. I cannot tell you what a gift it is to be mentored and humbled by someone with such deep

knowledge and loving power. Today, I try to follow his positive examples by mentoring others and passing along anything I can.

Was there a distinct cut off time when you went full time?

The “Cut Off” took time to prepare for, but the right moment to make the move arrived when I was ready. This might sound contrived, but I’ve always looked for open doors in life. I trust the universe and have



Red Rhinopias. Nikon D850, F105mm, f/11 @ 1/200. Dual Backscatter miniflash and snoot

Inward texture lighting helped create a beautiful portrayal of this bright scarlet-red Rhinopias found on our house reef. Lighting is everything. Understanding different styles and techniques allows me to switch between a commercial approach for publication or shooting for fun.

always done so. Things tend to work out if you can step aside and let them. It doesn’t always go as planned or as you want, but that’s part of the beauty.

Due to circumstances I don’t wish to discuss, I suddenly found myself in a position to make major life decisions. The magic happened when I stumbled into Crystal Blue while searching for a place to host workshops and teach natural history. I wanted to create a place that offered

people a life experience. It was a dive center then, mainly a weekend getaway for locals.

I spent the first day diving, and later that night, I braved a nasty typhoon with the staff. I later learned that the owner lived near my mother in LA. I flew back, we met, and the rest is history. The first few years to get the photo center off the ground were tough, but we managed to keep going. Year after year, we continued



to grow and reinvest in the property. I guess my “cut-off” time was more of a gradual transition as I kept my company in the US operating until 2013.

Now, we have a nice little resort focused on underwater photography and natural history, with a staff that is my family.

You're very knowledgeable about marine creature identification. Did you receive formal training, or are you self-taught?

I appreciate the kind comment. I don't see myself as an expert in IDs, but I am a quick learner when it comes to behavior. I never forget

behavior. I have never been able to find conclusive answers to the endless questions my brain generates. So, I ask a lot of questions, read books, and research topics that truly interest me. I learned early on that divers who understand the environment and habitats know how to find the coolest things. Diving with expert guides and scientists also helps me gain a better understanding. I also enjoy studying ecology, currents, tides, and substrate, knowing that everything works together, starting on shore.



Wunderpus photogenicus- Anilao, Philippines. Nikon D850, 60mm, ISO 320. f/18 @ 1/250

The Wunderpus is now an iconoc subject for Anilao blackwater divers. They are transparent with colorful pigments and an oversized siphon that resembles the head of an alien creature

You've settled in Anilao but were there other locations you considered and if so what was it about Anilao that tipped the balance.

I arrived in Anilao after taking a winding route through Lembeh. One morning in the camera room at the old Kasawari resort, I met a guy who told me about Anilao. I did my research, booked a ticket, and that was it.

The two locations complement

each other in many ways. Lembeh is calm and mysterious, while Anilao is rugged and wild. There's no better choice, just different. When I arrived in Anilao, there were no resorts dedicated to underwater photography, unlike Lembeh. I saw a spot that was a diamond in the rough. Anilao was an unknown destination; sure, a few pictures appeared here and there, but nobody really knew about it. I felt like this was a place I could call my own and to build



Melibe colemani- Anilao, Philippines. Nikon Z8, 105mm. ISO 100, f/20 @ 1/200. Backscatter Miniflash and snoot, purple color gel for background lighting
I enjoy creating various types of creative macro images. I prefer to keep things simple and don't carry much with me when I go diving. I rarely get a one-on-one opportunity with a guide and could never imagine involving anyone else in my creative process. However, I do rely on guides to help hunt and track subjects like this exquisite slug. Special subjects deserve special lighting.



Coconut Occy, Anilao, Philippines. Nikon Z8, 60mm, f/13 @ 1/4
Buried backlight to highlight the worms
I enjoy having fun while shooting. Thinking quickly and preparing for a shot are everything. Visualizing is a tool I used heavily as a chef—breaking things down into steps systematically helps me improve a shot as I create the image. On this night dive, the worms were out in force, which I actually enjoy. All of those squiggly things moving through the water can be fun to exploit in photos.

something significant. The entire area has become like my little cove and as much as I know the substrate, the guides always know it better.

Also, how has Anilao changed or developed over the years you've been there?

So much has changed, both underwater and on land. Anilao is

now quite popular for several reasons, including the discovery of new critters. But we also have stunning reefs, pinnacles, coral gardens, and incredible Blackwater diving. These beautiful resources have attracted more tourism and created more jobs within the community.

You have become synonymous with blackwater diving, perhaps even the

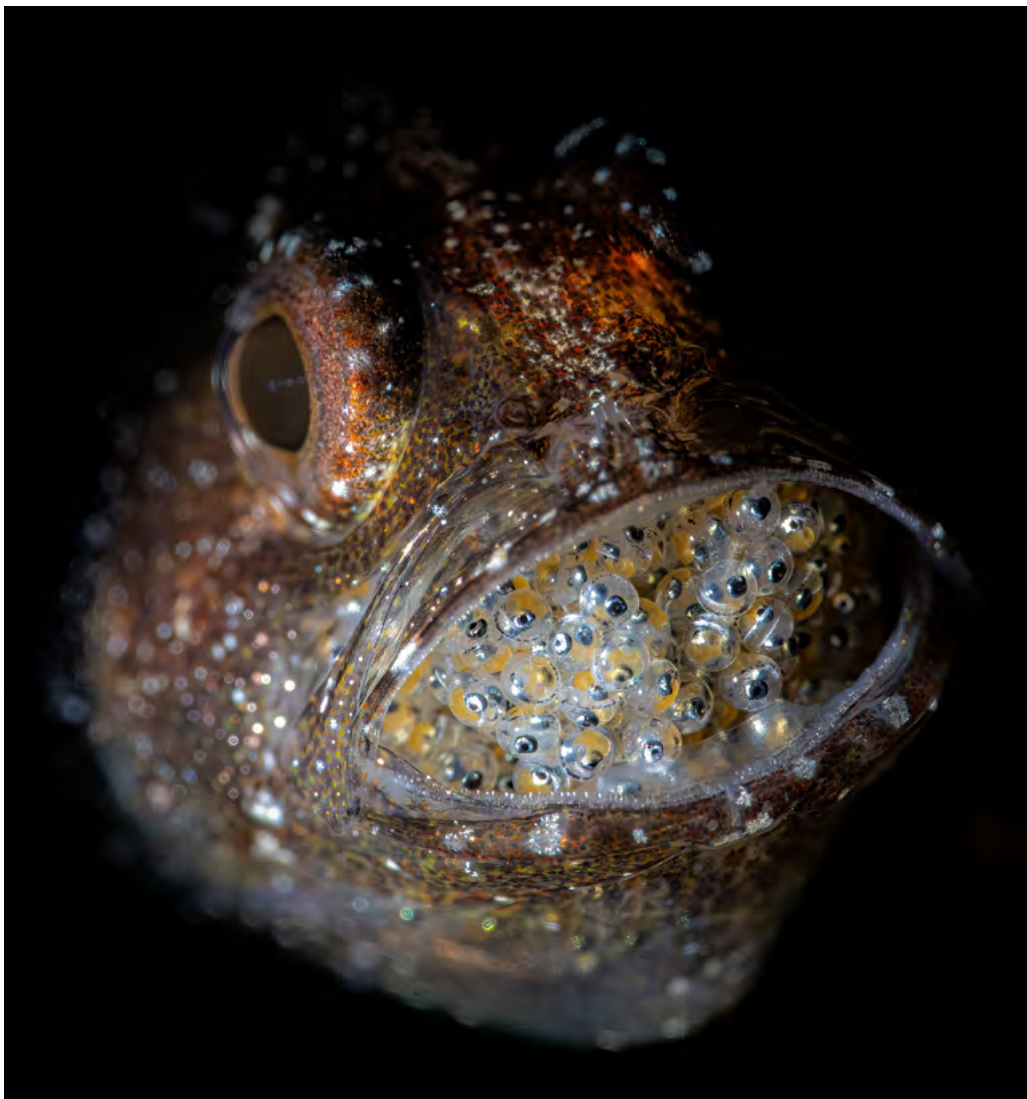


Diamond Squid, Anilao, Philippines. Nikon D850, 60mm. ISO 320, f/18 @ 1/250
D-backs are a highly sought-after target on blackwater dives. Knowing how to shoot them helps bring out the best in the subject. I enjoy collaborating with guests to help them shoot differently and achieve better images. Seeing that spark in their eyes is extremely rewarding for me.

founder, where, when and why did you get into it?

I am not the original founder of Blackwater Diving. I think Chris Newbert was the first person to swim away from the rope in Kona years ago. However, I created the environment in which Blackwater Diving and photography now thrives: The Blackwater Photogroup.

I also developed a safe method for BW diving that is now widely used across Asia, the Caribbean, Indo, and other parts of the Pacific and Indian ocean. I've traveled extensively, teaching dive centers, training their staff, and taking dive center and live-aboard operators out diving to demonstrate how it's done. It's fair to say that I helped popularize it worldwide by sharing knowledge,



Cardinalfish mouthbrooding. Nikon Z8, Z105mm+ MFO-3. ISO 100, f/22 @ 1/200. Kraken S-40 strobe and snoot.

My guide found this thumbnail-sized male Cardinalfish. Using my snoot to angle the light from the side so it traveled through the eggs was my entire goal. I focused solely on that, and this was the result. I don't know if a photographer is ever truly happy with their work. For me, I think it's a matter of accepting what I captured as the best I could do within that moment.

experience, images, and video footage.

For me, everything began when I started diving in the open ocean with my friends in Southern California circa 2007. My memory is a bit fuzzy. We would anchor ourselves to my buddy's boat and drift along, photographing plankton, and we saw some truly incredible things. Later, when I saw these highly exotic subjects being photographed the same way but at night, I thought it was the next logical step. What could possibly go wrong?

A few years later, we built our first free-drifting pumpkin and started exploring the Anilao area with it. What we discovered put Anilao on the map for blackwater (BW) diving. We encountered Argonauts, Blanket Octopus with eggs, Diamond Squid, Long-Armed Octopus, Ribbon Fish, and my all-time favorite, the "Settling Wunderpus," which we actually found in 2012.

The Wunderpus is now an icon of Anilao so we always target that first for new BW divers. We also introduced BW diving to guests as part of our regular dive programs. Over time, this evolved into offering workshops to teach the natural history and techniques, over a week dedicated solely to this style of diving. I suppose the whole BW thing has been another step in our ongoing evolution.

What percentage of your diving is blackwater nowadays?

Its easy to say, 50% of my diving is BW, depending on the day and season. In recent years, I shifted from still photos to video to better document the density and diversity of zooplankton near the surface at night. I usually drive myself and dive team to the edge of exhaustion when we go on these runs that can last up to 20+ nights. A typical night puts us back on the dive deck prior to midnight, sleep never comes easy after a good dive.

Do you have contacts in the academic world of marine biology and are they as excited about the revelations from blackwater images?

Absolutely, The FB group helped bridge a gap between divers and scientists. There are very few dedicated professionals that deal with planktonic life. Describing and cataloging animals isnt easy, and much of the knowledge is going to the grave with the luminaries in this niche profession.

Imagine being a scientist, spending a career of counting fin rays of dyed specimens. Then one day, you see an image of that same specimen in all of its glory. Colorful, ornate, and aloft on the current.

This is exactly what the

*Blanket Octopus reflection. Nikon D850, 60mm. ISO 320, f/16 @ 1/200. Flip down wide angle converter
The Queen of Chaos, a Female Banket Octopus (T.gracillis).*

A large female blanket octopus glides overhead, skimming the surface. I'm capturing 5 frames per second and using 3D tracking on this shot, and I was quite pleased with my luck when I reviewed the images in post. Technology today has enhanced our underwater capabilities, opening doors I never imagined possible.

Blackwater Photo Group has given the academic world, and in return, they generously educate us. Larval animals are the most challenging subjects to correctly identify, as they look so much different than their adult selves.

It would be remiss of me not to ask about the camera equipment you use/used both now and historically. Do you like to be up to date or have you got to a level of equipment which is sufficient for your needs.

Camera equipment- Apparently, there is no such thing as enough or sufficient. I'm currently shooting a Nikon Z8, but I have a cabinet full of old bodies. My first DSLR was a Canon. I switched to Nikon after a few years and have been very happy with that decision. I use two main cameras, primarily my Nikon Z8 for photo and video and my D850 for photos.

Current every day gear: Nikon Z8. Nauticam Housing and Optics. Backscatter Hybrid flash. Backscatter Miniflash and snoot. Kraken S40 flash/ snoot. Favorite lens- Nikon f, 105mm

For BW video: Nikon Z8- 8K Raw . 105+MFO-3. 60mm + MFO-1. 24-50mm w/WACP-1. Kraken 18K



with remote

I do like to stay ahead of the curve if possible. Technology is rapidly evolving on many fronts for us, so I like to have experience and honest feedback whenever I'm asked.

You have several collaborations with manufacturers. How did this come about and have the relationships produced improved equipment?

It's true, I am fortunate to work and collaborate with several companies, especially Nauticam. It's a

genuine honor to be part of a team that shares the same passion for creating innovative gear, as I have for my work. I am also grateful to Kraken Sports, as Doug supported my reckless idea of drifting through the open ocean at night, when no one else would. While others looked at me in horror, Doug said, tell me what you need.

It's not about influencing sales for me or getting free stuff; it's more about testing and being a proving ground for concepts. I enjoy the idea of using a piece of gear that could change the way I shoot. The way we see the ocean is like speaking a



Zu Cristatus Ribbon Fish

The ornate Ribbonfish are generally found at the very end of the night, when you're tired and about to pack it in, when all of a sudden, this guy shows up. Swimming parallel to the surface and heading straight for your lights, the Ribbonfish are exquisite.

John Cleese said it best during a Ted Talk: The creative process is not exclusive to geniuses or those who are smarter than others. It's about letting go of ego long enough to become a child again.

Lucky me, I never grew up

What does a photo pro actually do?

Being a photo pro for me means many things, one of which is staying ahead so I can provide the best service to clients and guests. Exploring or developing new techniques, and pushing myself and my camera gear to create something truly special—whether it's shooting interesting behavior, a natural setting, or unhinged macro work.

It's also about coaching patiently, with experienced insight, to help other shooters problem-solve and find their own way—not by setting up a shot, but by teaching others how to set up for a shot.

I dive and shoot nearly every day, logging more than 700 dives a year, with about 500+ in Anilao. I produce material for publication, research, workshops, and marketing. I write about destinations, marine life stories, camera gear, and more. Through it all, I'm able to have the finest human experience that I could ever imagine,

connecting people with our ocean. One thing is for certain: it takes a team of people to keep me running at top speed, and I'm grateful to have a support team of reliable professionals who share my work ethic.

In the end, I am just a guy with a camera, fortunate enough to do what I love every day.

Do it for the love and not the likes!

Many thanks, Mike, for taking the time to provide such detailed and informative responses.

Thanks Peter.

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com

Mike Bartick
www.DiveCBR.com

new language. Each new device has a personality that needs to be unlocked and tapped into before it can really shine. I work hard at figuring that out, but it isn't always easy.

I shoot the gear that serves me best so if you want to know what works, simply look at me camera anytime.

Do you foresee a life after Anilao and are there other ambitions still to achieve?

Well, when I retire, I plan to move to the Philippines and go diving every

day.

My goals are to experience the ocean as it truly is and to share that experience. I've always approached it with a journalistic mindset and hope to connect with and positively influence others in the same way. I love diving, photography, and meeting people from all over the world. I'm in the perfect place for me right now and hope to ride this wave all the way to the shore.



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Mike@DiveCBR.com

WWW.DiveCBR.com

