

UPY 2026 winners

by Alex Mustard



An adorable pair of Southern elephant seal pups, photographed in a rockpool on the Falkland Islands, sees Matty Smith from Australia named Underwater Photographer of the Year (UPY) 2026. Smith's photograph 'Rockpool Rookies' triumphed over 7900 pictures entered by underwater photographers from around the world.

"Once their pups are weaned, elephant seal mothers abandon them ashore," explained Smith. "I watched dozens clamber over one another in shallow rockpools, awkwardly learning to swim. On my very first evening, the sky ignited with colour and I captured a handful of frames before the light vanished. It was the defining moment of the long trip."

"The lives of elephant seals traverse land and sea; they are born on wild shores, but thrive in frigid waters," added chair of the judging panel, marine ecologist Dr Alex Mustard. "Smith used a special dome that he built himself to capture the revealing under-over perspective, perfectly balancing his lighting on the pups' fur with the setting sun. Elephant seals were hunted right to the brink of extinction. Their oil rich blubber was used for everything

from fuel for lighting to margarine. Fortunately, the hunt was stopped just in time, and their recovery over the last 100 years is a great example of resilience of the ocean. A beautiful and hopeful photograph."

Ocean babies starred in several of the contest's international categories including "Clownfish Hatchout" by Kazushige Horiguchi from Japan, which remarkably shows the moment anemonefish eggs hatch, with the parent watching on. "I have been photographing clownfish for over three years, but this single image is the only one that truly succeeds," said Horiguchi, who won the Behaviour category.

Cecile Gabillon Barats, from France, won the Wide Angle category, sponsored by Scuba Finders, with her characterful portrait of a sperm whale calf. "The exuberance of youth bursts out of this photo. Sperm whales live strange and secret lives, but we now know that youngsters can be full of mischief," commented Mustard.

Behaviour - "Clownfish Hatchout" © Kazushige Horiguchi (Japan)/UPY2026



Underwater Photographer of the Year - 'Rockpool Rookies' © Matty Smith (Australia)/UPY2026





'PADI' Up & Coming Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026 "Lunging Leopard"
© Sam Blount (US)/UPY2026

Sam Blount from the United States was named as 'PADI' Up & Coming Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026 for his photo "Lunging Leopard", for his symmetrical composition of the jaws of a leopard seal, one of Antarctica's top predators. "Leopard seals wield an astonishing array of dominance displays," explained Blount. "This one put them all to use, darting around me with effortless power. Watching that massive mouth lined with sharp teeth charge straight toward me is a thrill I'll never forget."

"Probably the best leopard seal

shots I've seen," commented contest judge Tobias Friedrich. "To capture such a perfect composition with delicate lighting, in such an intense moment, is so impressive."

The UPY Contest aims to promote underwater photography and in 2026 includes a Smartphone category to encourage more people to try making images underwater, using the camera most people carry in their pocket – their phone. Jack Ho from China won the category that is sponsored by DIVEVOLK, with "The Roar" a photo of a yawning hairy frogfish taken with a Vivo phone. "I found this well-

camouflaged frogfish patiently lying in wait for prey on the sandy seabed in Indonesia," said Ho. "I also waited patiently for at least 15 minutes to capture the moment it opened its huge mouth."

"2025 has been called the Year of the Octopus in British waters," explained judge Mustard. "Octopus are native to Britain, but usually very rare, but last summer there was a population bloom and as expected lots of photographers encountered them too." Tom Ingram won the British Waters Macro category with "Mum" showing a female octopus guarding her eggs in Cornwall. "Octopus are the most dedicated parents, the female guards the eggs for many weeks, stops feeding and dies soon after she's ensured they have safely hatched," said Ingram.

British Waters Macro
"Mum" © Tom Ingram(UK)/
UPY2026



DIVEVOLK Smartphone - © Jack Ho (China)/UPY2026





*'Save Our Seas Foundation' Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026
'Innocence Meets Tradition' © Khaichuin Sim (Malaysia)/UPY2026*

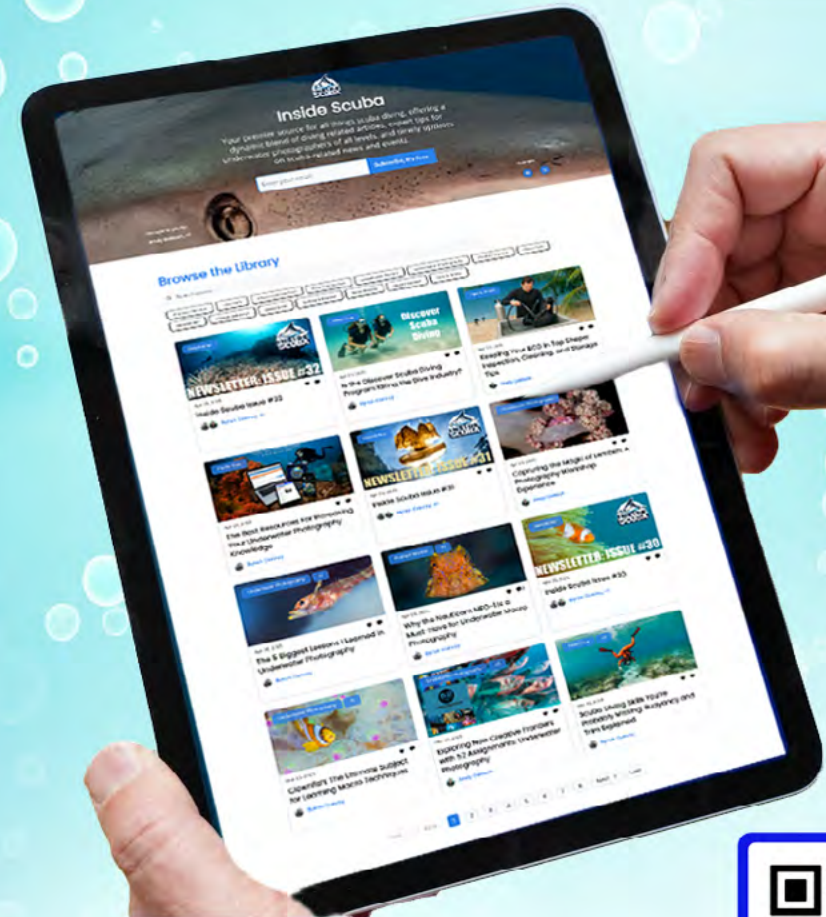
In the same contest, Malaysian photographer, Khaichuin Sim, was named 'Save Our Seas Foundation' Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026, with his photo 'Innocence Meets Tradition', depicting the annual pilot whale hunt in the Faroe Islands. "Seen by locals as a cultural heritage and source of food, it is condemned globally for its brutality and impact on wildlife," commented Sim. "A young boy sits atop a slain

whale amid blood-red waters, a haunting reflection of how tradition, identity, and ethics collide."

"A sad but powerful image which asks more questions than it answers," said contest judge Peter Rowlands. "The message must be that traditions such as these have no place in modern society. Photography has the power to bring change."

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