

Exploring Freshwater Habitats

by Andrew McLachlan

There are moments that stick with you such as the first time you truly feel at home beneath the surface. For me, that moment didn't happen in Ontario. It happened in the warm, clear waters of Grand Cayman, where every dive feels like a revelation. That's where I found myself as an underwater photographer.

In the Caribbean, most everything conspires in your favor. The visibility stretches for what feels like forever, often exceeding 100 feet. Sunlight pours down in clean, uninterrupted shafts, illuminating coral reefs. Encounters with fish, turtles, and stingrays feel both cinematic and effortless. It's a place where, as a photographer, you can focus almost entirely on composition and storytelling because the environment itself can provide much of the atmosphere and texture.

I not only learned to see underwater on Grand Cayman, but to anticipate behavior, to understand light as it filters through the water column, and to compose images in a space where gravity feels optional. It was intoxicating. And somewhere along the way, without really noticing when it happened,

underwater photography stopped being something I did and became something I was.

When the time came to leave my Grand Cayman home and return to Ontario, Canada I carried that identity with me. The problem, of course, was obvious: Ontario is absolutely not the Caribbean. There are no coral reefs, no turquoise shallows, and certainly no reliable 100-foot visibility. The ocean, with its vast and forgiving canvas, was gone. In its place freshwater lakes, rivers, and wetlands became my playground. These habitats are beautiful in their own right, but they are far less predictable, and far less inviting to an underwater photographer accustomed to tropical conditions.

At first, leaving the Caribbean felt like a loss. I remember thinking that I might have to leave underwater photography behind, or at least put

*Over-under of Chinook Salmon, Ontario, Canada with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 8mm Fisheye Lens in an AOI UH-OM1 housing with dual AOI Ultra-InTeli P1 Strobes with dome diffusers
ISO 200, f11 @ 1/250 sec.*





Water lily leaves in Eels Creek using the OM1 and Zuiko 8-25mm lens in an AOI UH-OM1 housing with dual AOI Ultra-InTeli P1 Strobes with diffusers. ISO 200, f8 @ 1/60

it on pause. It seemed logical, after all, most of the iconic underwater imagery we see comes from ocean environments. But the more I sat with that idea, the more it didn't sit right. Underwater photography had become too central to who I was. Putting it on pause wasn't an option.

So instead, I made a decision: if I couldn't bring the ocean with me, I would learn to see Ontario's freshwater environments the same way I had learned to see the

Caribbean's. One advantage of exploring freshwater habitats beneath the surface is that many locations are shallow and can be explored while snorkeling. This alone allows for extended time in the water as we are not limited based on the amount of air in our tanks. Freshwater environments, especially in Ontario do require the use of wetsuits to comfortably explore the watery world throughout the seasons. I use a 7mm suit for spring and fall and a 3mm suit



An invasive Round Goby in Ontario, Canada with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 60mm Macro lens with dual AOI Ultra-InTeli P1 Strobes with dome diffusers. ISO 200, f8 @ 1.250 sec

for summer months.

That decision marked the beginning of a transition, not just in subject matter, but in mindset.

Freshwater environments demand a different kind of patience. Visibility can change dramatically from one day to the next. Rainfall, runoff, algae blooms, and seasonal turnover can quickly degrade the clarity of the water. Where Caribbean waters often offer consistency, freshwater lakes and rivers are more moody

and unpredictable. At first, that unpredictability felt like a barrier. Over time, it became part of the appeal.

Instead of relying on expansive scenes, I had to start looking closer. Much closer.

In Grand Cayman, it was easy to be drawn to the big picture with sweeping reefscapes or sea turtles swimming through the water column. In Ontario, those grand scenes are indeed rare. Visibility might be measured in feet rather than tens

of feet. But within that smaller window exists an entirely different world, one that rewards attention to detail.

I began focusing on intimate encounters: a smallmouth bass in the shallows, a crayfish among rocky substrate, salmon running upstream, the delicate nature of aquatic plants, or the sunlight filtering down from the surface to illuminate a riverbed. Each of these subjects required me to slow down, observe, and to work within tight compositions where every element mattered.

Lighting also became a new challenge and an opportunity to learn.

In the Caribbean, ambient light is often abundant and clean. In Ontario, it can be dim, filtered through tannins or suspended particles that scatter and soften it. Artificial light, particularly strobes, became essential not just for illumination but for shaping the image. Learning to control backscatter or accept it as a compositional element to create an atmospheric look to images took time to develop, as backscatter is often frowned upon in our images. Positioning strobes carefully, adjusting angles, and sometimes embracing the moodiness rather than fighting it became part of my evolving approach.

There were certainly frustrations as I set out to explore the freshwater habitats near my home. There were days when the visibility collapsed, when subjects were elusive, when conditions simply didn't cooperate. But there were also breakthroughs, moments when everything came together and I photographed images that felt just as powerful and meaningful as anything I had photographed in the Caribbean Sea not that long ago.

One of the most significant shifts was realizing that freshwater photography isn't a lesser version



Virile Crayfish with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 8mm Fisheye Lens in an AOI UH-OM1 housing with dual AOI Ultra-InTeli P1 Strobes with dome diffusers. ISO 200, f8 @ 1/250 sec

of ocean photography, it is a different discipline entirely. It is also one that must be timed according to the seasons as there seems to be more of a timeline associated with photographing subject matter. For instance, the best time to photograph salmon is during the fall spawning run, or mudpuppies during winter nights as that is their

most active time. Nonetheless, becoming a better naturalist will indeed present more photographic opportunities.

The biodiversity in our freshwater habitats may not be as overtly colourful, but it is by no means less fascinating. Freshwater ecosystems here in Ontario are rich in life and much of it is overlooked. Fish

species like bass, pike, and sunfish exhibit complex behaviours, especially during spawning seasons. Amphibians, insects, and even the textures of the underwater landscape itself offer endless creative possibilities.

And then there's the seasonal aspect – winter is no time to store your housings, ports, and strobes in the closet until springtime.

In Ontario, the underwater world transforms throughout the year. Spring brings spawning activity and renewed life. Summer offers warmer water and increased activity, though often at the cost of reduced visibility due to algae blooms. Fall introduces cooler temperatures and, in some cases, improved clarity. Each season presents its own challenges and rewards, which forces me to adapt.

In the Caribbean, it's possible to become comfortable being able to rely on often consistently good conditions. In freshwater habitats complacency isn't an option. You must read the water, understand the environment, and be willing to experiment. You must accept that not every outing will yield results, and that success often comes from persistence.

These are not distant, exotic locations. There are local rivers and lakes that I can return to again and again. Over time, I've come to know certain areas more intimately: how they change with the seasons, where specific species tend to gather, how light behaves during different times of the day. This familiarity allows me to make a more deliberate approach, where I can plan shoots based on knowledge rather than chance.

In many ways working in freshwater habitats has brought my work full circle. While the Caribbean introduced me to underwater photography, Ontario has grounded it. I have become more engaged with



Common Mudpuppy in creek on a winter night with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 8mm Fisheye lens and dual AOI Ultra-InTeli P1 Strobes with dome diffusers. ISO 200, f8 @ 1/250 sec

the environment, to find beauty in subtlety, and to tell stories that might otherwise go unnoticed. My focus is now more connection based. And perhaps more importantly, it has reaffirmed why I enjoy underwater photography in the first place.

Underwater photography isn't just about

capturing striking images - it's about revealing a world that most people never truly get to see. Whether that world is a vibrant coral reef or a quiet freshwater lake doesn't ultimately matter. What matters is the act of exploration, of curiosity, of bringing something hidden to the surface.



Crowe River underwater landscape with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 8mm Fisheye Lens. ISO 200, f8 @ 1/40 sec. ambient light

Looking back, I can see that the transition from Grand Cayman to Ontario wasn't a step backward, but a forward step. The ocean gave me the foundation, the skills, the perspective, and a sense of wonder for the underwater world. Freshwater habitats have strengthened my depth, resilience, and sense of purpose for my imagery. It has challenged me in ways I didn't expect and pushed me to grow as both a photographer and an observer of the natural world.

I still think about those Caribbean dives with 100-foot visibility, the colours, the feeling of weightlessness in an endless blue. Those experiences will always be a part of me. But now, when I slip beneath the surface of an Ontario lake or river, I feel something just as meaningful.

I feel at home.

Underwater photography was never about a specific place. It is about the connection to the world



Air bubbles trapped under the frozen surface in winter with the OM1 and M. Zuiko 8mm Fisheye Lens, AOI UH-OM1 housing with ambient light. ISO 200, f11 @ 1/250 sec

beneath the surface. That connection can exist anywhere if you are willing to look for it.

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