

Breathhold Subjects

by Phillip Colla

Until about 1994 the vast majority of my diving was done at San Clemente Island, either with a tank or without, searching the kelp forests for interesting animals and compositions. Since then, however, I've virtually given up conventional tank diving, preferring to spend my few free days roaming offshore in my little boat, looking for "stuff to shoot". Historically, offshore waters have been the territory of fishermen and spearfishers more than divers since it was thought that there is not much for a diver to see out there. Indeed this is typically true. Just finding something offshore to observe is sometimes an exercise in frustration and dramamine. But the last few decades have seen photographers turning their attention to these waters with remarkable results, capturing marvelous images of tuna and billfish, gelatinous zooplankton, and whales and dolphins.

My introduction to bluewater diving came ten years ago when I received a call from Mike Johnson inviting me to join him for a day hopping kelp paddies off San Diego. Mike is known for his incredible photos of ocean sunfish and blue whales, images that have been published in many notable journals, National Geographic among them. At the time, though, I simply knew him as the guy who took the cool photos of the weird fish, and I had told him

I was curious about the offbeat diving he did. We hit it off well and I began joining Mike on his frequent summer excursions out on the open ocean. A few years later I picked up a small boat myself, at which point my weekends plans were set from May through October.

As I've grown older and softer (!) I find that this has become, for me, primarily a summer pursuit, but occasional past forays on the water in winter or early spring have yielded a few photos. Usually I will be out of sight of land, often out of radio shot of the coast, often accompanied by a friend or two but sometimes alone. In a sense this is a numbers game predicated on the notion that one needs to get only as far offshore as necessary to find a combination of strong sunlight, worthy animals and clean water. Countless are the days I've had two, but not three, of these critical factors. Yet if I put in enough days on the water, hope for a little luck and keep an ear to the ground for news from the fishing crowd, then I can expect a handful of trips each summer to yield all three. On these days my buddies and I shoot film until the sun goes down. The result is a few keepers, a huge proportion of duds and a once- or twice-a-year stunner.





**Ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*),
somewhere way offshore of
San Diego or Baja
California**

Most summers ocean sunfish are an obvious photographic subject—provided they are around. Sometimes we may drive 100 miles in a day and not see a single mola yet a few weeks later there may be so many we need to watch carefully to avoid hitting them as they

bask near the surface. These curious fish roam the ocean in search of food, following gelatinous zooplankton to all points of the compass as well as into the abyss (researchers have recorded molas on extremely deep dives). Of course we only see them near the surface, which is the most pleasant place to photograph them anyway. Strobe light tends to burn out a mola, and virtually all of my favorite sunfish photos are shot with

little or no strobe light. High overcast clouds rather than a clear sky yield the optimal light – diffuse but still bright—for photographing sunfish. I like to use Nikonos 15mm and 20mm lenses for these animals. Since the pace of the mola action is usually glacial, no motor drive is necessary and bracketing exposures – a good idea with such a contrasty scene – is easily achieved with any camera.



Some molas grow to be immense, 10' (3m) or more from tip to tip (dorsal to anal fin), weighing more than 2000 pounds. I've only seen a few of that size and they are impressive. Bigger molas are usually loaded with external parasites. It is presumably these parasites (often copepods) and the mola's desire to be rid of them that brings a mola to drifting kelp. Drift kelp is a magnet for fish: small fish seek protection in an otherwise exposed environment, and large fish are there to eat the smaller. The molas hang out alongside the drift kelp and soon fish within the kelp venture out to the mola to



clean it. It's a curious scene, an open ocean cleaning station far more impressive than the reef variety.



Guadalupe Fur Seals
(Arctocephalus townsendi),
 Isla Guadalupe, Mexico

Guadalupe fur seals are my favorite mammal. They have a regal bearing, more so than the more familiar sea lions, and require that an interested diver show patience and restraint in his approach before they will permit him near enough to photograph their natural activities well. Adult Guadalupe fur seals are too refined to engage in the same sort of divebombing play that sea lions exhibit. Rather they may show – if it suits their mood – a vague and lofty semi-interest in a visiting diver, something like that shown a waiter by

a party guest in the Hamptons. A fur seal's thick, two-layered fur constantly emits a thin stream of bubbles underwater. This makes for long glimmering contrails lingering behind swimming fur seals, difficult to capture on film.

It is estimated that Guadalupe fur seals once numbered over 200,000 and ranged from the Revillagigedos to the Channel Islands. However, with the exception of a small colony of

Arctocephalus townsendi at Isla Benito Oeste along the coast of Baja California, the only spot on earth with sizable numbers of Guadalupe fur seals is Isla Guadalupe itself, where the fragile population is staging what appears to be a strong recovery after



being hunted so hard by Russian sealers it was considered extinct for thirty years in the early 20th century. I've spent hundreds of hours in the clear shallows of Guadalupe Island admiring and photographing these elegant pinnipeds, watching as they rest and play in small groups hovering over vast expanses of gold kelp. In spite of the tranquil scene, diving at the island always feels a little edgy. Most divers I've spoken with will not dive at Isla Guadalupe except from the safety of a cage, which is understandable given the many great white sharks the island accommodates. Indeed, for years the annual spearfishing and diving trip organized by my friend Skip Stubbs



was the only one to the tuna-rich island in which people entered the water willingly, predating the many cage trips there that are now so popular and which are bringing an appreciative audience to this remote and special place. Every other year or so spearfishers on our trip encounter a great white, but fortunately no attacks have occurred yet. Guadalupe fur seals deal with the threat of attack from below constantly, and I've seen a number of adult males who must spend their days in the water patrolling their territory with fresh bite marks on their hindquarters. I believe it is for this reason that they have adopted an in-water head-down resting posture quite different from their seal and seal lion cousins. In fact, one way to quickly tell that a raft of floating animals is composed of fur seals rather than sea lions is the near absence of heads above water for fur seals – they are too busy keeping an eye out for what's below. I have seen similar posturing among Northern fur seals at San Miguel Island in California, another white shark zone.

Should you ever find yourself in the waters of Guadalupe or San Benito Islands and wish to photograph the fur seals there, my advice is to turn off your strobes and stay back from the seals for a while. In most cases these animals have never seen a diver before and they need time to become comfortable with your presence. I've seen many fur seals bolt or back off when nailed by strobes by a

diver swimming toward them. It pays to wait and allow them to swim over for a first look. Eventually they will resume their head-down rafting at which point you may be able to approach close enough for good shots. Strobes serve little purpose with these densely furred pinnipeds, except to toss a catch-light into their eyes and brighten the muzzle a bit. The fur seal's coat normally absorbs all the light you can throw at it. I only turn strobes on when I have an individual who I've spent 30 minutes with and is totally comfortable with me, and with whom I've already shot a good selection of available light shots.

**Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*),
Baja California, Mexico.**

This photograph is soft. Yet the subject is about as magnificent as they come, so I am pleased with the photo, the encounter and my good fortune. One of the challenges of photographing a blue whale is being able to see the entire animal at once, above water or below. Seriously, they are usually longer than the visibility of the water so that only a portion of the animal can be seen at any moment. Another challenge is meeting a whale that is sufficiently inquisitive to swim close enough that a photo with any detail at all can be obtained. A body length is a reasonable measure of proximity for any large creature underwater. For a humpback whale this is only about 20-40', which provides for some detail in clear tropical





water. A body length for a blue whale is 50-80' or more, which is generally not near enough in temperate West Coast water for any appreciable detail.

Of course the most important element to such a photo is luck, manifest as simply seeing a blue whale, ever. These enormous animals migrate between Oregon and central America annually, tending north for feeding and south for calving and

perhaps mating. Researchers are now learning much about blue whales, and it appears the northeastern Pacific population is the largest in the world. Most summers off San Diego or northern Baja boaters (usually fishermen chasing tuna) eventually see a blue whale, usually in the distance as a blow or raised fluke. Occasionally, however, a blue whale will unexpectedly surface near a drifting boat with a huge blow and catch everyone by surprise, causing general mayhem as sandwiches are tossed aside in a rush to grab topside cameras. (I've heard this referred to as "getting puckered", for obvious reasons. As in "Wow, we just got puckered by a blue whale!") In some of these instances the whale is inquisitively inspecting the boat. An 80' animal that can be seen from the deck as it passes silently just below is an intimidating sight for those in a small skiff. This has happened to us several times, including while tied to a kelp paddy working molas or plankton. In a few instances we have managed to hop in and hang alongside the boat hoping the whale would swim by for another look. This photo is the result of such a fortunate happenstance: a whale that repeatedly swam under our boat apparently curious to see what we were. It was taken with a Nikonos V and 15mm lens, as I recall shot on automatic with a Nikonos 15mm lens, pushing the film at least a stop. The dim light and specific response of the film led to quite a bit of haze around the animal in the blue channel, so I resorted to using the green channel only for a more pleasing and contrast-rich black and white rendering.

Giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*), San Clemente Island



It is my spirited opinion, one that I enjoy defending over a beer after a long day on the water, that diving amidst giant kelp is the most magnificent diving in the world. I am fortunate enough to have had some amazing experiences underwater – watching swarms of hammerheads



soar overhead, riding the broad back of an accommodating manta, being eyeballed by an inquisitive whale. However, the diving I consider best is that found in the splendid kelp forests along the coast and offshore islands of California. Vast beds of giant kelp line the shore, rising from rocky reefs nearly 100' deep to reach the surface before spreading out to form a thick floating canopy. Underneath this canopy, the sensation of swimming amid the columns of kelp plants is akin to flying through a terrestrial forest. Corridors between kelp stalks lead to wide openings in the forest in which schools of fish hover. Shafts of light filtered by the canopy above fall across kelp to the reef below. When

the current shifts and bends the kelp stalks in a new direction the topology of the forest changes.

When the goal is simply to swim in and admire a kelp forest, nothing beats the clear waters of Southern California's San Clemente Island in late summer. On a good day the panorama at San Clemente is stunning: kelp in all directions reaching from seafloor to surface, summer sun and canopy shadows that are constantly changing, fish swimming the avenues of the forest and visible over 100' away. One is enveloped – literally – by life as far as one can see, an effect I have experienced only a few times, and fleetingly, elsewhere in the ocean. On

a day like this I'll spend as much time in the water as possible, staying just below the surface to take advantage of the wonderful quality and variety of sunlight in the canopy, waiting for subjects to photograph against a backdrop of kelp. There are always garibaldi, kelp bass, various wrasses and juvenile fish hidden among kelp fronds to photograph year-round. It is September and October – the magical Indian summer months at Clemente – that are my favorite as they have brought torpedo and bat rays, seals and sea lions, huge schools of salem and mackerel and enormous sea bass though the forest in front of my lens: wonderful animals in a spectacular setting to spite my limited ability to capture them on film.

It is easy to lose other divers and find solitude in a kelp forest. Sometimes I will spy another diver hovering in the forest staring up and around at the kelp rising on all sides of him, as if in a trance. Either he is totally lost or simply enjoying the surroundings – either way, I know how he feels. At times I do the same thing, finding a particularly appealing spot and shooting all my film on the weeds themselves in an attempt to get one perfect photograph of the kelp forest. It's a photograph I will likely never achieve as the kelp forest is too grand to adequately capture on film.

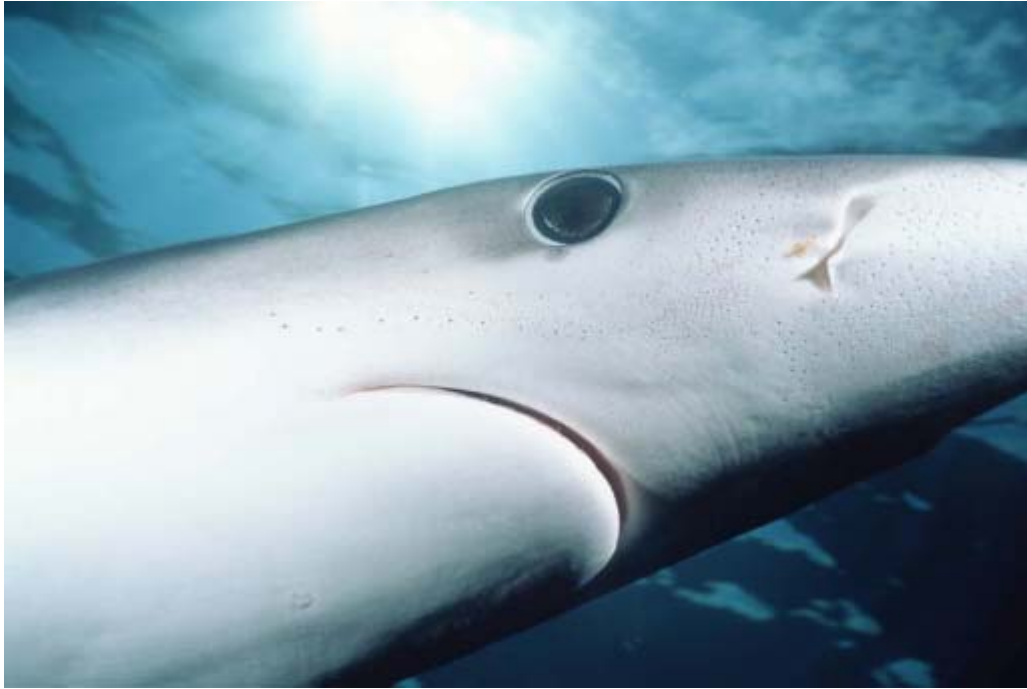
Virtually all of my photos in the

kelp forest are shot with a Nikonos V and 15mm lens. Occasionally I will use a fisheye, since kelp is so bendy anyway that the fisheye's distortion is less noticeable.

Blue Shark (*Prionace glauca*), somewhere offshore of San Diego or Baja California



Blue shark diving is quite easy and inexpensive. Drive 5 to 20 miles offshore until the water turns blue and then a few miles further to be safe. Hang a \$20 bucket of chum over the side, drift and wait a while, and take a nap. A gentle wind is helpful in order



to produce a long chum line. Hopefully a shark or two will show up at which time it is appropriate to quietly slip in, hope it does not flee, and start to photograph it. There is no need for cages, chain mail or dramatics. If you are really lucky a mako will arrive too, which raises the excitement. In practice, the only real problem with photographing blue sharks these days is that far fewer blue sharks appear at the chum bucket now than did fifteen years ago. It would be nice if this were because the quality of the chum has worsened. However, I believe the number of blue sharks has declined, drastically so, due to longlining and other

commercial fishing pressures. This is simply my anecdotal observation, but I feel certain that my feeling that blue sharks have declined in my area (San Diego), if not the reason for their decline, is supported (or would be) by research. Some days we are lucky to get a few small ones, other days none at all. It is really discouraging. Getting a nice six or seven footer is rare now, but it used to be common to have a half dozen or more around the boat all day using just a small bucket of frozen chum and some frozen mackerel carcasses.

Like all sharks, the ventral surface of a blue shark are very reflective. Even with my old dinky low-powered MCD strobes I was able

to stop down to f11 or f16 on these sharks, allowing for nice close-focus wide angle photography with a 15mm or even a close-up lens. The challenge is to form an interesting composition. These sharks are so well photographed that a simple “blue shark in blue water” photo, even if perfectly exposed, is likely interesting only to kids and the most manic shark aficionados. I’ve not had much luck composing sharks with divers, largely because I either do not have anyone else in the water to shoot or my partner is as much a photographer as I am and thus a terrible model. So I have had to resort to shooting blue sharks against kelp, when the opportunity presents itself.

Phillip Colla

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(Right) Phillip Colla at work. Photo by Mike Johnson

Phillip Colla is a natural history photographer, videographer and writer specializing in wild marine mammals (whales, dolphins, seals), remote islands of the eastern Pacific and the California kelp forest. His work has been published in a few publications, most notably: BBC Wildlife, International Wildlife, Ranger Rick, Nature’s Best, Sportfishing, Reader’s Digest, Skin Diver, Scuba Diving, Sport Diver, Unterwasser (Germany), Marine Photo (Japan), Science, Islands, The New York Times, United Press International, USA Today and National Geographic Society Books as well as lots of aquariums and museums.



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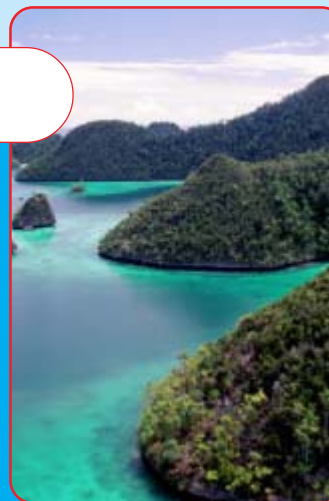
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