

The Elephant Man

By Peter Rowlands

There are some things most ordinary people don't do straight after they've had a few rudimentary lessons on scuba diving. Underwater photography, for a start, is best left til you've mastered the subtle art of buoyancy and, for sure, getting in the water to photograph a 5 ton male elephant should be put off until you've at least completed the PADI "Photographing 5 ton elephants" speciality course. But then Steve Bloom could never be ordinary and his first real foray into underwater photography has produced some absolutely extraordinary images.

UwP was delighted to catch up with him during the launch of his new book "Elephant!" to find out more about the man and hear how he got on with his first underwater shoot.

I first interviewed Steve back in 1996 when his image retouching business had just gone digital. A couple of years earlier he had had

his film images scanned following a two week trip to the Kruger National Park and was embracing the new technology to produce a new genre of natural history image.

Steve started work on his latest book Elephant! about 12 years ago and when he heard that some elephants actually enjoy swimming he decided that he had to have some images for the book. It took two years of research and organisation to accomplish but he is reticent to reveal the location as he nor the local people want to be swamped by divers. All he is prepared to say is that the elephant was the same age as him, 53, and was a retired log mover living with his handler on a remote island. The elephant in question is a large 5 ton male but Steve is not sure how tall he is. All he can say is that when he rode on his back on land, he got vertigo!

A large part of Steve's success is his understanding



of his subject and his thorough preparation. Never having taken a serious photograph underwater he contacted Ocean Optics in London and the owner, Steve Warren, took him through the options for housing his Canon EOS 1DS Mk11. He even arranged pool sessions for Steve to get used to his new Subal housing. Warren observed that Steve was not particularly co-ordinated underwater but that, as

soon as he put his eye to the viewfinder, everything changed and he watched him concentrating totally and being in full control of the camera. This is something that others have observed and Steve (Bloom) confirms that using a camera makes him become a different person. His concentration is so intense that there is no sense of time.

Bloom was quick to say that he could

not underestimate the professional and thorough support which Steve Warren and Ocean Optics provided and felt that without their input he doubted whether he would have achieved such successful images.

Once on location two local divers were hired to look after Steve in the water leaving him to concentrate on the photography. Several sessions were planned at varying times of the day but

they were always dictated by the elephant's demeanour so that he was acting naturally and not being corralled.

Steve's lens of choice was the Canon 15mm F2.8 full frame fisheye but he also used the 14mm and the 16-35mm for tighter shots. He shot RAW and JPG with his 8gig card and on most dives, which could last up to 2 hours, it was full with over 200 images. The JPGs were for viewing on his PC laptop after the dive and the RAW images were, in Steve's words, 'My digital negative'. Just as with conventional film photography, the printing of a negative is as much a part of the finishing process and RAW images allow this to continue with digital photography. He nearly always used aperture priority with auto white balance and available light only, taking single shots rather than using the motor-drive setting.

Prior to his first dive Steve was, understandable, extremely nervous to the point of being terrified but when he saw the elephants ballet-like movements underwater and his pure

exuberance the two years of preparation fell into place and the anxiety melted away as the team went into action. Steve is keen to emphasise the importance of teamwork from Ocean Optics back in London to all those on site who combined to give Steve the space to concentrate on the images.

The visibility varied from good to murky but then you'd expect that with an elephant close to the sandy bottom! Steve was immediately aware of how surprisingly fast the elephant moved underwater and even more aware of his large tusks. The old adage with underwater of "Get close and then get closer" wasn't written with elephant tusks in mind.

After each session there was a feeling of elation mixed with relief that the session had ended safely. The elephant had genuinely enjoyed himself and Steve's 8gig card was ready to download another set of extraordinary images.

It is very difficult to view Steve's images both on land and underwater without



getting either emotional or clichéd but I don't care. They move me deeply and fill me with awe, humility, guilt and elation all at the same time.

I just hope he finds another underwater subject to photograph in his unique style.

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www.stevebloom.com

Special offer



Elephant! is published by Thames & Hudson (RRP £24.95) and is available at the special price of £22.50 including postage & packaging in the UK only (all overseas rates quoted on request.)

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