

Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2006

by Alex Mustard

The Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year is probably the most prestigious photographic competition for underwater photographer, a fact backed up by the calibre of names that have won awards in the past and those that continue to enter each year. Each year the competition attracts around 20,000 entries from professional and amateur photographers from about 60 countries, which are whittled down to about 90 winning and commended images spread across 16 categories.

Underwater images did particularly well in this year's competition, placing first in four of the twelve adult categories, and winning awards or commendations in a further four categories. Moreover, the overall winner of the competition was Goran Ehlme's photo of a Walrus feeding in the sediment. Similar to last year's overall winner by Manuel Presti, it is certainly an image that polarises opinion, but both are incredibly original wildlife shots, and certainly images that the audience has never seen the like of before.

Michael Aw won the Underwater World category with a fantastic shot of a mimic octopus swimming straight at the camera, taken in the Sulawesi with a Nikon D2X, 12-24mm lens and Seacam housing. Tibor Dombovari won the Animal Portraits category with a characterful Barracuda portrait taken in Papua New Guinea with a Nikon D70s, 12-24mm lens and Subal housing. Andre Seale won the Behaviour, All Other Animals category with a simple and strong image of a green turtle being cleaned by surgeonfish in Hawaii, taken



Michael AW- The Underwater World - Winner - The great mimic
Diving off Banka Island, in Indonesia, Michael spotted a strange eel moving along a sandy slope. For the next hour he swam with it as it hunted over the sand, watching it assume the movement and shape of various marine creatures, including a sole, a ray and even a sea snake. What he'd met was the master of disguises, the Indo-Malayan mimic octopus – here sporting its 'normal' brown-and-white striped coat. This animal takes intelligence to a new level. It can discern which dangerous sea creature to imitate to present the greatest threat to any predator it's confronted with. Only discovered in 1998, the mimic's repertoire of hunting or hiding disguises includes hermit crabs, sand anemones, crinoids, jellyfish, sea cucumbers, blennies, jawfish and lionfish. Already a fan of octopuses, Michael has 'long since given up eating them'.

Nikon D2X with 12-24mm lens; 1/100 sec at f14; 160 ISO; Seacam housing, single S200 Ikelite strobe.



Göran Ehlme - Wildlife Photographer of the Year - Overall Winner - Beast of the Sediment
Like most bottom-feeders, the walrus has messy table manners. Gorging on bivalve shells, it first uses its facial bristles to brush away the sediment. Then it roots, pig-like, with its snout or beats a flipper, to whip up the sediment. That's what is happening here. Swimming with this huge beast off northeast Greenland, Göran took more than 400 images with his new digital camera. This meant he wasn't limited to 36 before needing to surface to change film. The walrus, though, had to surface for air every four or five minutes. Hours later, after shooting from every angle, 'the moment came', says Göran. 'The walrus looked round, and we made eye contact.' It took Göran years of studying walrus behaviour to consider diving with them. 'At first I was very nervous,' he says, 'but now I know how to approach them safely and respectfully'.

Nikon D2x with 12-24mm lens; 1/50 sec at f4; 400 ISO; Seacam housing with wide-angle port.



Tibor Dombovari (Hungary) won the Animal Portraits, the largest category in the competition with his portrait of a barracuda. Taken with a Nikon D70s and 12-24mm lens in a Subal Housing. 1/200th @ F7.1.

with a Nikon D100, 12-24mm lens in a Nexus housing. And Goran Ehlme's Walrus also won the Animal Behaviour : Mammals category, taken in Greenland with a Nikon D2X, 12-24mm lens and a Seacam housing.

Manu San Felix was runner up in the Underwater World category, and the following photographers were highly commended for their



Tobias Bernhard- The Underwater World - Highly Commended- King swimmer
The king penguin colony at Sandy Bay on Maquarie Island in the sub-Antarctic is camped around a tidal pool for easy access to the tempestuous Southern Ocean. Tobias positioned himself in the water near one of their favourite launch sites to watch the busy thoroughfare of penguins rushing back and forth. Nikon D2x with 14mm f2.8 lens; f15 at 20 secs; 100 ISO; Subal housing.

underwater photos: Tobias Bernhard, Jordi Chias, John Johnson, Jun Kezuka, Willem Kolvoort, Magnus Lundgren, Alexander Mustard, Gavin Parsons and Carlos Villoch.

The Wildlife Photographer of the Year is looked at by many as a barometer for trends in nature and underwater photography - both aesthetic and technical. The 2006 competition

was the first year that digital entries (61%) outnumbered slides, with an even higher percentage amongst the actual winning images, where 86% of the adult winners were digital (100% of the winning young photographer images were digital). The most popular camera choice of the winning photographers was the Nikon D2X, although remember most of the images for this competition were taken more than a year ago, generally before newer models like the Nikon D200 and Canon 5D were widely available.

Of the underwater pictures, Nikon brand cameras dominated taking 15 of the 16 winning shots, which included 3 images taken on film. Rectilinear lenses also proved successful particularly the Nikon 12-24mm, which was used for all of the category winning underwater images. As usual charismatic underwater subjects did well – marine mammals, turtles and sharks, and possibly related to this factor a high proportion of the underwater images were taken in ambient light without strobes.

Once again the Wildlife Photographer of the Year has brought together a most staggering collection of evocative, beautiful and memorable images of our natural world. And perhaps the most clear and encouraging trend for us underwater photographers that our images are competing on a level status with terrestrial wildlife images across many categories.

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