

Sweet, Button-eyed Creatures

My Love Affair with the Florida Manatee

By Carol Grant

“Sweet Button-eyed Creatures”, that was my husband’s remark after he had his first up close encounter with our beloved Florida manatees. It has now been a growing passion of mine for over ten years to communicate the details of their fascinating lives and my heartfelt desire to help protect manatees so their future survival and quality of life is assured.

My “quest” to tell the manatee’s story and convey my deep affection for them took a huge step forward when I procured my first underwater DSLR setup in 2006. Actually, I got some quite acceptable manatee photographs before with a digital point and shoot Sony P-10, then a Fuji F-810 in manual mode with Inon wide 105AD lens. But most important - I learned “how to” find, photograph and act around the manatee gradually, first with a small photographic setup and then with a little larger one, so that when I initially took down the Nikon d200/Nikon 16mm FE f2.8 lens/Subal Housing, I was quite delighted at the quality of my manatee photographs. As they say “I was hooked!”

Photographers have asked me lots of questions about photographing

manatee and here are some of my successful actions. First off I’m in the water a lot, observing manatee, time in the water is key as “manatee time” runs at a very different pace than what we are generally used to. Also I’ve learned to watch the dramatic and ever-changing weather fronts, tides and wind patterns during the winter in Florida and make some sense of them to help find water clear enough to adequately portray the manatee’s delightful features and behaviors. Additionally, I’ve studied underwater photography techniques to ensure I’m technically capable of capturing a special “manatee moment” when it happens. And I also make sure that I’m adequately warm enough to spend long stretches in the 72-degree (22 Celsius) spring water, even while staying quite still for long periods of time. Plus I go mid-week when things are much quieter and fewer boats are on the water. But most important, far and above all else, the reason I tend to be successful at capturing the essence of the manatee is I really, really like them! I mean I have such strong affinity for the manatee that I just feel it in the pit of my stomach



“Timeless” Manatee

This manatee seemed “suspended in time” - manatee time is certainly different from human time. Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Nikon 16mm lens, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 400, 1/60 @ f8

and I’m swept away and enveloped with kind feelings for them. I can’t explain it any better than that, the Florida manatees are sweet, graceful, intelligent and mesmerizing creatures and I love them!

In my experience noticing how manatee have approached (and surprised) me in various habitats all over the state, while I was swimming, snorkeling or scuba diving, it is my observation that they probably have never really had an innate “natural

fear” of humans at all thus some can be very curious and “interested” photographic subjects. The springs at Crystal River is where I like to photograph manatee best and at times the clarity of the water is amazing as is the quality of the strong Florida sunlight from different angles, filtered through the trees. My “love affair” with the manatee is just as much a “love affair” with the enchanting Florida springs and dancing rainbow light rays. But be forewarned that



In Front of Three Sisters Spring

Manatee sanctuary is to the left, channel in the center, private land to the right. Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm, available light, ISO 100, 1/60 @ f13

those same “crystal clear” springs can turn murky very easily with strong weather fronts and are also influenced by sea states in the Gulf of Mexico as Crystal River is fresh water but is connected to the Gulf seven miles away. Also the clearest water is becoming increasingly hard to encounter as development, fertilizer runoff, pollution, invasive algae and changing environmental factors are affecting the delicate balance of the entire Florida aquifer. But

fortunately for us photographers all is not lost as we can still locate, politely observe and document manatee in their traditional freshwater winter refuge at the Homosassa and Crystal Rivers. Do take note though that laws and protocol designed to protect the manatee must be observed and it is best to educate yourself in advance. The best times to observe manatee is from late fall to early spring depending on weather conditions. As soon as the Gulf of Mexico water



Mom & “Sparky”

Every time this manatee mom would try to take a nap or even take a breath her precocious “Sparky” would take off like a rocket to go explore! This was taken in my favorite fall sunlight and good news is little Sparky is still at the springs right now and boy is he getting FAT!

Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Nikon 16mm lens, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 400, 1/60 @ 7.1

warms up in early spring, hungry manatee tend to depart the springs quickly for warmer waters with more abundant food.

This brings up a vital point, how do manatee learn where to go at various times of the year, what and how much to eat at those same times and the routes to take and not

end up lost? Manatees learn from mom of course, for more than two years. For me that is the touching and endearing nucleus of the manatee community and one of the things I’m most interested in documenting – the essence of the strong mother/calf relationship. I must say a photographic image of a mother



Synchronized Manatees

This was one of my first images with the Tokina 10-17 lens and I certainly am pleased with that lens! Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 @ 10mm, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 250, 1/50 @ 7.1

manatee with a little calf is one of the most touching images you can capture underwater and one of the most compelling for change, especially when it speaks volumes as in horrible boat scars on mom while she still patiently cares for the little one – we wonder what the little calf's future will bring? And it would take quite a hardened heart not to see that every little manatee's future is up to us,

who so directly affect his or her safety and environment.

Photographically with the manatee it is all about being there, respecting and observing manatee behavior, assessing the direction, strength and filtering of the ambient sunlight, adding fill light when necessary and patience, patience, patience! As far as my equipment - from 2006 to



Manatee Mother and Small Calf

Despite this mother's boat and propeller injury scars she still patiently guides around and cares for her very young calf. You can see their tender bond. But what will the future hold for her little one? Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 320, Nikon 16mm lens, 1/60 @ 7.1.



Mother/Calf, Reflections, Sky

A peaceful bucolic scene. We are lucky the manatee can still enjoy places where it is safe. Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens @ 10mm, available light, ISO 320, 1/80 @ f10

early January 2008 the only wide-angle lens I've used with my Nikon d200 on the manatee was the Nikon 16mm FE f2.8. Yes this was because my budget was somewhat limited, but also because I really liked the results I got photographing manatee with that lens. On the 1.5X cropped sensor Nikon d200 Digital SLR, the 16mm is not very wide but still allowed me to focus on endearing manatee expressions and behaviors plus the amazing light in the springs

that I wanted to showcase. The Nikon 16mm is such a sharp lens with few defects and I've used it happily photographing many, many manatees. But early last year I heard from Ryan Canon of Reef Photo & Video, that he used the Tokina 10-17 f3.5-4.5 FE on the manatee and it was "awesome". I finally broke down and got the Tokina recently, knowing too that Alex Mustard and Peter Rowlands were coming to photograph manatee with me and I could ask



Bob Bonde Conducting Manatee Research

Bob is the best friend the manatees have ever had. He studies and looks after the manatees at Crystal River regularly, as he has done for over 25 years. Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Tokina 10-17 lens @ 11mm, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 200, 1/80 @ f6.3

Alex questions about the lens. Alex said, "The Tokina 10-17 is the perfect manatee lens." I admit I must agree the Tokina is really suited for manatee photography, with a few "quirks" though of course. While I've noticed the Tokina 10-17 f3.5-4.5 certainly doesn't seem to auto-focus any slower than the Nikon 16mm f2.8, auto-focusing can still be a big problem in the low-light areas of the springs. With the Nikon 16mm in the lower light I always focused on my hand in

front of the dome or focused on my fin (depending on if I wanted to achieve close focus wide angle or standard wide angle), locked the auto-focus, flipped to manual focus and used apertures f8 or above. This worked like a charm and I used this technique successfully on lots of manatee photographs. But with the Tokina it is a little different. With different zoom settings it changes a bit and I'm still discovering the best settings for when I auto-focus and "lock it off" in lower-



*Carol at the Three Sister's Spring,
Photo by Alex Mustard*

light fisheye photography. The Tokina lens really shines though in its ability to zoom from 10mm to 17mm and seeing that the manatee can be from 3 feet long (1 Meter) as a baby to over 10 feet long (3.3 Meters +) as adults that versatility cannot be overstated, plus it focuses truly close, much closer than the Nikon 16mm, right on the dome in fact! The Tokina 10-17 is indeed a marvelous lens for photographing the manatee.

Should the photographer use strobes or no strobes? First of all as far as the manatee – do you notice in some of my photographs the strong Florida sunlight illuminating the shallow water? These rays penetrate the manatee's eyes repeatedly many times during the day so I haven't noticed that properly positioned and diffused strobes produce any negative reaction from the manatee. That said, I would still use strobes only when necessary and turn them off when not needed. Without strobes you will miss many early morning moments plus

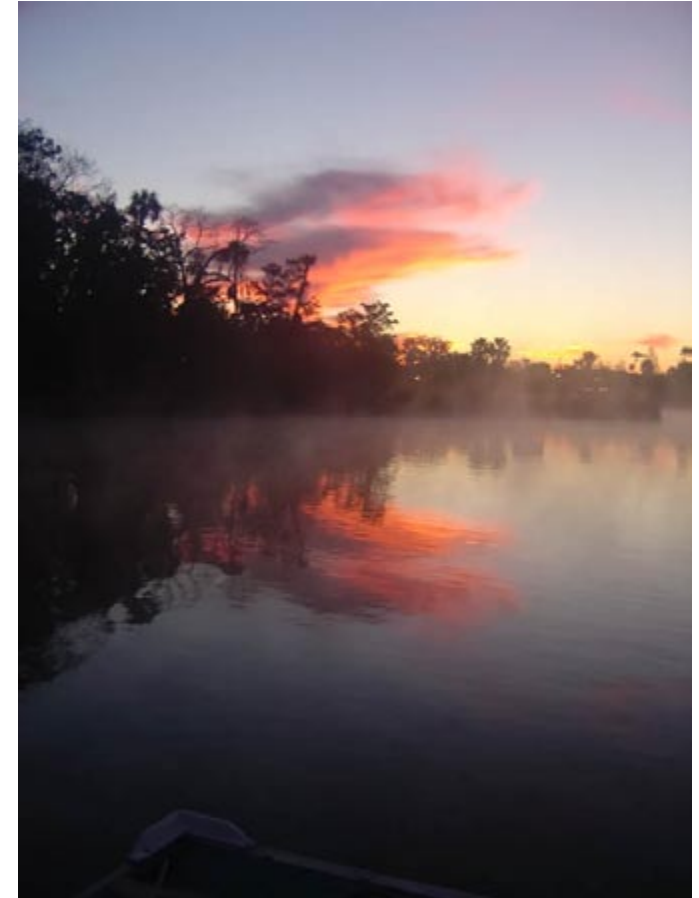


Sparky Explores!

Some little manatee are quiet and shy, some are loving and some are bold and born to take on the underwater world! Nikon d200, Subal Housing, Nikon 16mm lens, Sea & Sea 110s, ISO 400, f7.1 @ 1/60

miss photographing other fascinating characters of the springs including diving cormorant and anhinga feeding among the dark tree roots and possibly even the rare appearance of a cool Florida snapping turtle, which almost never appears in good light! Plus I like the look of certain manatee photographs with the "fill light" of strobes (I use Sea and Sea 110s w/diffusers) and scatter is of course kept to a minimum with proper positioning. But if you care to skip bringing strobes there are advantages as that setup is less cumbersome, split-levels are much easier and it is simpler to manipulate two cameras. So beforehand think about what you are trying to achieve and plan accordingly to use a strobe or no strobes.

In closing, manatee photography is a



Sunrise at Crystal River - Motoring out to the springs/ steam on the water.

Sony P-10, 7.9mm, ISO 100, 1/50 @2.8

powerful tool for conservation and change so we as underwater photographers have an opportunity to set a good example and use our images to help impact the future for the better. The Florida manatee recently scored a victory at state level by not being removed from its endangered species status, but this is only a start. Manatee are still in constant danger from speeding boats in shallow waters and as anyone who has seen these



Carol Being Welcomed By Two Female Manatees. Photo by Alex Mustard

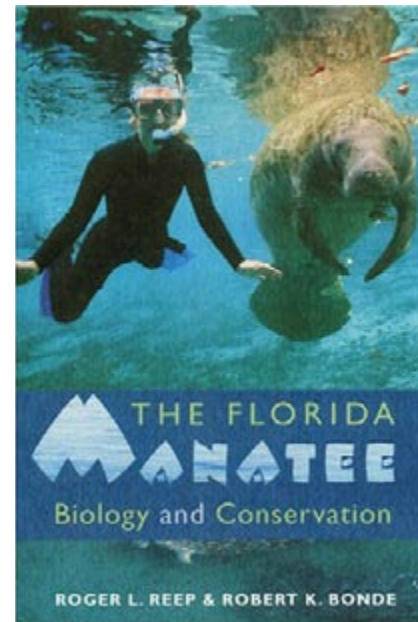
magnificent creatures knows boat injury scars are on nearly 90% of adult manatee. Plus development in their prime areas, pollution, sea grass beds being eliminated, etc., are all issues that we have direct impact and ultimately control over. I encourage everyone to purchase and read a fascinating book 'The Florida Manatee Biology and Conservation' by Robert K. "Bob" Bonde and Roger L. Reep. It will familiarize you with the manatee and their plight. And when visiting the manatee at Crystal River I tell people to go out with

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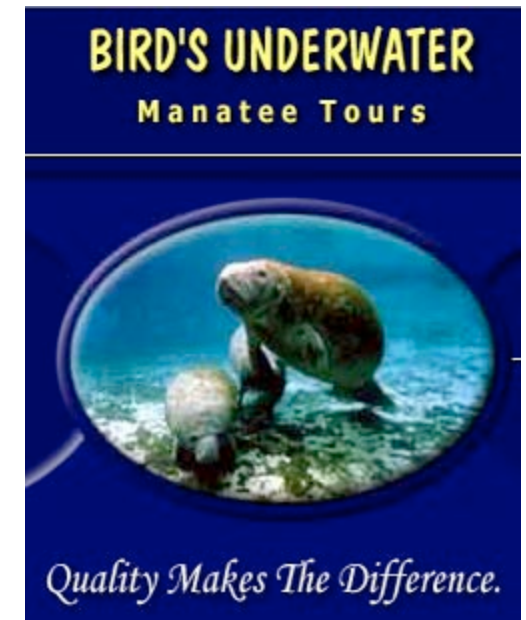
Bird's Underwater as I feel they really do the best job educating people on the correct way to observe and interact with the manatees and they have been of enormous help to me personally over the years. Of course you can rent your own boat but since there are probably too many boats already on Crystal River my suggestion is to either go out with Bird's or rent a kayak, as the stable sit-on-top or newer inflatable ones are very steady with room for cameras. Then you can go see the manatee at your own pace with the added benefit of being able to gaze quietly at Florida's magnificent array of bird life along the way!

And just maybe you will one day gaze into some "Sweet Button-eyes" and begin your own "love affair" and form a strong desire to help our marvelous Florida manatee.

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SLIDESHOW - BREATHE WITH THE FLORIDA MANATEES
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