

Adventure of an amateur

By Alex Goldblum

The goal was simple; freeze the action of one of the most dynamic, high velocity hunts in the ocean. Sailfish have been clocked in excess of 65 miles per hour and are to be found hunting Brazilian sardines along the continental shelf circa fifty miles north East of Isla Mujeres in the Gulf of Mexico. My guide was the renowned Amos Nachoum, owner and director of Big Animals, an organisation solely focused on bringing its clients close to the largest and most impressive inhabitants of the animal kingdom. I had accompanied Amos to the Arctic circle to photograph Orcas in 2005 and although I have since felt a huge affinity to underwater photography, due to other commitments I have only spent a total of four weeks developing the required skills. So when I spoke to Amos about this trip I was (rightly!) concerned whether my skills were honed enough to be able to capture this amazing scene.

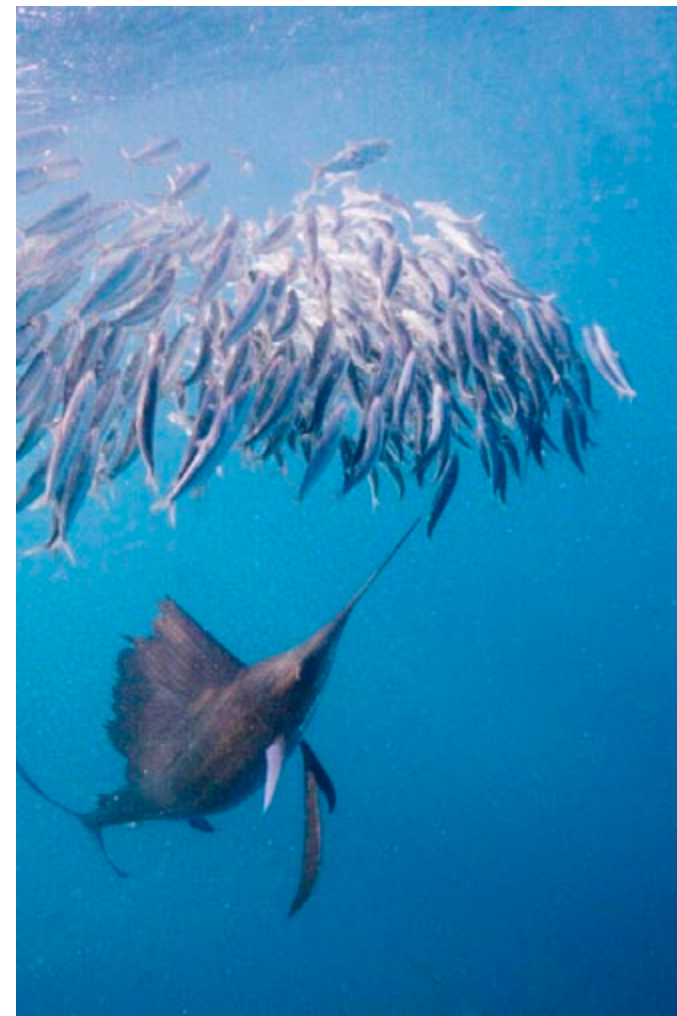
I arrived in Isla Mujeres to find the other two guests were published underwater photographers and as we attended our evening briefing I realised I may well be out of my depth. The weather had been mixed and sightings had been limited to single fish in greenish water with significant amounts of plankton around. ISO management would be important as would optimising strobe power. Amos laid down the gauntlet early - we all needed to capture a Sailfish re-entering the water with a sardine in its mouth. We also needed to be close



The sport fishing fleet at Isla Mujeres

enough to these high velocity fish to capture the iridescent flash across the body and flaring of the dorsal fin. Most of the week would be snorkelling/freediving and only if the baitball was moving slowly would we don our ponytanks.

The first morning we established the routine for the week - rise at 5, order our burrito at the



Piercing portrait. Canon EFS 10-22 @f18, 18mm, 1/250 ISO 800 Exposure corr -1.33. Canon Eos 20D in a Subal Housing with a dome port.

harbour and depart before sunrise. A two-hour journey out to the continental shelf gave us plenty of time to discuss camera set-ups. I was shooting a Canon Eos 20D in a Subal housing, the others flagship Canons and Nikons in Subal and SeaCam housings. It was suggested we use 640 ISO to



Dorsal Fin. Canon EFS 10-22 @f13.0, 22mm, 1/250 ISO 800 Exposure corr -.33. Canon Eos 20D in a Subal Housing with a dome port.

start with. My first mistake - the 20D has a choice of 400 or 800 so I opted for 800, remembering that I took some pretty good shots of the Orcas on ISO 800 and not remembering too much noise on those prints. I also assumed there will be plenty of opportunity for trial and error.

We all looked out for the promising sign of sailfish - frigate birds bunched in a funnel cloud formation close to the surface. If the birds were high or were moving quickly from spot to spot it meant the baitball was either too deep or too spread out. Either of those signs could also mean Bonitos, in which case the Sailfish would not be found close. We were extremely fortunate to spot the tell tale signs within the first few hours of searching. Our first encounter was on the first day at around 10:45 and it was incredible. More than 30 Sailfish corralling, piercing and splitting the schools of several hundred Brazilian sardines.



Hunters gather Canon EFS-10-22 @ f13, 22mm, 1/250 ISO 800 Exposure corr -.33. Canon Eos 20D in a Subal Housing with a dome port.

When the bait ball is still large it moves fast; we were finning as fast as we could to keep up with the action. Occasionally we lost sight of the baitball and needed to look above the surface to locate the frigates hovering above the frenzy. The paddling was exhausting but once we caught up with the action we were rewarded with an orgy of feeding and started to frame the shots. The advice we received was simple; stay with baitball as the fish are swimming extremely quickly making it very difficult to frame shots worthy of publishing. Given that publishing wasn't my goal I must admit to occasionally just panning, pointing and shooting hopefully on the off chance luck was on my side and that the Sailfish would fill the frame. I stayed predominantly focussed on the baitball framed through the viewfinder and took literally hundreds of shots in excitement. The sailfish did not literally pierce the sardines, rather they skillfully tapped a

single sardine away from the school, temporarily stunning it and then just swallowed the fish. I was using shutter priority set a 1/250. My single strobe was set to minimum power but I quickly realised the advantage of the extra light was being offset by the backscatter and overexposed sardines. So the strobe was switched off and I just resolved to swim as close as possible to the baitball to ensure the ambient light was enough to bring out the vivid colours the sailfish exude during the hunt. After roughly an hour the baitball began to diminish in size and the pace began to slow. We donned the pony tanks and descended to a maximum of 10 metres. Whilst circling the baitball something remarkable happened. In a split second the sailfish disappeared leaving me and Amos looking at each other rather bewilderedly. Then seemingly out of nowhere a very large school of Bonitos charged the baitball sending it into what only could be described as sheer panic. The baitball mistook us for protection and surrounded me and Amos - for around 15 seconds we had bonitos and sardines literally colliding with our legs. I captured a shot of the sardines surrounding me with one of the fish in the centre of the shot seemingly crying out for help.

In all the action on our first day lasted an exhausting 2 hours.

Upon returning to the boat Amos informed us we had had witnessed something very few people had experienced and that we shouldn't hope to see that sort of action for that length of time for the rest of the week. This is when the alarm bells began to ring. In the excitement I hadn't been reviewing that many shots and the ones I did review looked OK on my 1.8 inch viewfinder. I didn't notice the noise..... Some perfectly framed shots of the sailfish piercing the bait ball were simply too noisy.



Portrait. Canon EFS 10-22 @f10, 22mm, 1/250 ISO 800 Exposure Corr -1. Canon Eos 20D in a Subal Housing with a dome port.

Following the first day's action ensued two days without encounters. The first was too windy to sail and the second we didn't find a single frigate bird in the sky. This gave us an extended opportunity to analyse the pictures and give/receive feedback. It was during this time that being around such experienced photographers paid dividends. Tricks of the trade were shared and together with Amos we focussed a lot on composition, the



Seeking cover Canon 10-22 @f13, 22mm, 1/320, ISO 800 Exposure Corr -.67. Canon Eos 20D in a Subal Housing with a dome port.

use of ambient light, exposure etc. I also began to appreciate the lot of the serious wildlife photographer and hoped for at least a few more interactions so I could correct the original mistakes I made.

Day four we were lucky - a series of encounters throughout the day gave me the opportunity to try some shots on 400 ISO. The shutter speed of 250 was still fine and I decided to initially remove the strobe from the set up,

creating less drag and thus more of a chance to keep up with the frenetic pace ahead of me. I took a large number of shots, however I had a new challenge with my camera - it simply would not focus on several occasions. I changed shutter speeds and apertures but nothing seemed to work. To this day I do not know what happened. The shots I did take however were much less grainy and I captured a few shots of the much sought after 'sardine in mouth'. However there was still too much backscatter surrounding the shot preventing it from being publishable.

In the evening we compared shots and received candid feedback from Amos regarding predominantly composition and lighting. My shots told a good story he said, but were just not clear enough. The first batch was too noisy and the second was too far away (I was shooting a 10-22 @22m and felt that if I had got any closer I would have ended up in the middle of the bait ball.) I was missing the spectacular flashings of colour and there appeared to be some dust on my sensor! The other guest's shots were considerably better. They were cleaner, crisper and contained much more vivid colours. I resolved to get at least one shot which would receive the compliments from the critical group but was running out of time.

Another two days passed without

a great deal of excitement. One achievement was to find a remarkable patch of blue water amidst the green expanse along the continental shelf. We all hoped to have our next sighting in that stretch, however we had since come to terms with the fact the mother nature really does call the shots and that maybe she thought we had had a good enough crack at the whip. A single encounter left me wondering whether our luck had run out and fearing that day one had been the golden opportunity ruined by my inexperience. By this point the other guests were happy with their shots (one of them even got a shot of the sailfish with two sardines in its mouth....)

On our last day, after about 4 hours searching for the frigates in the right formation we hit the jackpot. In a very blue stretch of water (we had had encounters in green water making the shots much less picturesque) we encountered two bait balls and dozens of Sailfish. Due to the blue water and the sun penetrating the water ISO 400 was absolutely fine (In hindsight I could probably have gone to 200). The colours on the Sailfish were magnificent and the action was as enthralling as ever. And then it happened; a number of sailfish had driven the bait ball right to the surface and the annihilation began. Sailfish after sailfish breeched



shot and certainly not as good as the others', whose photos the readers of this magazine may see appearing in competitions in the coming months.

During the week spent hunting the sailfish my photography skills (and fitness level!) improved significantly. I learnt from my mistakes and from the generous coaching not only afforded to me by Amos but also by the other divers on my trip. Before I embark on my next fast moving photo trip I am considering a more leisurely underwater photographic experience to hone those skills and enable me to operate my camera like second nature – something I learned the hard way is crucial if you are going to get 'that shot'.

Alex Goldblum



in what looked like an attempt to catch the sardines by surprise. As they re-entered the water, as Amos had said they would, with a fish in their mouths....my autofocus jammed again. Later I learned that the other divers had been alternating between autofocus and manual with a flick of a switch. Something they said really paid dividends when shooting fast moving/large animals. I didn't have this functionality on my camera but it will be a consideration if I ever decide to upgrade. Despite all this I was able to capture a sailfish re-entering the water with a fish in its mouth, unfortunately it is not my best

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