

Port Hardy

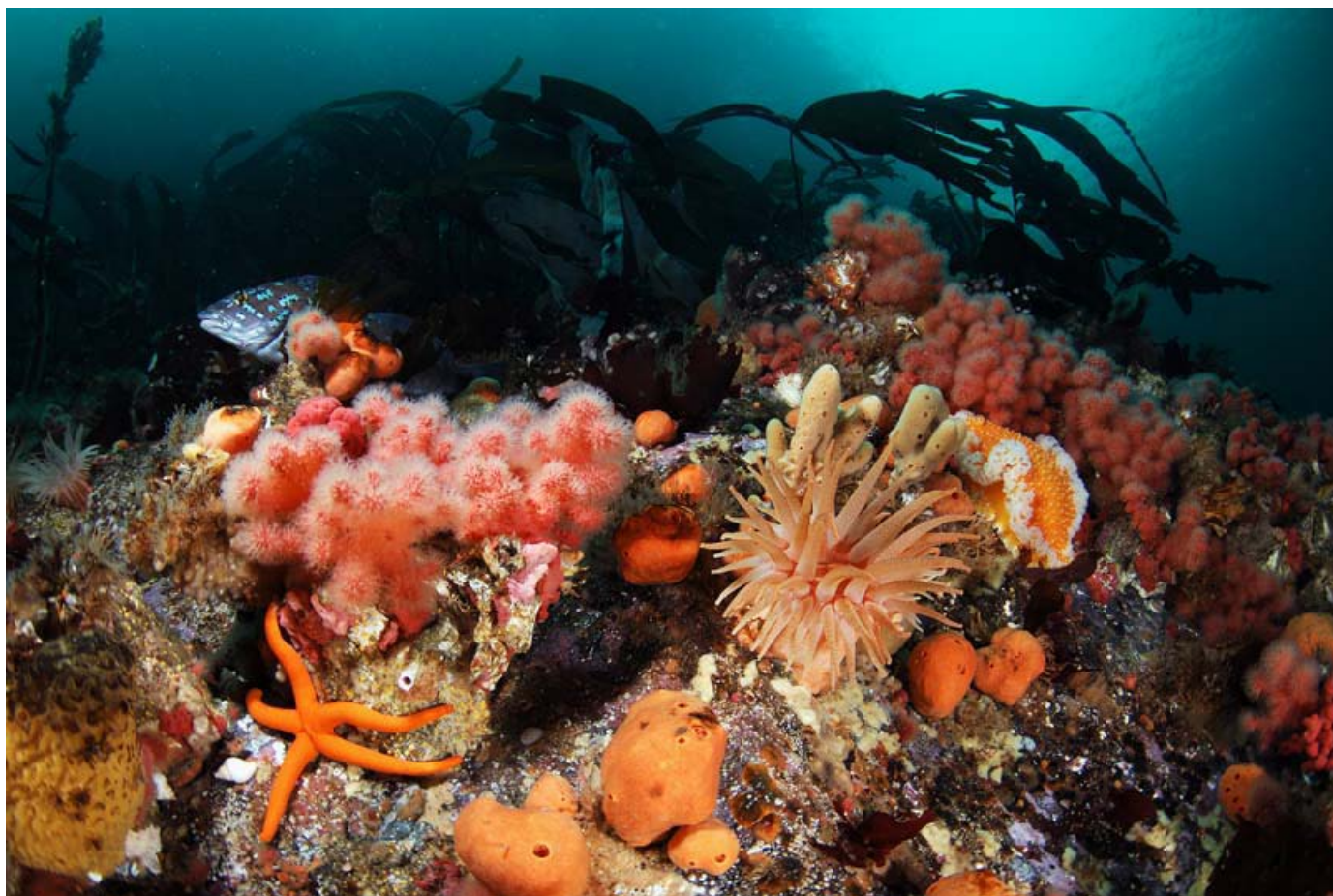
with Rand McMeins

Port Hardy is located at the north end of Vancouver Island and is an underwater photography paradise. The waters off northern Vancouver Island feature amazing invertebrate life, wolf eels, and octopus. The dives also include walls covered with colorful anemones, a variety of sponges and starfish, and loads of fish including black rockfish, seals, and sea lions. Also, it is not uncommon to see killer whales on the surface.

On our way up to Port Hardy we did two dives at Race Rocks. This was on a day-boat out of Victoria, B.C. with Ogden Point Diver Centre. The boat Captain said that the vis was just about as good as it gets the day we dove. I'd put it around 30-40'.

Race Rocks was a wide-angle dive for me. The Stellar sea lions are the main attraction and they have some big ones. Some were well over 2,000 lbs. I was first in on the first dive and was surrounded by about 10 of them for the first few minutes. They like to come from behind and bump your head. A high pucker-factor for sure. The topography underwater is sparse. It featured some big boulders, but not much to see for growth so, other than some Seastars and Puget Sound king crab, the real attraction was diving with the sea lions.

Port Hardy is great for both macro and wide-angle. A bounty of macro subjects. Shrimp, Nudis, Dorids, Skeleton shrimp, Gunnels, free swimming snails and sea fleas. And of course the high dollar targets, Warbonetts, both decorated and Mosshead. And of course wide-angle. The walls are so beautiful. Every color imaginable, and so dense that



Kelp greenling, anemones and orange peel nudibranch. Tokina 10-17mm FE lens, F6.3 @ 1/125th, ISO 200.



MV Mamro and skipper Dan Ferris





A close encounter with a Stella Sealion at Race Rocks where we also had an Orca swimpast. 2 of our group were still diving!

there's no open space to place a finger to steady yourself. Subjects include wolf eels, Great Pacific Octopus, Lions' mane jellyfish, anemones as big as a dinner plate, sponges and soft corals. There are huge Orange peel nudibranchs, some close to 2 feet long.

There are also kelp beds that serve as cover for Black Rockfish. The kelp is very photogenic on a sunny day. The fish life is a bit less compared to the Caribbean for instance but what's there makes for great photo opportunities. Small sculpins have the ability to change

color to match their surroundings making for an endless variety of coloration on this single subject. A favorite of photographers is the Red Irish Lord. A very co-operative subject apparently having high confidence in its ability to blend in. Their eyes are a special treat when lit properly since they are flecked with gold-colored bits. The very odd-shaped Grunt sculpin with a head that resembles a barnacle and a tail that looks like the feeding arm, as well as Ling Cod and Cabezon, are favorites.

I'd rate the diving in Port Hardy as world class. If you haven't dove

there yet, it's got to be on anyone's bucket list that does temperate diving. The kelp beds in California offer some beautiful scenery and would be my second choice, but even then, it's not even close to the diversity of color and critters in Port Hardy. Plus, the topside opportunities are ample. Whales, dolphins, sea lions, orcas, otters, deer, bears, and the grand bald eagles. We saw eagles in the trees on almost every day.

We dove with Dan Ferris from Port Hardy on the Mamro. We did three dives a day. It doesn't sound like that would fill a day but somehow, it

usually did and the cold water takes its toll as well.

And yes, the timing of the dives is crucial, especially for underwater photographers. One of the reasons we've continued to dive with Dan Ferris on the Mamro is that he is excellent at giving us that slack window.

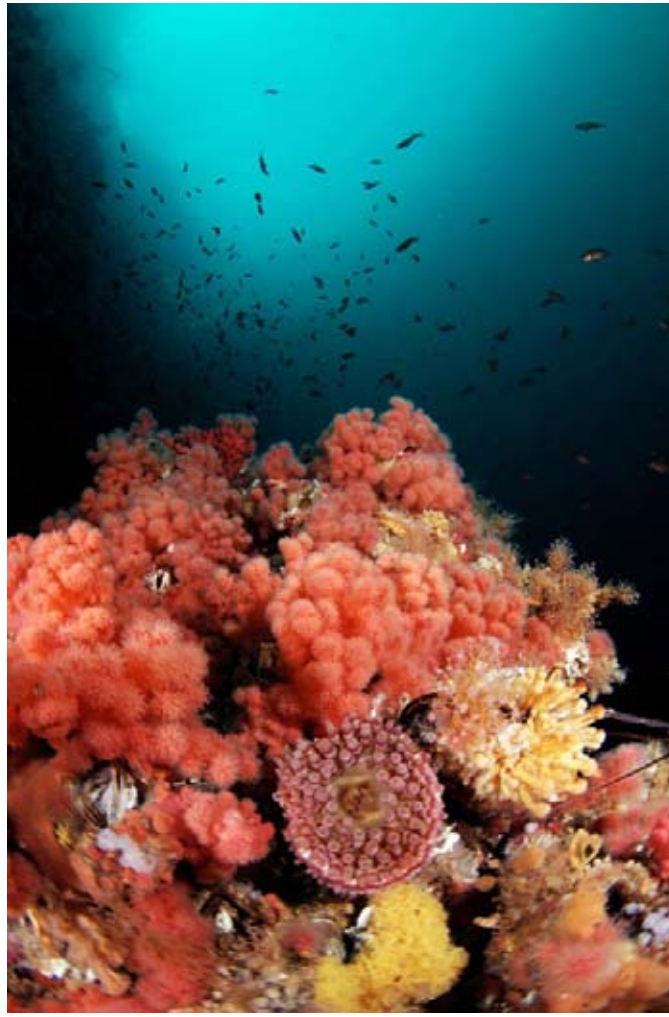
Photographically I use a Nikon D2x camera in a Subal D2 housing and 2 Inon Z220 strobes. All the wide-angle, except for the sea lions and topside shots (15mm for those) were with a Tokina 10-17 FE zoom behind the Zen mini dome. Macro shots were



Black rockfish and Bull kelp. 10-17mm FE lens F5.6 @ 1/15th, ISO 200

captured with the Nikon 105mm macro lens, the supermacro shots were taken utilizing the Nikon 105mm macro lens along with the Subsee +10 diopter.

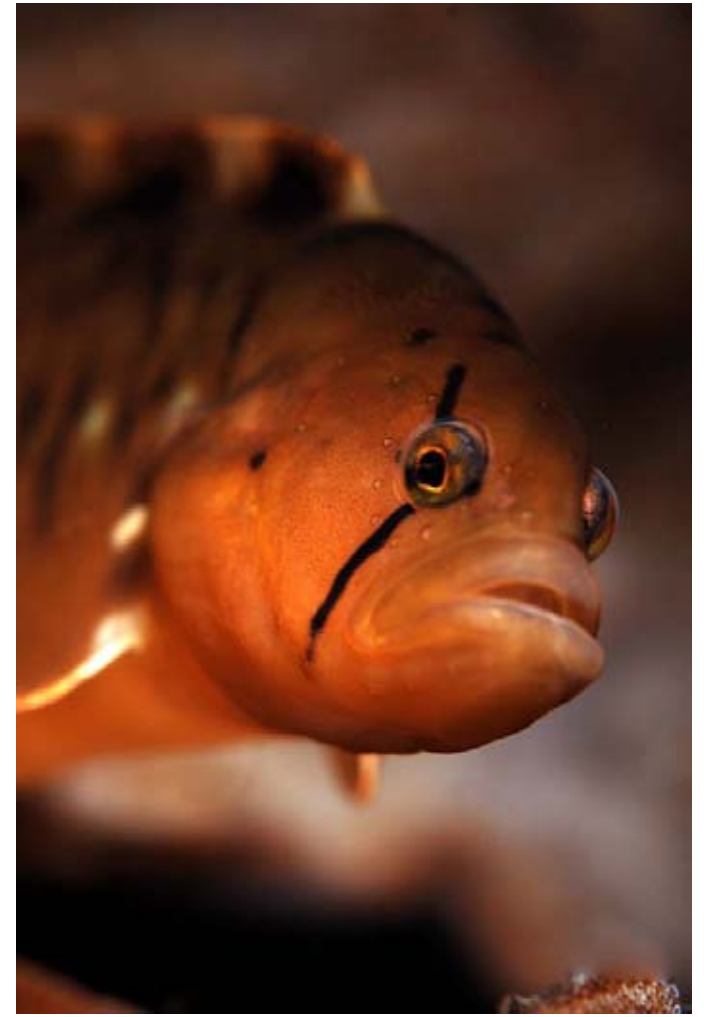
The biggest challenge shooting wide-angle in cold water is the extra gear and weight you must wear. Turning over on your back to shoot up into the



Anemones. Tokina 10-17mm FE lens, F3.5 @ 1/125th, ISO 200

water column is no easy feat. Sometimes I feel like a cockroach trying to flip over and I'm sure seeing my legs flailing and arms wind milling is not pretty.

The other issues are lack of ambient light at depth and the amount of crud in the water. The light issue sometimes requires bumping up the ISO. Cameras that can do that and maintain low noise are



Gunnel. Nikon 105mm macro lens, F8 @ 1/200th, ISO 200

a real asset. My D2x is not one of them, so I kept my maximum ISO at 200. The backscatter is an issue that can cause the best image of your life to hit the trash bin.

Two of the techniques that I found pretty effective were:

Shoot more reef than you normally would.



Left to right, Todd Mintz, Jamie Morphy, Peter Rowlands, myself and Alex Mustard

Concentrate on lighting on a small area then allowing the light to fall off with just a touch of open water at the top of the frame can keep scatter to a minimum. Shooting with strobes into open water invites a really horrible result. Keeping your strobes tight or even just using one strobe will help as well. Try lighting the foreground subject from over the top of the dome port or off to one side, as this will help eliminate backscatter. You might also end up with a more pleasing result

with using just a single strobe.

Get as close as possible to the subject and light only the subject. I really enjoy using the Tokina 10-17mm fisheye lens with a Zen mini dome. This set-up allows me to get right on top of the subject and keep my strobes tight.

Rand McMeins

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