

# My way with monochrome

by Morris Gregory

The underwater world is an environment full of colourful fish, corals and other marine life so it's only natural for photographers to want to produce their images on colour film. Indeed, that is how I began my underwater photography and I will still continue to contribute to the profits of Fuji etc by taking lots of transparencies. However, having started out as a land based photographer shooting both colour and b&w I decided it would be interesting to explore what could be done with monochrome film underwater.

My main reasons for using b&w film on land are that it allows me to concentrate on form, shape and texture and also that it can create mood and atmosphere in a picture which can sometimes be lost through the distraction of colour. I decided that the underwater world would also lend itself to the same kind of reasoning.

A further very practical reason for using b&w film is the freedom from using flash guns as there is no need to try to restore the colours that are very quickly lost underwater and of course the curse of flash photography, backscatter, is no longer a problem. Taking just the housed camera on a dive without a tangle of cords, arms and flash guns, all of which are just one more thing to go wrong, is sheer bliss. I can concentrate on the picture taking without having to worry whether the arms are positioned correctly, if the flash settings are correct or if the flash will fire at all.



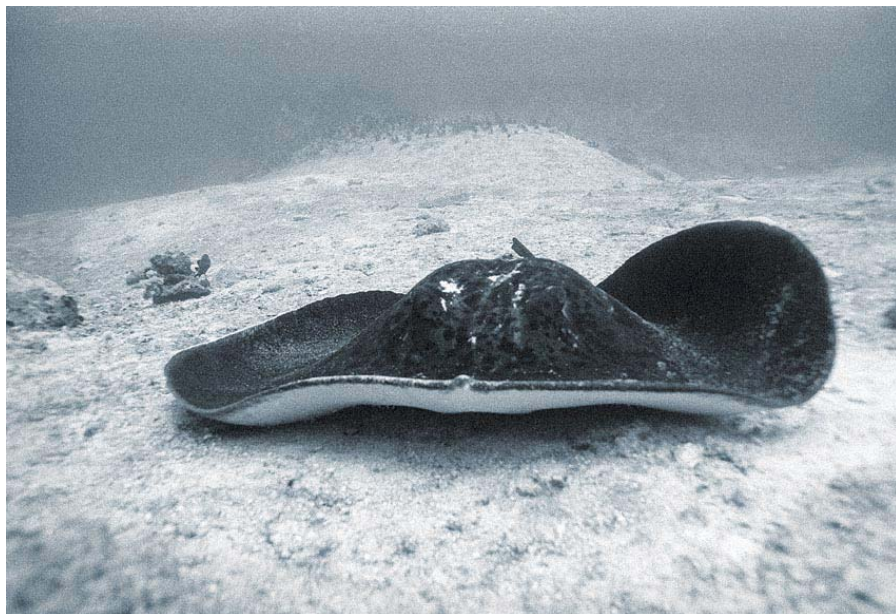
*Seal - Ilford Delta 3200, f11 on aperture priority, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. Farne Islands, Northumberland.*



*Turtle - Ilford Delta 400 rated at 800 ISO, f11 on aperture priority, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. Brisee Rocks, Praslin, Seychelles.*

The underwater environment presents its own particular problems for photographers, whether shooting in colour or b&w. The main two for b& w photography are the lack of definition and reduction in contrast the further objects are from the camera. A further one is the need to separate the tones of

subject and background to avoid a messy and confusing composition. The first two problems can largely be overcome by simply getting as close to the subject as possible, usually by the use of a wide angle lens. The latter requires a better understanding of how various tones will record on



*Stingray - Ilford Delta 3200, f11 on aperture priority, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. Brisee Rocks, Praslin, Seychelles.*



*Moray Eel - Ilford XP2, f8 @ 1/125, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. The Jetty, Bathala Island, Maldives.*

b&w film but, as with underwater colour photography, setting the subject against a background of water rather than rocks or coral often produces the desired result.

As far as subject matter is concerned I much prefer to photograph marine life than wrecks, although b& w does lend itself very well to wreck photography by the way in which it can add mood to the scene. In general I concentrate

on the larger creatures, such as turtles, rays, napoleon wrasse, batfish and the like that can be found in open water rather than hugging the reef as this more easily allows for the separation of the subject from its surroundings. Invariably I will use my 24mm wide angle lens as it enables me to get close to the subject while still providing some space around it to put it in context. An even wider lens would be useful but I'll have to

save up the pennies for that.

Deciding on which film to use is largely down to personal preference but unless you intend to shoot in very clear, shallow water I would suggest nothing slower than 400 ISO. Anything less than this will leave little option but to use slow shutter speeds and large apertures leading to problems with camera shake and a lack of depth of field.

For my first attempts with b&w I tried Ilford XP2, a film I have used extensively on land so I was familiar with its characteristics. I find it to be a very good general purpose film with grain not being too intrusive, plenty of detail throughout the tonal range, reasonably sharp and pushable by a stop or even two without significant degradation. I took a couple of rolls on holiday with me to Bathala Island in the Maldives. The island has its own very good house reef and, when the current isn't running, it provides a safe, shallow environment ideal for conducting photographic experiments. I decided on a 24 mm lens in my Subal housing and clicked away.

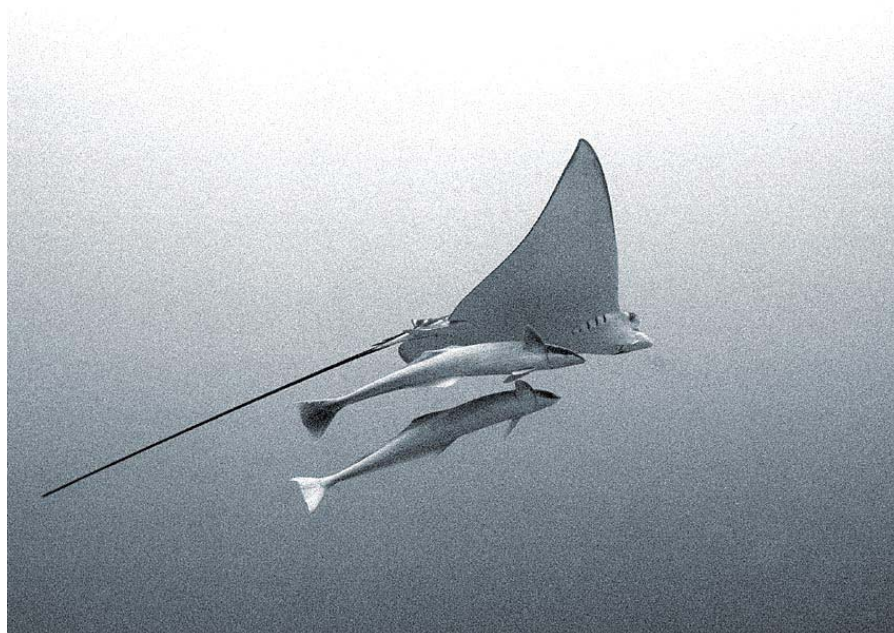
In general the results weren't particularly inspiring, as I had failed on many shots to pay sufficient attention to my own advice and the subject just blended in with the background. However, a few were sufficiently good for me to think it was worth persisting with.

A short while after my first dabbings with b&w I noticed, in various magazines, the work of Peter Hince and Julian Calverley, both of whom were producing some very impressive monochrome photographs using high speed film, so for my next attempts I tried some Ilford Delta

3200. Not surprisingly this film is quite grainy but the grain is well controlled and I have been generally pleased with the results it produces, particularly in low light conditions such as on a trip to the Farnes to photograph the seals. It was a fairly overcast day with some light rain at times so my expectations weren't high. For most of the dive I had to make do with pointing my lens at the odd inquisitive wrasse as the seals didn't seem to want to play. Eventually I did spot one seal and it came into range sufficiently long for me to take four shots as it glided by. If I had been using flash I would only have managed to get one shot as the seal would have been long gone by the time the guns had recycled, so yet another advantage of using ambient light.

Lately I have just begun using the 400 ISO version of Delta but I normally uprate it to 800 ISO and compensate by giving extra time in the developer. This not only gives a one stop advantage over it's nominal rating but also provides for slightly more contrasty images without introducing too much grain. For me it is likely to become my film of choice for underwater b&w.

As far as exposure is concerned I normally put the camera on aperture priority, set the aperture to the highest possible to give a hand holdable shutter speed and let the camera do the rest. In most instances this will give an accurate or at least acceptable result, particularly as negative films (both colour and b&w) have a better exposure latitude than slide films. On occasion I might switch to manual if I think the camera's meter is going to be fooled by



*Eagle Ray - Ilford Delta 3200, f11 on aperture priority, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. Shark Reef, Praslin, Seychelles.*

some particularly bright or dark element in the composition. For instance the underside of a stingray is very pale and this would lead to underexposure if it formed a large part of the picture space.

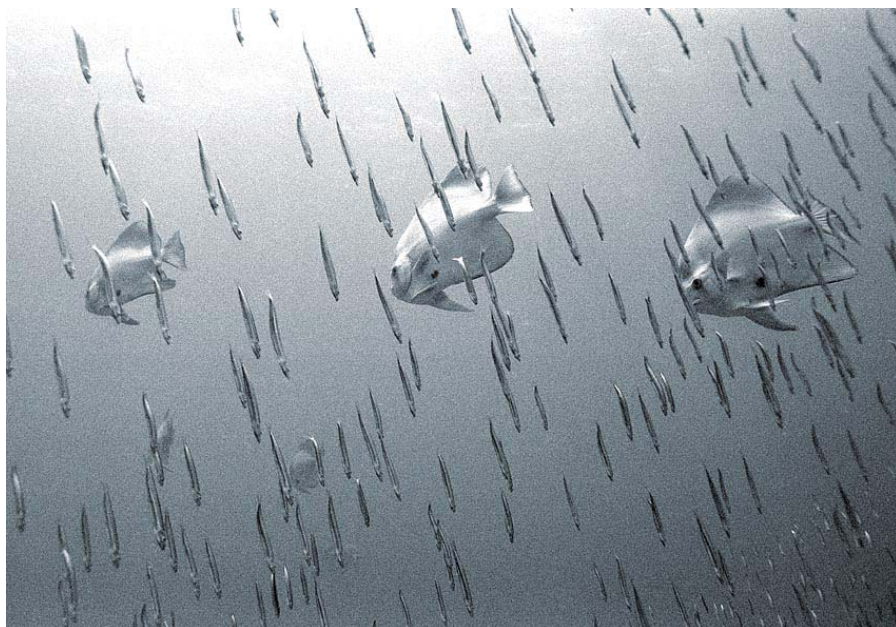
In such circumstances I would meter from the surrounding sea, looking slightly upwards, as this can be usually be relied upon to give a mid tone reading, and set the camera accordingly.

A very specialist film I have tried, and so far failed with, is Kodak High Speed Infra Red. As its name suggests it's sensitivity extends to the infra red end of the spectrum, which water absorbs very quickly so it doesn't penetrate more than a foot or so below the surface. Trying to use ambient light is therefore a pointless exercise so it's back to flash, negating some of the advantages of b&w photography. That said it's an interesting film which can provide unusual, ethereal effects resulting both from unexpected tonal renditions and ghostly outlines due to having no anti

halation layer.

I used it, rated at 400 ISO (my usual starting point on land) with a deep red filter, to accentuate the infrared sensitivity, on my 24mm lens and using twin Ikelite flashes. Unfortunately, at only ten metres or so in the warm, clear waters of the Seychelles I found it almost impossible to see more than a vague outline of anything through the filter. I resorted to pointing the housing in the general direction of the subject, guessing focus and hoping for the best. For my future attempts with this film I will place red filters over the flash heads which should give the same results but make it easier to see what's in the viewfinder.

A few years ago I would have taken the negatives into the darkroom and spent a great deal of time and wasted a huge amount of photographic paper to get the final print. Now I look at the negatives through a lupe on a lightbox and decide which ones to scan into my PC. I then use Photoshop in a very conservative way, removing any dust marks



*Raining Fish - Ilford Delta 3200, f16 on aperture priority, 24mm lens on Nikon 801s in Subal Housing. Shark Reef, Praslin, Seychelles.*

etc and adjusting the tonal balance, brightness and contrast before converting the image to colour (RGB mode). A subtle amount of toning is added,

usually to the whole image but sometimes one tone to the subject and another to the background. The image is subsequently printed either on to

a glossy paper such as Tetenal Spectra Jet or on a textured paper (e.g. Kentmere Tapestry) for an 'artistic' look. Overall a much easier, controllable and repeatable process than the darkroom.

Shooting monochrome underwater can be a frustrating, challenging but ultimately rewarding experience. It continues to provide me with a great deal of enjoyment and by it's nature forces me to look at the underwater world in a different way to colour photography. I won't be giving up on colour as it hold its own fascinations but I would encourage others to try a few rolls of b&w it could give your photography a whole new lease of life.

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## Ring of Bright Water



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The Quad is packed with useful features such as an automatically activated modeling light to assist autofocus and Nikon compatible TTL. To get creative there are three manual powers and a built in shade lets you block off two of the reflectors.

Available with ports to suit both Subal and Sea and Sea SLR housings. Quad from £995.00. Ports from £299.00. For a full review by award winning photographer, author and underwater photography coach Mark Webster see UwP Issue 2 at <http://www.uwpmag.co.uk>

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