

PRO ZONE

Learn the techniques and get tips from the professionals

A blue shark photographed off the coast of New England. Note the parasitic copepod.

OCEAN COLOUR SCENE

National Geographic photographer **BRIAN SKERRY** speaks of his adventures under water, how he has fought hard to get where he is, and how he uses shapes and light to reflect the way he sees the oceans.
By **SEAN SAMUELS**.

Brian Skerry has spent more than a year of his life under water. Over the last 30 years he has photographed beneath the frozen realms of the Arctic, in the shallow tropical waters of the Bahamas and throughout the deep oceans in between.

He has been chased by a sperm whale in the Azores and lost beneath an ice pack. While in Canada he once surfaced to see his dive boat sinking. He later returned to the wreck in the vain hope that he could recover some of the camera equipment that went down with it. ▶

BRIAN SKERRY

“EQUIPMENT, BOTH DIVING AND PHOTOGRAPHIC, WAS EXPENSIVE, BUT HE NEVER ONCE THOUGHT ABOUT GIVING UP AND TOOK MANY OTHER JOBS ALONG THE WAY TO HELP HIM CARVE OUT A CAREER IN UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY.”

The odd misfortune aside, Brian has loved every moment of his career. He is also extremely grateful to have been allowed to see his childhood dreams come true. Growing up in a small Massachusetts town 40 miles from the cold North Atlantic Ocean meant the chance of becoming an underwater cameraman, let alone working for *National Geographic*, was remote.

Nonetheless, he took his first dive under water in 1978. Having pored over colourful and exciting images of underwater life as a child in issue after issue of *National Geographic*, he was not about to be deterred. Brian found conditions in the local dive sites he visited were not ideal for photography, but he persevered with his passion, diving off the east coast of America and becoming proficient at diving in cold water.

Mastering his craft was just the first hurdle, however. In the early 1980s magazines that featured underwater photojournalism were few and far between, and it took Brian a number of years to develop the skills and experience necessary to pursue his dream.

For many years he was spending more money than he was making from underwater photography. Equipment, both diving and photographic, was expensive, but he never once thought about giving up, and took many other jobs along the way to help him carve out a career in underwater photography. He worked in factories, mills and supermarkets to support his endeavours through the early years.

But with his cold-water training it was not long before Brian became known for photographing shipwrecks in challenging conditions. He got work from the few dive

BIOGRAPHY

Brian Skerry is a professional underwater photographer based in the US. Since 1998 he has been a contract photographer for *National Geographic* and in 2008 he was awarded first place in the Underwater World category of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. He is the author of four books. www.brianskerry.com



BRIAN SKERRY

Whale shark off the coast of Australia.



A female tiger shark swimming with bar jacks.

magazines in print in the US at the time and began selling stock to bigger magazines. He spoke at engagements and lectures and in the early 1990s wrote his first book. His diligence was starting to pay off and in 1998 the opportunity to work for *National Geographic* was presented.

Brian was a friend of one of the veteran staff photographers on the magazine. They had dived together all over the world. The friend asked Brian if he wanted to do one of two jobs he had on. It was a shipwreck story and the conditions underwater were terrible. As far as the friend was concerned, the wreck was buried under the sand and there was nothing to photograph.

The friend proceeded to tell Brian that he thought there was a 98% chance

of failure and that, with *National Geographic*, you only get one chance, so perhaps he should consider waiting for a better opportunity.

Brian didn't wait. He was not about to turn this one down. So, armed with a recommendation from his friend and a limited portfolio, he visited the magazine. Once again, his sheer determination, passion and creativity worked, and Brian was given the assignment. Later that year he dived off Cape Cod and photographed the *Whydah*, the first pirate ship in history to be excavated.

Brian had no assistant on the shoot and had to work out a new way to light the wreck, his strobes were picking up reflective matter in the water, spoiling all his shots. So he brought in divers to hold

cable lights running down from the dive boat. This worked and he was able to photograph the entire site. When the excavation team found treasure, he was able to take macro shots for his story, which was published in 1999.

When working with *National Geographic*, all photographers must go to the magazine headquarters in Washington DC and meet with the picture editor to compile 30 or 40 images to show the editor and senior staff for approval. It was on this trip that fate stepped in again when Brian met Susan Smith, the assistant director of photography at *National Geographic*.

"At the end of my week in Washington, as I was about to leave, I met a lady in the elevator that had been present in all the presentations, but that I didn't know. We

talked about my photography and she told me the magazine was looking for a new photographer to develop and asked if I would like to return in a couple of weeks with a more diverse portfolio."

Now well established as a shipwreck specialist, Brian followed his heart once more and created a second portfolio that would enable him to cover natural history, his real love. He included images that demonstrated he could shoot a variety of different living subjects in all manner of conditions and was quickly signed to a contract with the magazine's stock agency. He was soon spending time in various magazine departments from design to photographic engineering, where a lot of the special equipment needed for covering stories is built. This period helped him to

BRIAN SKERRY

An oceanic whitetip shark and biologist.



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understand the needs of the magazine and how to tell a story with images.

"I loved everything about the ocean and wanted to do it all. I think that is what they recognised."

Doing things his way is a recurring theme in Brian's approach to photography as well as life. He treats each subject differently and rarely goes by the book. He finds pre-visualising an image to be helpful, but knows that gesture and grace, the two things that make good natural history photographs, are of the moment.

"You can't predict these moments, but if an animal is behaving in a certain way and you can capture them in a graceful pose, then that speaks volumes about the animal and makes for a successful photograph."

Underwater photography is very different to other kinds of wildlife photography. Photographers must get very close to their subjects – sometimes just five to six feet away and learn to be patient to allow the animals to take them into their world.

Light is also different underwater. There is refraction and reflection, and even in the clearest water there are tiny particles, whether plankton or other articulate matter, which produce an effect called backscatter. To counter this, a photographer needs strobes to capture colour, which is lost at just a few feet underwater.

"The ocean acts like a giant filter that removes all the warm colours such as the reds, the oranges and the yellows, and you have to use flash to bring warmth back into

the images, but because of these particles you have to be mindful you're not going to light that stuff up. They act as little mirrors and form white spots in the photograph. So use your lights to the side at a 45-degree angle so you are lighting your subject but not all the junk in the water."

Shot on film, the image of a blue shark bearing a red parasite (see page 27) was pre-visualised while Brian was working in New England. He fell in love with the lines and colour of these sharks and wanted to take an image that showed the evolutionary sculpting of these animals. These pelagic sharks cover great distances with bodies built like gliders. What Brian saw was a long fuselage-like body and huge pectoral fins like wings and wanted an image that showed that.

"The eye or the teeth were less important to me, so I selected an aperture and a shutter speed that would make the background go black and used my lights to bring out the blue colour. Shot on a 24mm lens, this frame achieved what I hoped it would. It was serendipity that this particular shark had this long trailing parasite that added a dash of colour and interest, but then I'd rather be lucky than good."

Brian now works in digital. In the days when he used film, he used to shoot 500 rolls while on assignment, send them all to *National Geographic* and then sit by the phone for two weeks until his picture editor called to tell him how he had done. He moved to digital in 2005, which has made him a better photographer. Being

able to shoot 700 frames on a dive over 36 has granted him creative freedom. Being able to see results instantly is also resounding.

His creative approach extends to his treatment of subject matter. For tropical coral reefs, Brian likes to work very late in the day, which goes against the rules he was furnished with when he first started out – that the best time to photograph was between 10am and 2pm because that is when the sun is highest in the sky and you get the best light.

Brian preferred to shoot at dusk in tropical conditions because during the day the water is so clear and the light so bright that he has almost no control.

“At dusk I can slow everything down and use my own strobes and flashes to saturate colours. I love working with very slow shutter speeds. In the ocean, particularly environments where there are a lot of fish swimming about and there is an interplay of light, that’s when I love being creative and am able to capture images that reflect the way I see the ocean where there is motion, light and gesture all happening together.”

The image of shadows from smaller fish falling across the nose of a female tiger shark is one of Brian’s favourite images (see page 30). He wanted to do a very different kind of shark story from those often presented by underwater photographers. He wanted to convey the drama and presence of these big animals, but at the same time show sharks as beautiful creatures to be respected. Brian had been in the water for some time with this shark getting closer and closer. In a moment she turned towards him and he was able to capture her portrait.

This kind of work is dangerous. Being an underwater photographer is a specialist job and one which Brian is aware carries risks, but education and being prepared takes some of the risk away. Brian will think nothing of spending anywhere between six months and a year researching his subject before he even goes into the field. He routinely works with experts on animal behaviour, which gives him information he wouldn’t otherwise have. This process also helps to inform the kind of image he wants.

“I will lie in bed at night thinking about the images I want to make. It may not work out that way, but at least in my mind I have a sense of what will be a magnificent

image. The greatest gift a photographer can be given is time. If you have time with a subject, you are often granted those little moments where something special happens, and if you are prepared, then you can seize that moment.”

Studying marine wildlife behaviour over the last 30 years has also given Brian a sense of when things feel right and when they do not.

“I might be in the water one day with a dozen tiger sharks around and things feel fine, while on another day a single mako shark might be acting in a way that tells me to get out of the water. I think it’s similar to walking to a neighbour’s house and seeing a dog in the front yard. One dog gives off a friendly vibe while another might not. I have to trust my instincts.”

It should not go unreported that the number of sharks killed by humans is far greater than the number of humans killed by sharks. Removing this many apex predators from an ecosystem is not wise. Conservation is high on Brian’s agenda and he was able to tell me that over 100 million sharks are killed every year. For the shot of a lemon shark pup (see opposite page), Brian wanted to photograph juvenile animals in their natural habitat. In the Bahamas, baby lemon sharks spend the first three years of their lives in tropical mangroves, which, despite being difficult for Barry to manoeuvre in, proved the ideal landscape in which to photograph the animals. It was shallow water and Brian spent four to five days allowing the sharks to acclimate to him. He scouted this position with the mangrove roots and the green shoot in frame. He wanted to capture this frozen frame; the sharp details of the animal and its habitat. The shark in this image is just 10 or 12in long.

“I can spend eight months of the year, sometimes more, in the field, and there are days when I just want to come home and be with my family, but I am compelled to tell stories about environmental problems. In the years I have been doing this, I have seen a steady degradation of our oceans and I think I have been given this privilege to be able to reach more than 50 million readers every month that my stories are published.”

Brian will be teaching underwater photography for the first time in November. He has partnered with a company based in the Netherlands called Photo Master Class, which specialises in



A lemon shark pup in its mangrove nursery.

workshops with wildlife photographers such as Steve Winter, Tim Laman and Brian – all *National Geographic* photographers. His first workshop will be in Bonaire.

“I have witnessed things that 30 years ago I barely could have dreamt about. Every time I go out something wonderful happens, and the more amazing the encounters I have, the more I want to have.”

Through an addiction to underwater photography, a commitment to conservation and a passion for the oceans, Brian is able to capture enthralling images. I can’t help but wonder: are they taken with the eyes of a small boy growing up 40 miles from the ocean dreaming of what that world is really like? 

WHAT'S IN YOUR KIT BAG?

- ▶ Three Nikon D3 bodies
- ▶ One Nikon D3x body
- ▶ Most used underwater lenses: Nikon 16mm, 14mm, 18mm, 20mm, 24mm, 28mm, 60mm and 105mm
- ▶ Most used surface lenses: Nikon 14-24mm, 24-70mm, 70-200mm (all nano-coated lenses), 200-400mm, 600mm
- ▶ Nikon SB-800 flash guns
- ▶ Subal underwater housings
- ▶ Hartenberger and Sea&Sea Strobes

DIVE EQUIPMENT

- ▶ Scubapro regulators, fins, masks, snorkels and buoyancy compensators
- ▶ Mares and Sherwood regulators
- ▶ DUI drysuits
- ▶ O’Neill wetsuits
- ▶ Yazbeck and Picasso freediving wetsuits

BRIAN SKERRY

WIN A PLACE ON AN UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY COURSE!

WIN!

If you would like to learn to shoot under water using a camera mode other than automatic, enter our competition to win a tailor-made course worth £300 from Ocean Visions. Under the expert guidance of award-winning photographer Maria Munn, you will learn tips and tricks to help you achieve beautiful photographs, whether above or below water. She will also share her experience and knowledge of the many destinations she has visited worldwide to bring you a day to remember. You will learn new skills in an easy-to-understand course with little technical jargon. For more information on the courses, visit www.oceanvisions.co.uk. For more details on how to enter the competition, visit www.photographymonthly.com/competitions.

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