



HEART OF THE HUNTER
Story & Photos: Jan Messersmith

Blue spotted stingray - *Dasyatis kuhlii*.

Heart of the HUNTER

From the musket to the sniper rifle in two decades

Jan Messersmith

Hunting trips with my Grandfather are among the fondest memories of my youth. Grandad was an excellent marksman and would insist that I not aim my open-sight pump-action .22 Winchester at any living thing until I could consistently place three bullets into a two inch circle at fifty feet. When I had achieved this goal, he allowed me to move on to the tasty targets of squirrels, rabbits and doves. Bigger game followed in time, such as deer and the occasional bear, downed by larger calibre telescopic sighted rifles.

Grandad was an ethical hunter. We never killed anything that we did not plan to eat. A poor first shot that required a second would make him growl. A wounded animal that forced a chase to end its suffering provoked a stony silence. Although I enjoyed many aspects of hunting, I eventually tired of the sport and its bloodletting.

When I moved to Madang and discovered diving I soon yearned to

be able to record the wonderful scenes that I saw every time I slipped into the warm sea. My father taught me his photographic skills and I became an enthusiastic amateur photographer from the time he first allowed me to use his

darkroom when I was eleven. It seemed natural to combine the two interests – hunting and photography. Suddenly, I rediscovered the thrill of the hunt.

The Arsenal

In the world of underwater



“...we have moved from the musket to the sniper rifle in a mere two decades...”

photography, we have moved from the musket to the sniper rifle in a mere two decades. Never before has an amateur photographer on a limited budget had the tools to capture beautiful, realistic images underwater. Look at the image of my major underwater camera equipment over twenty years. My first Ikelite outfit containing a Minolta SLR was unwieldy, to say the least. Shooting on film and depending on local processing was a source of continuous frustration. I spent several thousand dollars for the gear and all I have to show for it is a huge box of faded, off-colour prints that nobody has seen for years.

My next outfit was an Olympus C8080 in a factory housing. It was a quantum leap forward. I captured many good images and even made a little money peddling them. It was much smaller, but still required two hands to manage a decent shot. The tiny screen was an improvement over peering through the miniscule peep-hole on the Ikelite housing, but it was still difficult to frame a shot. The housing itself proved to be poorly engineered, flooding two cameras when it simply fell to pieces while underwater.

Top left: Black squirrelfish - *Neoniphon opercularis*. Right: Coral grouper - *Cephalopholis miniata*. Left: Butterflyfish.

My current weapon of choice is a Canon G10 in a factory housing. Don Silcock has, in his series of *Niugini Blue* articles, meticulously covered the technical photographic issues. In his last article he mentioned the G10 and the newest model, the G11. I am currently recommending the G11 with

the factory housing to any diver who is serious about UW photography and does not want to spend a fortune. The G11 should be superior to the G10 because it has fewer megapixels (10MP versus 15MP for the G10). The reason, as Don explained, is that the ‘buckets’ (pixels) that catch the light are bigger, yielding





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Above: Spotted porcelain crab - *Neopetrolisthes maculata*.

less noise, and the ranges of colours and intensity of light that the sensor can deliver to the camera's computer are considerably greater.

When choosing any camera for underwater use, if you plan to produce high-quality images, your first consideration should be that it can capture images in what is called the RAW mode.

Never mind the technicalities. Simply put, the RAW mode keeps

the three colours, red, green and blue, completely separated from each other and it does not compress the images in such a way that details are lost. This makes for large files, upwards of 15MB for the G10, so you will need an 8GB storage card at the least. The payoff is seen when these files are opened in the Photoshop Camera Raw software, which allows an incredible range of adjustments to recreate the colours that you saw when you captured the image. If the cost of Photoshop is a hindrance, a free program called GIMP is available on the web. It contains many of the same

features.
The Prey

Cameras such as the Canon G11 are a good choice for building a collection of what are generally called specimen images. A specimen image is simply a picture that displays sufficient accurate detail to allow one to identify the species. Since you will normally be quite close to your prey, the limitations of the tiny flash are not so significant. Many of your shots will be in relatively shallow water where there is sufficient light to get excellent images with the flash completely disabled. Most of the

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images that you see in this article were taken without flash.

You will find shooting big game more difficult. It is rare in the Madang area to have water clear enough to give good results more than two or three metres from the camera. At that

Above: Spotted sand diver - *Trichonotus setiger*. Top right: Nudibranch - *Phyllidia coelestis*. Right: Urchin clingfish - *Diademichthys lineatus*.



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“Chasing fish around simply uses up your air. Learn to think as a sniper.”

distance, the flash is useless anyway. Backscattering light from particles in the water make it appear as if it were snowing. The Hump-Headed Parrotfish seen here is one of the few distant images that have satisfied me. It was taken at a distance of about three metres. Any large fish is likely to be very difficult to approach close enough for a good shot.

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Top right: Hermit crab - *Calcinus minutus*. Below: Hump headed parrotfish - *Bulbometopon muricatum*.



winning images for the eager amateur equipped with modest gear. This brings us to the skills which reside in the heart of the hunter.

The Hunt

Knowing your hunting ground is important. However, on a dive that is new to you, having someone along who

is familiar with the spot is nearly as helpful. In an unfamiliar area, I always appreciate having a local tracker along. As an example of local knowledge, I have been photographing a single exceptionally brilliant anemone and its inhabitant, a Spinecheek Anemonefish for over ten years at Planet Rock. Dives that I have made hundreds of times often provide the most Canon fodder.

For creatures such as nudibranchs and crabs, the hunt consists primarily of finding your prey. Since they are relatively immobile, once found, it is a simple matter of point and shoot.

For mobile prey, stalking is a valuable hunting skill below as well as above the surface. Chasing fish around simply uses up your air. Learn to think as a sniper. Make use of available cover. If you spot a fish, stay close to the reef, using bommies, fan corals, or other natural cover to obscure your outline.

Divers are not supposed to hold their breath, but you will soon discover that the last few seconds of the stalk are when the goby will dive into its burrow upon sensing a big exhale. I use a modified rifleman's technique. Approach as closely as you can without spooking your prey, inhale a moderate



Above: Dwarf hawkfish - *Cirrhitichthys falco*. Right: Spotted garden eel.

breath and hold it, make your final approach and then squeeze off the shot. If you inhale too deeply, you will simply float upwards and spoil the shot. Too little, and you will be wishing you had more air before you get the shot. It all adds to the excitement. Just remember to begin breathing normally before you rise even a metre. At shallow depths, with lungs nearly full, you seriously endanger yourself by ascending while holding your breath.

You can closely approach many of the small perching fish, such as the



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Dwarf Hawkfish, if you come in slowly, breathing calmly with as few noisy bubbles as you can manage and give the fish time to get used to your presence. It will often skitter from perch to perch for a minute or so. Chasing the little jewel is fruitless. Give it time and it will settle on a suitable perch and you may be able to hold your camera out to within a few centimetres of the subject. Teasing a little telephoto extension from your lens at this point will often yield an image of a four or five centimetre fish that fills your viewfinder.

With patience, you can approach some larger prey that prefer ambush hunting or use natural cover for hiding their presence. The Blue-Spotted Stingray is an excellent example. When you are stalking it all you will normally see are two bulbous eyes protruding above the sand or a stick-like tail

Left: Arch eye hawkfish. Below: Spotted lionfish - *Pterois antennata*.



extending from under a shelf of coral. I have had more success approaching it head-on. You want to stay as far from that tail as you can. A slow, patient approach will put your camera within a metre of the beautiful creature before it decides that enough is enough.

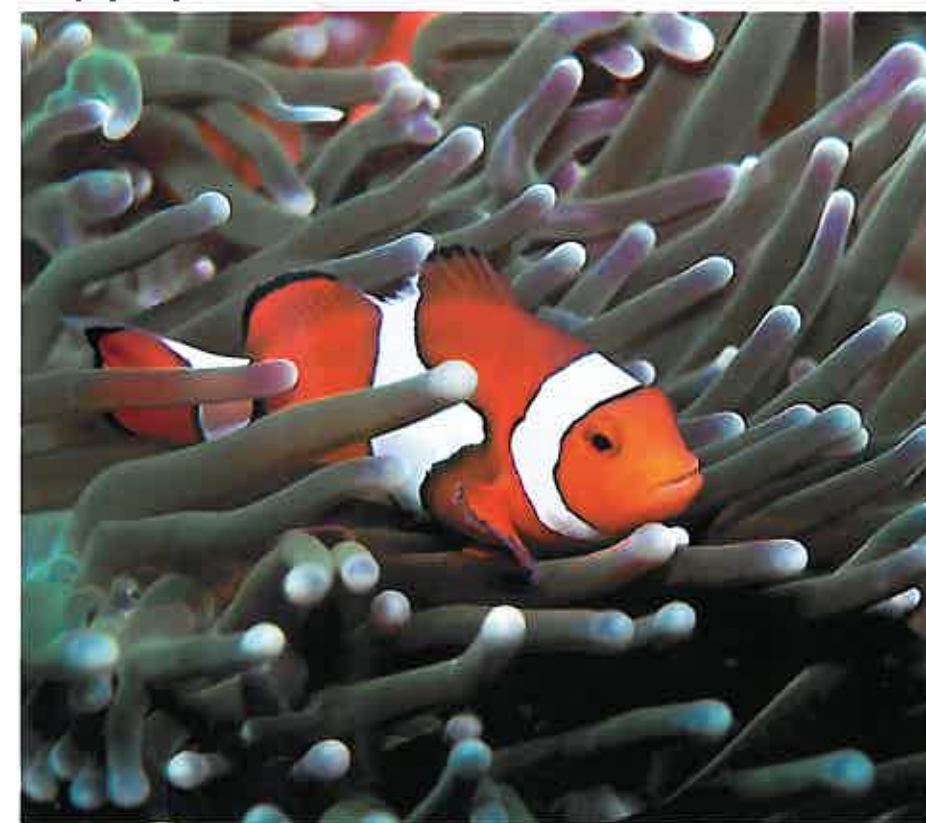
The most exasperating critter that I have stalked is the Spotted Garden Eel. They mob together by the dozens waving in the current in synchrony and darting for tasty bits floating past. When you approach and are just out of camera range, they all slip back down into their holes. Getting a close-up shot is an

Top left: Longnose hawkfish - *Oxychirrhites typus*. Top right: Spotted soapfish - *Pogonoperca punctata*. Below: Clown anemonefish - *Amphiprion percula*.



exercise in frustration.

A final example of stalking problems is illustrated by the Longnose Hawkfish.



It is not so difficult to get a shot at one, if you can find one. They are rather rare. The only place near Madang where I can guarantee a sighting is on the wreck of the *Henry Leith*. The difficulty arises when you attempt to get a clear shot. Like the squirrel hiding around the side of a tree, showing only its head (a deadly error of judgement if I had my .22 with me), the Longnose insists that something remains between it and your camera. Sometimes you get lucky and it is only a sprig of coral as in the image you see here.

The Trophies

I am amused by the complements that come my way, not to mention the money that I receive, for my modest underwater images. I believe that the public in general and a large proportion of divers believe that it is both difficult and expensive to get good underwater pictures. Some have tried in the past and been disappointed because they did not have sufficient money or training or did not understand the principles.

This supposed difficulty and expense is based on completely obsolete information. For a few hundred dollars,



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Above: Spotted shrimp goby. Below:
Musket to sniper rifle.



far less than the cost a new beaut dive rig, any diver can own the equipment that produced every one of these images. With a computer, the proper software, and six hours of training, any diver can acquire all of the skills needed to begin to produce beautiful images.

Of the images that you see here, the one with which I am most satisfied is not the brightest and most colourful; it is the one that stretched my hunting skills to their limits. Have a look at the image of a Spotted Shrimp Goby with two commensal *Alpheus ochrostriatus* shrimps. I took over seventy shots during approximately twenty-five minutes to get both of the shrimps bulldozing sand from their burrow while the shrimp goby stood guard.

For me, that is far more satisfying than a thirty point buck. ■

Jan Messersmith

Just For Starters...



Rob McCulloch often visits PNG to skipper or fish during the annual GFAPNG National Titles tournament. Here he is with young seven year old Nick Brown (middle) and his first marlin. Young Nick caught this admirable fish during the 23rd Groote Eylandt Annual Billfish Comp.

According to Cap'n Rob, "He [Nick] did it a bit tough for a while but hung in till the end. [He is] my youngest ever angler to catch a marlin. His father Jeff Brown is holding the tail and it was caught out of his 5.66m Polycraft." The fish is an estimated 30kg caught on 15kg line (with light drag) and took only forty-five

minutes to tag.

So there you go Mums and Dads. PNG is full of juvenile billfish and sailfish and offers the perfect hunting grounds to start the kids on the big stuff. Talk to your local fishing club to find out the best strategy, and don't forget to be patient! ■

Oops I Ran Out of Fuel...

Here's a snap of one of the newer boats in Lae getting a fuel delivery somewhere way, way, way down the coast! This was forwarded for discussion, I believe by one of his good mates.

Reminds me of the gold lotto advert of the guy who got seasick on boats so hired a chopper to go fishing. ■

J.C.



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