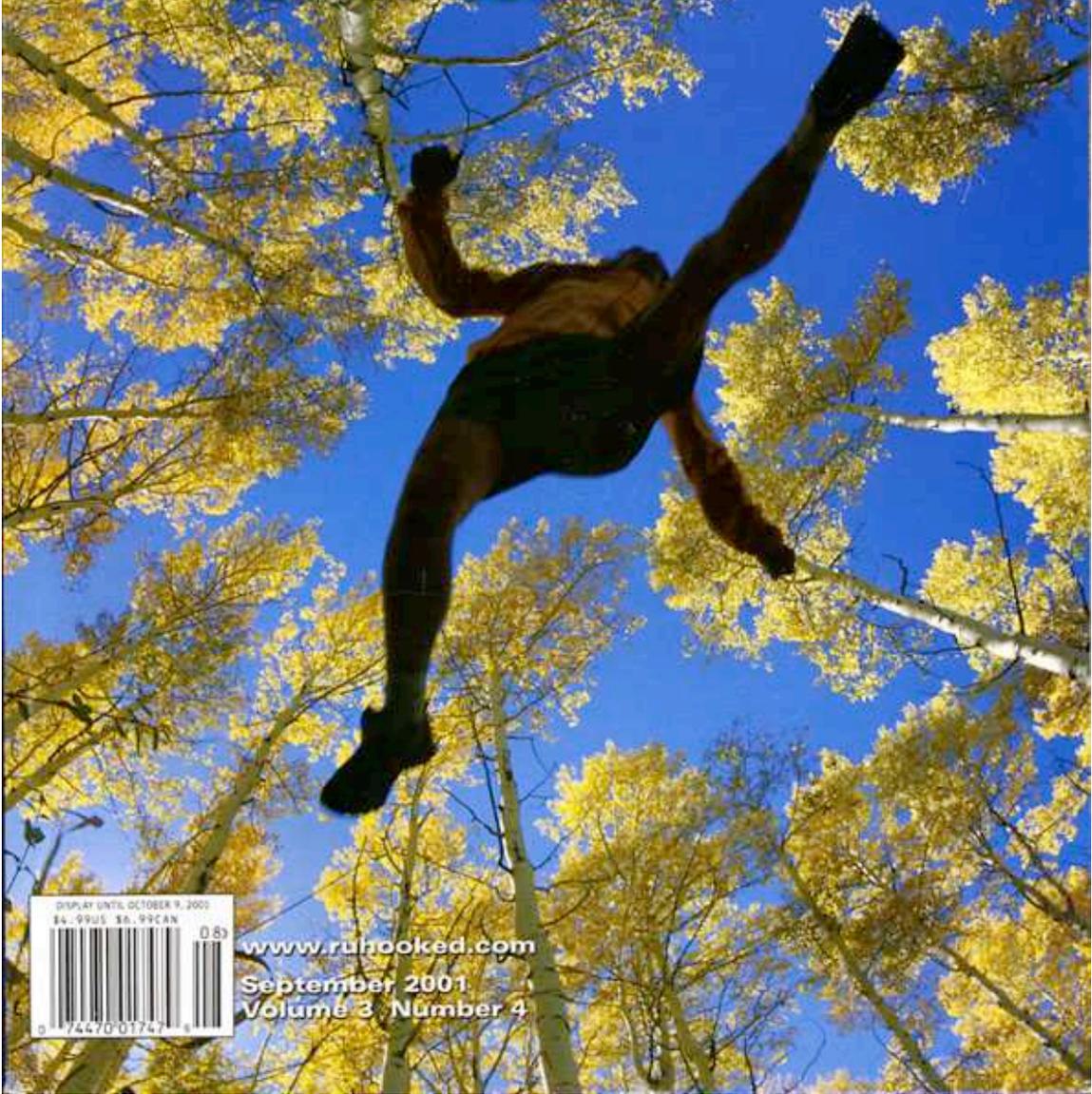


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# 10 Under WATER Photo Tips

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CLYDE SOLES

Underwater photography is among the most challenging and rewarding genres of camera art. You must simultaneously use your right brain to monitor both your diving and photo gear—tracking depth, air remaining, decompression status, exposure settings, strobe positions, shots left, etc.—and your left brain to creatively compose images that convey the experience. Here are 10 tips that should increase your odds of surfacing with winning photos.



## GAIN CONTROL, HONE YOUR UNDERWATER DIVING SKILLS

Refining buoyancy control and breathing are the first steps to becoming a better photographer. These will come with experience, though you can speed up the process with Advanced Diver certification. Better yet, become a Rescue Diver.

## KNOW YOUR SUBJECT

Learn about the ecosystem before you get in the water. Good photos are not accidental. Never harm the reef!

## GET CLOSE

Reducing the distance between your lens and the subject is vital in murky water or your shots will look like they were made in a snowstorm. Even in clear tropical waters, a closer approach will reward you with crisper colors.

## SHOOT WIDE

If you're buying a Nikonos V camera body, don't bother with a 35mm lens (it has minimal usage underwater but is handy for raft trips). Start off with a 28mm or even a 20mm lens; the results are vastly better. For a housing (Ikelite is a great choice), try a 24mm or 21mm lens behind a dome port. Avoid zoom lenses; divers tend to take snapshots of whatever comes along instead of concentrating on a subject.

## SHOOT SMALL

Shooting macro subject matter is most fun with a housed camera, a 90mm to 105mm lens with a flat port, and a pair of flashes. The extension tubes for Nikonos cameras are affordable and work well for inanimate objects but the framers spook fish.

## SEPARATE THE FLASH

Serious underwater camera systems, as opposed to point-and-shoots, have a flash on a long, multi-jointed arm. This flexibility is essential for directing your light source and preventing backscatter, the underwater equivalent of red-eye from a thousand critters. Two flashes on arms are even better for uniform wide-angle lighting and controlling shadows when shooting macro.

## KNOW YOUR GEAR

Before an expensive trip of a lifetime, test your scuba and camera equipment in a swimming pool where mistakes are a lot cheaper. Learn the intricacies of through-the-lens (TTL) flash; many times it's better to shoot manual. Autofocus is rarely useful underwater. Choose a mask with a dark skirt for better viewing.

## MIX YOUR GASES

Nitrox, a gas blend with more than normal amounts of nitrogen, extends your bottom time at the moderate depths best suited to

photography (short course required). If you're rich, purchase a rebreather...if you're really rich, send me one too. These allow almost unlimited bottom time and there are no noisy bubbles to scare critters.

## HEED THE WATER GODS

A flooded camera is a sad sight and it's almost always the owner's fault. Clean and re-grease any seal that is opened between

dives. Diligence is essential but a leak detector and absorbent towels inside the housing are added insurance. Many floods occur from the jostling in the freshwater rinse bucket, which is mandatory after each dive.

## HEED THE DANGERS

It's all too easy to get caught up in composing that great shot and forget to check your air. Always dive with a buddy and carry a backup supply (Spare Air or pony bottle).

Although both of the major scuba organizations in the US ([www.PADI.com](http://www.PADI.com) and [www.NAUI.org](http://www.NAUI.org)) offer an introductory photo course, you won't learn much that you can't figure out from a good book. If the photo bug really bites, your best bet is to take an in-depth class at a resort or on a live-aboard boat. 



*Clyde Soles is a freelance photojournalist who photographed the seals and sea lions of California's Channel Islands for his master's project in photography.*