

Underwater Photographer of the Year

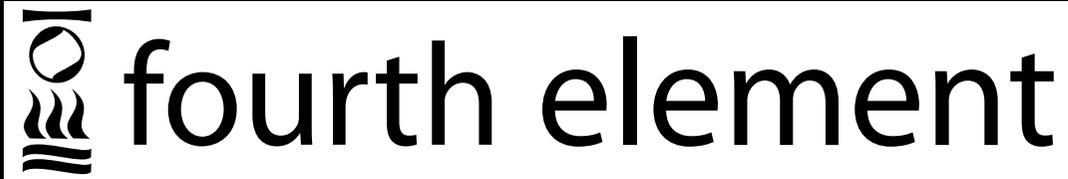
UPY 2026

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Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026

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Chairman's Welcome

Welcome! The whole UPY Team invites you to enjoy the stunning winning images from the 2026 Underwater Photographer of the Year competition. They don't disappoint.

UPY has always focused on celebrating the excellence and the diversity of imagery within underwater photography. At first glance, you might conclude that underwater photography is a specialist activity, that it occupies a narrow photographic niche. Each year we hope to show that on a planet that is 71% covered in water, underwater photography encompasses a huge variety of photography styles, disciplines and potential subjects. Once again, our winning images were taken across the oceans from the poles to the tropics, we have pictures from the open ocean to mountain lakes and the collection includes photos taken on deep wrecks, in underground caves, in shallow rockpools, and even in enclosed water, like swimming pools.

We always approach judging UPY with our minds open, assessing every image on its individual merits. We park our own biases and judge without trying to fit the winners into our own wish-list. It means the collection is always filled with surprises and real variety. I also think that this approach is why it is rare for individual photographers to place with multiple images in a single year, and why most of our categories have different winners year on year.

Over the last decade or so, UPY has firmly established its place on the photographic calendar, and has become one of the most global photo contests. Even the photographers in the winners circle don't hail from a handful of the usual suspect countries, but really come from everywhere. We award just 88 images in our International categories, yet they were taken by photographers from 28 different countries (as you'll see as you explore the collection). Our International category winners come from France, Korea, Sweden, Japan, Australia, Israel, Japan again, USA, Italy, China and Malaysia.

Each year UPY aims to showcase the very best underwater photos, but as a contest we're not only

focused on our winners... 2026 was another record year for entries, with a surprisingly large increase to 7934 pictures in the contest. This is an impressive number as most other contests for underwater images rarely reach 4 figures. Especially so as we limit entrants to a maximum of 20 images, which is less than most others. The high number comes from the large number of individual entrants and we're very grateful that so many of you come out for UPY. The downside of the numbers is that about 99% of these pictures can't get awarded. Running a contest you always make more people unhappy than happy. But at UPY we try our best to redress that balance. Because UPY is judged start to finish by the named judges, with the judges seeing every single entry - all while in the same room at the same time - we are able to provide detailed individual feedback. For every image that is entered in UPY we share with the photographer the details of how it progressed, so if you miss out on being a winner, you do see how near or far your different pictures were.

I'd like to congratulate all the amazing winners and thank all the photographers who entered and entrusted UPY with your fantastic photography. I would also like to thank our five category sponsors. Two join us for the first time this year. DIVEVOLK the technological magicians behind those amazing touchscreen underwater housings for phones inspired and support the new Smartphone category, which acts as the gateway for so many into creating their own underwater imagery. Scuba Finders support the spectacular Wide Angle category, their innovative online platform connects divers with the best dive destinations and dive centres around the world. The Save Our Seas Foundation continue their support our Marine Conservation category, both ensuring it is totally free to enter (these important images should have no barriers to getting out there) and providing cash prizes for the winners. PADI, arguably the biggest name in diving, sponsor the important Up & Coming category that puts the spotlight on rising talent. I'd also like to thank The Crown Estate, who sponsor the popular



Alex Mustard

British Waters Living Together category and host our special Awards Evening in central London, where the results are first revealed and winners get to celebrate properly together. I also must say a big thank you to all the amazing companies that donate prizes for our winners, you can see them on the previous page. If you like what we're doing with UPY, then please support them when you have the chance.

Finally, UPY simply wouldn't exist without the hardworking team that make this all happen. The three judges, Peter Rowlands, Tobias Friedrich and myself, tend to grab the attention, as we shoulder the long hours of judging and the responsibility of standing behind the big decisions. But the majority of the graft happens away from those days. It's the wider team of Dan Bolt, Saeed Rashid and Shannon Moran, who bring UPY to life. So from me, and I know from everyone who enters UPY, a heartfelt thank you to the entire UPY Team for your dedication, good humour, skill and efforts. UPY is the world's most important underwater photography contest, and is cherished by our community for the way we operate; thank you for making it what it is.

Dr Alex Mustard MBE
Chair of the UPY Judging Panel

The Judges

Each judging year begins with a quiet sense of anticipation. Before the results are known, before the winners are announced, there is a rare moment where the underwater world reveals itself in thousands of unseen interpretations. Being part of the UPY judging process means stepping into that moment — away from trends, algorithms and public opinion — and focusing solely on the images themselves.

What stands out immediately is how intentional the submissions have become. The photographers entering today are not simply recording encounters; they are shaping narratives, refining visual language and pushing technical boundaries. The standard has risen to a point where originality is no longer a bonus, but a necessity. Many images demand careful, repeated viewing, revealing subtle choices in lighting, timing and composition that separate a strong photograph from an exceptional one.

Judging such a collection is an immersive experience. For several days, the outside world fades away as thousands of images are reviewed, compared and reconsidered. Decisions are rarely straightforward. Tiny differences — a fraction of a second, a cleaner line, a more confident use of negative space — can define the outcome. It is this level of precision that makes the process challenging, but also deeply rewarding.

Despite the intense selection, the final shortlisted images represent an extraordinary range of environments and perspectives. From intimate macro scenes to powerful wide-angle moments, the diversity reflects a truly global community united by curiosity and dedication. Each entry contributes to a broader visual conversation about life below the surface.

Ultimately, success at UPY is not about location, rarity or spectacle. It is about vision. Compelling images can emerge from familiar waters just as easily as from remote destinations when creativity, patience and technical mastery come together. We encourage photographers to trust their ideas, explore their local environments

and submit work that reflects how they see the underwater world. These personal perspectives are what continue to shape and elevate the competition year after year.

Tobias Friedrich

Just when we thought we must have reached a plateau, you go and surprise us again. Nearly 8,000 images but, more importantly, from 706 underwater photographers worldwide - up from 602 last year - that's just under a 20% increase from last year.

Now one thing which sets UPY apart from all the other underwater photography competitions is that we are totally transparent about the number of images entered and the number of underwater photographers who entered them - this year 7,934 images from 706 underwater photographers.

Nobody knows for sure how many serious underwater photographers there are worldwide. It's a question that the UPY team often ponders for, as with divers and diving in general, there are newcomers and leavers every year. I'm going to stick my neck out and suggest that annually there are about 2,500 active serious underwater photographers worldwide who have much more than a basic camera and use one or two strobes/ flashes and additional or a range of lenses. That would mean that just under a third entered UPY.

Now competitions are not everyone's cup of coffee but they have increased in popularity recently and I put that down to the reduction in the financial value of underwater images. The advent of digital underwater photography has seen the commercial market for underwater images plummet. The amount of money you earned from the sales of your images was an indication of how good your images were. Competitions are the new way of gauging that level or, if you put store in this sort of modern thing, the number of likes your images get on



Judges taking a break in the rare British sunshine

social media.

Either way, UPY can claim to be the most supported and prestigious of all underwater photography competitions and for that we are most grateful for your support and confidence.

Surely we can't top it again next year? Well, that's exactly what we said last year :-)

Peter Rowlands

Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026



Rockpool Rookies - Matty Smith (Australia)

Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026



Rockpool Rookies

Matty Smith (Australia)

Once several weeks old and weaned from their mothers milk, elephant seal pups are abandoned by their parents on shore, left to navigate life alone. On Sealion Island in the Falklands, I watched dozens of them clamber over one another in shallow rockpools, awkwardly learning to swim, and quite engaging to my presence. I'd come here for this moment, to witness and photograph their first solo lessons in life. On the very first evening of my arrival, the sky ignited with colour. I donned my dry suit and rushed into the water, capturing a handful of frames before the light vanished. It turned out to be the defining moment of the trip, and I'm glad I didn't hesitate.

Sealion Island, The Falklands

Nikon Z9, Aquatica Digital AZ9, Nikkor Z 14-30mm F4 S, ISO200 , f/16, 1/60, 2 x Ikelite DS230

Judges' comments

Cold water contrasts with heartwarming cuteness. Southern elephant seals traverse land and sea, born on wild shores, but thriving in the frigid waters. Elephant seals were hunted remorselessly from the end of the 1700s until the 20th century, pushing them right to the brink of extinction. Their oil rich blubber was used for everything from lighting to margarine. Fortunately, the hunt was stopped just in time, and their recovery over the last 100 years is a great example of the resilience of the ocean. A beautiful and hopeful photograph.

What a cutie! I love the split image approach that the photographer took to capture this beautiful and emotionally very engaging image. The look of the baby elephant seal below the surface is just magic and a very well deserved and undisputed winner of this year's competition! Well done!

In hindsight, it's easy and obvious but when you have nearly 8,000 images vying for your eye's attention it can be a tough call. Fortunately, this year, the winner almost chose itself by being so good. Cute, puppy eyes and perfectly lit with a sunset background; top it with a perfect split level and you have the judges on their feet. Deserved congratulations.

Alex Mustard

Tobias Friedrich

Peter Rowlands

The 'Save our Seas Foundation' Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Where innocence meets tradition Khaichuin Sim (Malaysia)

In the Faroe Islands, the annual pilot whale hunt known as Grindadráp, remains one of the world's most controversial traditions. Seen by locals as a cultural heritage and source of food, it is condemned globally for its brutality and impact on marine life. In this poignant scene, a young boy sits atop a slain whale amid blood-red waters, a haunting reflection of how tradition, identity, and ethics collide. It captures not just a moment, but a generational question: what should be preserved, and what should change?

Hvítnes, Faroe Islands

Sony A7RM2, No Housing , Sony FE 85mm F1.4 GM, 800 , f/2.5, 1/8000, No Lighting

Judge's comments: A sad but powerful image which asks more questions than it answers. The message must be that traditions such as these have no place in modern society regardless of the food justification. Photography has the power to bring change.

Peter Rawlands

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Wide Angle

Category History

2026 Cecile Gabillon Barats (France)	2020 Greg Lecoeur (France)
2025 Alvaro Herrero (Mekan), (Spain)	2019 François Baelen (Reunion Island)
2024 Alex Dawson (Sweden)	2018 Greg Lecoeur (France)
2023 Greg Sherman (USA)	2017 Ron Watkins (USA)
2022 Rafael Fernandez Caballero (Spain)	2016 Mike Korostelev (Russia)
2021 Renee Capozzola (USA)	2015 Raffaele Livornese (Italy)

We are Gonzalo and Juan, founders of Scuba Finders, a Spanish online travel agency specializing in diving trips. What began as a project among divers remains so today: a young team committed to every trip we design. We've built proprietary technology that lets us offer real-time dive travel packages, combining flights, accommodation, diving, and essentials in one seamless booking.

It is an honor to sponsor UPY's Wide Angle category, where unforgettable encounters and sweeping seascapes come to life, capturing moments that make the ocean feel vast, intimate, and worth protecting.

Underwater images can spark awareness and action. We are proud to support the photographers whose work helps more people fall in love with the ocean, realise its value and help to protect it.



Wide Angle



Winner

Happy Baby

Cecile Gabillon Barats (France)

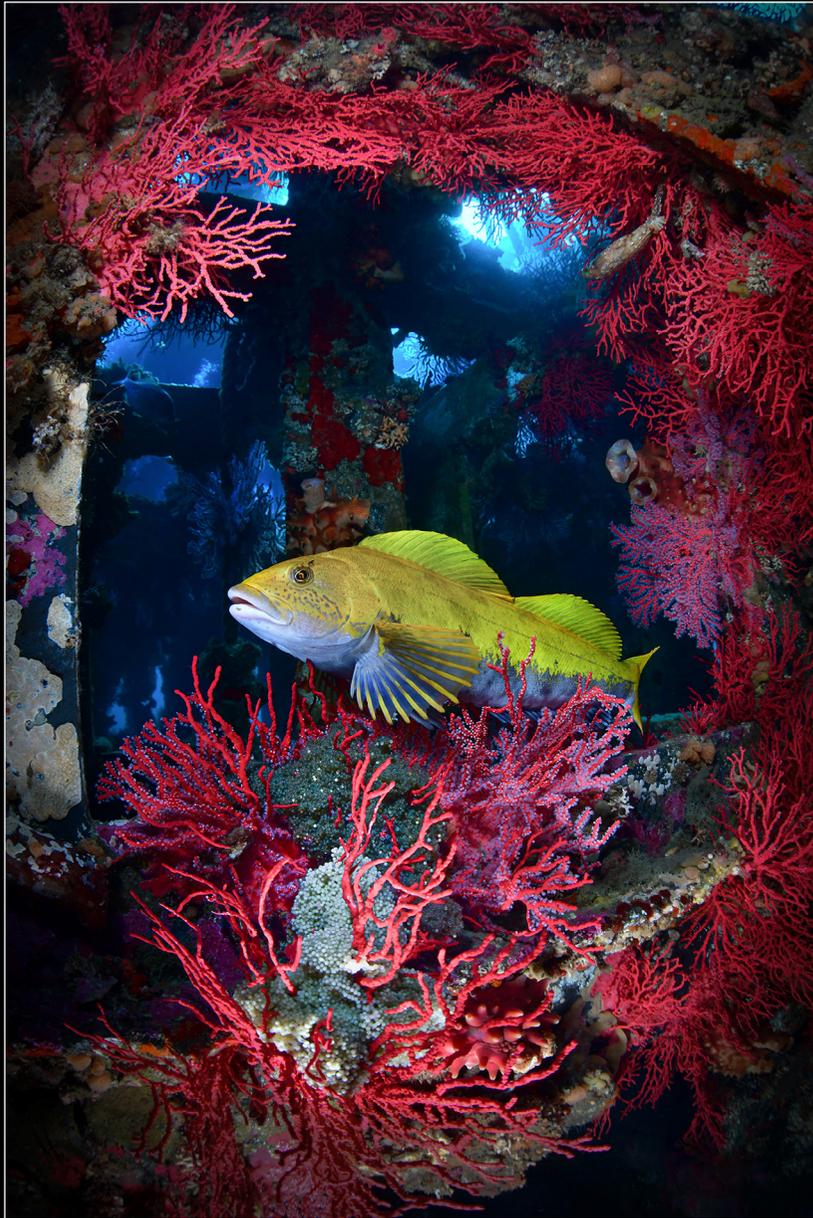
As a tour leader and photographer in Dominica, I was fortunate to experience a truly magical encounter with a curious juvenile sperm whale. We entered the water at a respectful distance alongside the mother and her calf, watching as the mother prepared to dive in search of food, leaving her youngster at the surface. Almost immediately, the calf spun around and approached us, coming remarkably close, mouth wide open to reveal his emerging teeth, rolling playfully upside down. It seemed he was eager to interact. We could clearly see a chunk of squid held in his jaw and the many scars already etched into his skin. Over the years, I've photographed sperm whales countless times for documentaries and a feature film, but this unforgettable moment will always hold a special place in my heart. Looking back at the encounter, it's tempting to believe he was smiling—and perhaps even about to give us a cheeky wink!

5 miles offshore from Roseau, Dominica

Nikon D850, NAUTICAM NA D850, Tokina 10-17, at 17,800, f/7.1, 1/400, natural light

Judge's comments: The curiosity and exuberance of youth bursts out of this photo connecting us with one of our planet's most magnificent species. Sperm whales live strange and secret lives, diving deep into the ocean's interior, but we now know that when they are young they can be full of mischief.

Wide Angle



Runner Up

Chamber of Life

Jinny Kim (Republic of Korea)

In the depths of the East Sea at the height of winter, a male greenling transforms into a brilliant golden sentinel. This vivid coloration, triggered by his spawning hormones, serves both to attract mates and deter rivals. Photographed among the red soft corals of Jumunjin's artificial reef, the male stands watch over his eggs, guarding them tirelessly until they hatch. The image reflects a moving moment of paternal devotion, an enduring act of protection shaped by instinct and sacrifice.

East Sea (Jumunjin-eup, Gangneung-City, Gangwon-Do), South Korea (Republic of Korea)

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye, 320 , f/9, 1/50, Retra flashes

Judge's comments: A powerful image with well chosen, contrasting and complementary colours, backed up by a strong composition and slight upward angle make this an image which grew with every viewing. I'm sure the subject would have been happy with this portrait.

Peter Howlands

UPY2026



Wide Angle



Third

Halocline

Alex Dawson (Sweden)

This image was shot on the second dive in this cave. I realized that this space was where I wanted to do something special photographically. The biggest challenge was the halocline, where fresh and salt water meet and mix right at the diving depth, turning the water into a blur. It's also quite far into the cave, about 30 minutes runtime with our powerful SUEX XK DPVs. The plan was to light up the space and get the perfect diver shadow on the bottom to create depth.

Bue Marino cave, Sardinia, Italy

Nikon Z9, Nauticam, 8-15mm , 500 , f/4.2, 1/25, 4x BigBlue dive lights VL65000P

Judge's comments: Stunning perspective and composition create a highly original cave shot. We all loved the different perspective and perfect light from above with the little shadow on the sand floor, which all add such quality to this excellent image.

Tobias Friedrich

Wide Angle



Highly Commended

Tiger Tiger

Nicholas More (United Kingdom)

"What of the hunting, hunter bold? Brother, the watch was long and cold."

Descending into the clear Bahamian blue, we were met by nine tiger sharks patrolling the depths. It was truly epic diving. Feeling "feline" brave, I captured this pair in a perfect formation over the sargassum. By using a slow shutter speed combined with panning, I was able to translate their raw power into a sense of dynamic motion.

After receiving the "RAWR" request, it was hard not to let the cat out of the bag, but I'm thrilled to have earned my stripes with this shot. Beyond the photography, please consider supporting Bite-Back—the race is on to protect sharks and other critical marine species.

Tiger Beach, Bahamas

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Nikon 28-70 & Nauticam FCP, 32, f/16, 1/10th, Retra Pro Max

Judge's comments: Some techniques produce tiresome images when they are often repeated or, more importantly, inappropriately used. Motion blur, as here, is one of these techniques which, when applied to sharks, is never inappropriate but is often repeated. As a result if a shot is to enter the winners enclosure it must be exceptional and this is.

Peter Howlands

Wide Angle



Highly Commended

Masters of the Frozen Realm

Lars von Ritter Zahony (Germany)

A large group of Gentoo Penguins (*Pygoscelis papua*) emerges from the shimmering waves of the Southern Ocean, their sleek bodies glistening in the fading light. It has always been a dream to witness such a moment.

After hours of hunting in the open sea, the penguins gather in tight formations, moving with surprising grace through the surf. Each penguin has spent the day diving deep, chasing schools of fish and krill in the cold, nutrient-rich waters. Now, as evening approaches, they return to the safety of their colonies on land. It is a daily ritual, a dance between land and sea, that defines their existence in one of the most unforgiving environments on Earth. They move with astonishing speed, slicing through the waves with a grace that defies the harshness of their world. Capturing them in this raw, untamed environment is no easy task.

Port Charcot, Booth Island, Antarctica

Canon EOS-1Dx Mark iii , SEACAM, CANON EF 16-35MM 4,0L IS USM, 2500 , f/11, 1/600, natural light

Judge's comments: Sleek as tuna, we loved this formation flyby, with accompanying bubble vapour-trails, showing these gentoos in the environment where they are most at home – the open Southern Ocean. Beautiful and impressive.

Alex Mustard

Wide Angle



Highly Commended

Concise Chaos

James Ferrara (United States)

I set off to Magdalena Bay to photograph striped marlins hunting bait balls, marking my second year witnessing this extraordinary spectacle. The speed and precision of these predators are mesmerizing as the sardines scatter in frantic bursts, fighting for survival. With this image, I wanted to convey the contrast between chaos and control, the swirling disorder of the bait ball set against the calculated movements of the marlin. I noticed one marlin lingering along the outer edge of the bait ball, patiently waiting for the perfect moment to strike. To capture this dynamic, I used a slow shutter speed and panned at the same pace as the marlin, allowing its motion to remain sharp while the sardines blurred into streaks of energy. The result reflects the tension, timing, and raw intensity of this underwater hunt.

Magdalena Bay, Mexico

Sony A7RV, Nauticam, Sony FE 28-70mm f3.5-5.6 OSS with WACP-C, 250 , f/22, 1/10, natural light

Judge's comments: A magic ocean moment captured with the upmost skill and cool thinking among fleeting action. The photographer selecting the perfect combination of panning and shutter speed to blur the school yet freeze the marlin. A real favourite of mine.

Alex Mustard

Wide Angle



Highly Commended

Mobula Rays Assemble Nicolas Hahn (Argentina)

A fever of mobula rays travels through the waters of Baja California Sur, Mexico—one of the ocean’s greatest wonders. While protected in Mexico and listed under CITES Appendix I, these rays still face significant threats from fisheries bycatch.

Mobulas are photographed extensively, so I sought a fresh perspective. I anticipated their path, dove down, and lay motionless on the sandy seabed. This stillness prevented the rays from being disturbed, allowing them to swim directly above me. Using strobes to illuminate their pale underbellies, I waited for the fever to pass overhead.

The resulting image captures the sheer scale of these aggregations from an intimate, “bottom-up” angle, highlighting the importance of protecting a species that remains vulnerable despite its high-level legal status.

Baja California Sur, Mexico

Sony A7RIV, Nauticam, 28-60 with WWL-1, 125 , f/9, 1/200, Sea & Sea YS-D3

Judge’s comments: Great shot of these huge school of mobulas which is everything but easy to do ! Especially in a rare seen perspective from below and having the right amount of light distributed on all mobulas that are closer and further away is a masterclass! Well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Wide Angle



Commended

Contact

Dan Taylor (Mexico)

What began as an exploratory dive at Gordo Banks, a couple of deep underwater seamounts five miles off the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula, became an unforgettable encounter. Out of the blue, two humpback whales appeared, moving together in a slow, intimate courtship dance. Their massive bodies grazed and touched as they circled one another. Even during this behaviour, they sought our presence. At times, their gentle movements carried them far beyond sight, only to repeatedly return moments later.

As our paths crossed again, their movements became so intertwined it was hard to distinguish one from the other. In a fleeting moment, one turned beneath its companion, slowly and elegantly extending its enormous pectoral fin. Its gaze met mine, brief and unmistakable. Suspended in the water, there was no sense of scale or time, only contact, trust, and the quiet privilege of being acknowledged by something so vast.

Gordo Banks, Baja California Sur, Mexico

Canon R, Nauticam NA-R, Canon RF 15-35mm
f/2.8, 400, f/8.0, 1/200, natural light

Judge's comments: Stunning encounter and what a memorising moment! Excellent capture by the photographer to shoot in the very right moment where both whales are in perfect synchronisation!

Tobias Friedrich

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Apollo III 2.0 Strobe



Aquista 130 Wide Angle Wet Lens

Aquista 110 Wide Angle Wet Lens

Aquista 130d Wide Angle Wet Lens



Takaji Ochi

Macro

Category History

- 2026 SeongCheol Cho (Republic of Korea)
- 2025 Paolo Bondaschi (Italy)
- 2024 Talia Greis (Australia)
- 2023 Shane Gross (Canada)
- 2022 Javier Murcia (Spain)
- 2021 Galice Hoarau (Norway)
- 2020 Hannes Klostermann (Germany)
- 2019 Fabio Iardino (Italy)
- 2018 Shane Gross (Canada)
- 2017 So Yat Wai (Hong Kong)
- 2016 Davide Lopresti (Italy)
- 2015 Nuno Sa (Portugal)

Macro



Category Winner

Calm at the Heart of Turmoil

SeongCheol Cho
(Republic of Korea)

While diving in Tulamben with my guide, Jaye, I encountered a commensal shrimp living within a naturally spiralling whip coral. Something I had long hoped to see. The coral's deep, rich green formed a striking nest for the brightly coloured shrimp resting inside. By introducing red and blue light against the green coral, I wanted to create a sense of intense beauty combined with visual turbulence, while expressing the shrimp's stillness at the centre.

Everything about this dive was a first for me, the location, the guide, and working with continuous light, but meeting a subject I had dreamed of photographing and capturing it in a satisfying way made the experience especially memorable.

Tulamben, Bali, Indonesia

Nikon D850, Nexus D850, AF-S VR Micro-NIKKOR 105mm f/2.8G IF-ED, 560, f/16, 1/160, Weefine Solar Flare Zoom 1500, Smart Focus 1200FR

Judge's comments: Creative macro is hugely popular in underwater photography. This is the very best of the genre, first finding an amazing creature and then elevating it to an artistic vision using only the kiss of innovative lighting.

Alex Mustard

Macro



Runner Up

JAWS

Fabian Becker (Germany)

In Bohol, Philippines, lizardfish are common reef dwellers, usually seen resting motionless on the sand. My goal was to move beyond the predictable image of a sedentary predator and reveal an unexpected, sculptural side of the species.

Because lizardfish are surprisingly skittish, I used a slow, deliberate approach. To isolate the subject, I positioned a snooted strobe on an extra-long arm behind the fish. This backlighting, combined with a low shooting angle, fundamentally altered its appearance. The technique allowed the impressive jawline to emerge, highlighted the subtle skin textures, and caught the reflective glint in the eyes.

The final result transforms a familiar inhabitant into a striking, minimalist portrait, inviting viewers to pause and reconsider a fish they might otherwise overlook.

Bohol, Philippines

Sony A7IV, Nauticam Sony A7IV, Sony 90mm F2.8, ISO 100, f/16, 1/250, Backscatter MF-1 & OS-1

Judge's comments: It takes a new approach to stand out with often photographed subjects and this is a classic example. Very well lit and composed, it is graphically simple and symmetrical with the lighting on the mouth, the icing on the photographic cake, seemingly coming from inside. The negative space above is also contributing significantly.

Peter Rawlands

Macro



Third

A Time to Dream

Simon Theuma (Australia)

Near Shellharbour, New South Wales, my local dive site sits just fifteen minutes from home—a vibrant spot where every dive feels like an adventure. While mosaic seastars always catch my eye with their brilliant colors, this time I discovered a tiny commensal shrimp, barely 20mm long, nestled on an arm.

To capture this miniature world, I used a +15 wet lens dioptré and a handmade snoot. By aiming the light across the scene, I highlighted the intricate textures and shared hues of the pair.

The resulting image reminds me of Aboriginal art and Dreamtime stories, reflecting the balance woven throughout the marine world. It's a small moment that speaks volumes about the "bigger picture," illustrating the delicate connections that sustain our underwater ecosystems.

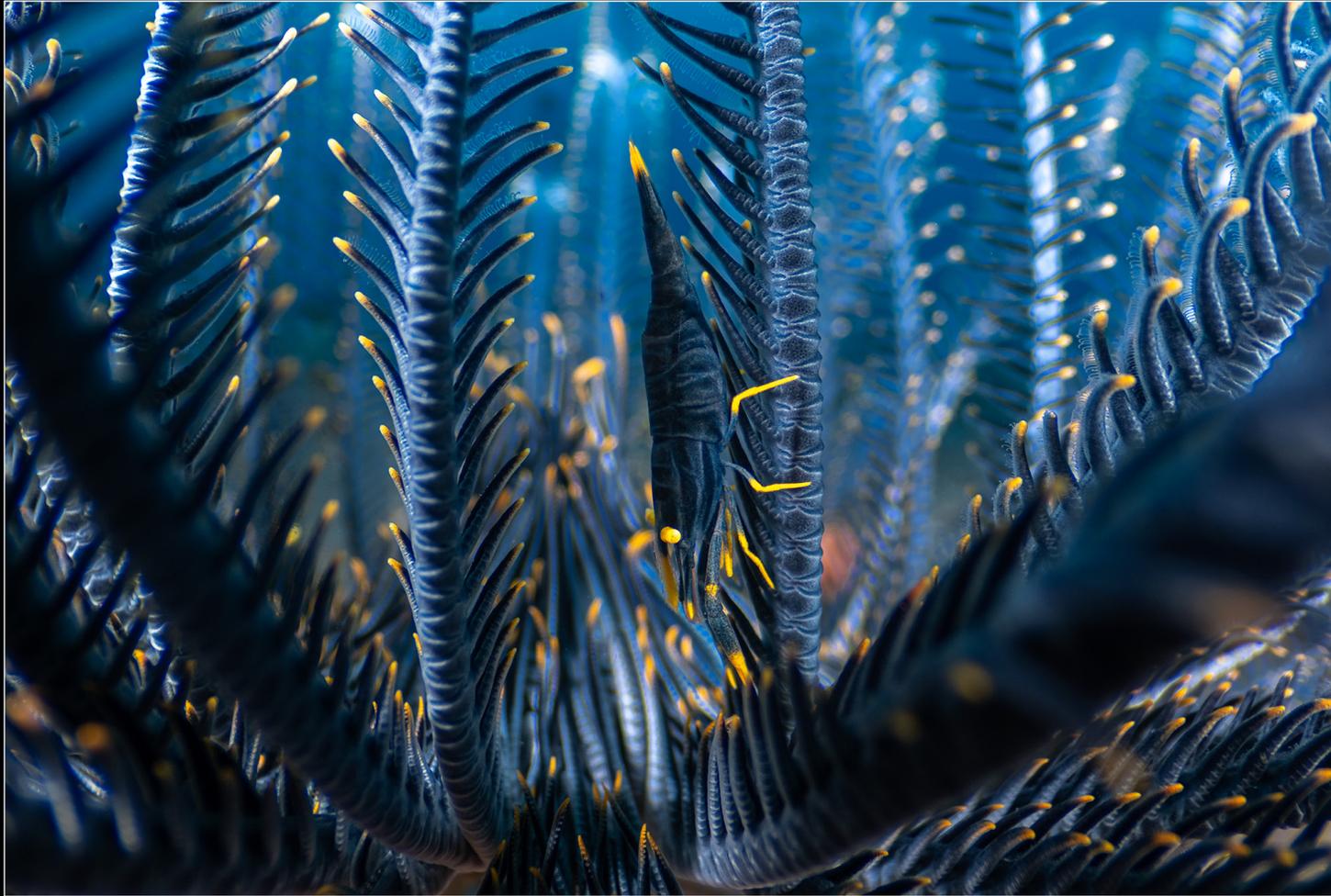
The Gutter, Shellharbour NSW, Australia

Nikon D850, Sea & Sea MDX-D850, Nikon AF-S 85mm f/1.8G, 64, f/14, 1/200, Sea & Sea YS250

Judge's comments: This exquisite shot was a favourite with all the judges, all the way. The delicate pastel colours, pin sharp detail and soft lighting are easy on the eye. With so many images to judge, this was so nice and gentle. The off centre composition caused much discussion but it still won through.

Peter Howlands

Macro



Highly Commended

Featherhome

Luis Arpa (Spain)

Camouflaged among the arms of a feather star, a crinoid shrimp blends seamlessly with its host through precise colour and pattern matching. Sheltered within the moving arms, the shrimp feeds on passing particles carried by the current, an elegant example of host-specific specialization on coral reefs.

This image is especially meaningful to me, as I had planned it for a long time. I used a Nauticam EMWL 160° wet lens to create a shrimp's perspective on the scene that cannot be achieved with a conventional macro lens alone. The image was taken in Tulamben without the assistance of a dive guide and without disturbing either the shrimp or its host. Achieving this image required many dives over several weeks, waiting for the right feather star, shrimp, and precise positioning.

Tulamben, Bali

Nikon Z7, Nauticam NA-Z7, Nauticam EMWL 160°, 200 , f/11, 1/50, 2x Scubalamp D-Pro

Judge's comments: Excellent usage and example of how technology can transform into a stunning image. But even with a lot of accessories it's still important to have great composition and quality of light, which both of them were mastered very well by the photographer.

Tobias Friedrich

Macro



Highly Commended

Diamond Squid defensive pose

Boz Johnson (United States)

My guide found this small diamond squid at the very beginning of a blackwater dive at about 7 meters. This is one of the many poses it presented us over the next several minutes, it seemed almost playful, like it was showing off different costumes, swimming casually for a bit then stopping for another set of photos while even allowing me to time review some images and adjust my exposures and strobes.

Anilao, Philippines

Nikon D850, Nauticam , 60mm, 200 , f/22, 1/250,
Marelux Apollo 3

Judge's comments: Beautiful capture of this nice little creature and perfect example that a macro image also works without having the eyes in a in clear sight. Excellent lighting and well judged post production! Well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Macro



Highly Commended

Shelter in the flames

Zlati Zlatev (Bulgaria)

Two years after my first visit to the Lembeh Strait, I returned last summer, drawn again to its rich macro life. While the region is famous for pygmy seahorses and mandarinfish, I am particularly fascinated by porcelain crabs and coconut octopuses, subjects brimming with personality and found in striking environments.

This image was an unexpected discovery. Seeing the crab glowing within its anemone, I aimed to create a scene that felt warm and intimate, like a fiery sanctuary. The moment felt calm and meditative, offering a brief immersion into the fragile, hidden world of the reef.

Lembeh Strait, Indonesia

Sony A7RIII, Isotta, Sony FE 90mm F2.8 Macro , 100 , 16, 1/125, Inon Z330 II

Judge's comments: Great capture of an idea that is not new but perfectly executed! The light distribution from outside the anemone is so nice and soft while the porcelain crab sits in perfect composition!

Tobias Friedrich

Macro



Highly Commended

Bubble Storm

Theo Maynier (France)

Uncommon in the waters of the French Caribbean, I was lucky enough to encounter a frogfish during a shore dive in Martinique. I then decided to dedicate several dives to capturing its portrait. For this shot, the assistance of a spotter was essential to illuminate the animal precisely using a snoot. After triggering the flash, I moved my camera toward my bubbles using a slow shutter speed, creating a graphic and almost magical effect in the image.

Martinique, France

Nikon Nikon D500, Aquatica AD500, AF-S Micro NIKKOR 60 mm f/2.8G ED, 50 , f/40, 2.0 s, Backscatter Mini Flash 3 + snoot

Judge's comments: A surreal and intriguing photograph, where a 2 second exposure helps to create an ethereal atmosphere.

Alex Mustard

Macro

Commended

Bobbit in the Dark

J. Gregory Sherman (United States)

My dive guide spotted a massive Bobbit worm partially exposed from the sandy seabed at night, its serrated jaws poised in ambush. Knowing how fleeting the moment would be, I quickly positioned my lighting for backlighting and captured a few frames before the worm vanished back into the sand. The encounter was only short, but the image is one I'll long remember. A brief glimpse into the raw, predatory nature of this elusive hunter.

Lembeh, Indonesia

Canon 5DSR, Subal, 100mm, 200 , f/7.1, 1/80,
Kraken torch & MF2

Judge's comments: Backlighting is always dramatic and probably the one time when backscatter is contributory. This alien-like subject lends itself well to the technique and the image still appealed throughout the rounds.

Peter Rowlands



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Wrecks

Category History

- 2026 Niclas Andersson (Sweden)
- 2025 Alex Dawson (Sweden)
- 2024 Martin Broen (United States)
- 2023 Brett Eldridge (USA)
- 2022 Alex Dawson (Sweden)
- 2021 Tobias Friedrich (Germany)
- 2020 Tobias Friedrich (Germany)
- 2019 René B. Andersen (Denmark)
- 2018 Tobias Friedrich (Germany)
- 2017 Csaba Tokolyi (Hungary)
- 2016 Thomas Heckmann (Germany)
- 2015 Tobias Friedrich (Germany)

Wrecks



Category Winner

The Guns of the Nagato

Niclas Andersson (Sweden)

IJN Nagato is a famed Japanese battleship from which Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto is said to have issued the order to attack Pearl Harbor. Seized by the United States at the end of World War II, she was later towed to Bikini Atoll and used as a target ship during Operation Crossroads, the early nuclear weapons tests. Today Nagato rests upside down at roughly 52 meters, making it a demanding but highly rewarding dive. On descent, divers are greeted by four enormous propellers, while the standout features are the twin stern guns, best approached from the port side. This image was carefully staged by a four-person team to maximize safety and reduce silt, since visibility can be limited and particles stir easily.

Bikini Atoll, Marshall Islands

Sony A7R IV, Ikelite 200DL, Sony 12-24mm F4G, 8000, f/9, 1/100, 2x Inon Z330, 2x BigBlue 30,000 lm videolights, 2x

Judge's comments: A powerful image of powerful subjects complemented by well placed lighting produces an image which grabs one's attention immediately and still has plenty of subtle detail to entertain the eye on repeated viewings. A credit to the team.

Peter Rawlands

Wrecks



Runner Up

Living wreck

Jean-Baptiste Cazajous (France)

The Donator, or Prosper Schiaffino, is a cargo ship wreck that was sunk by a mine in 1945. It is one of the most famous wrecks on the French coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. This wreck is an amazing artificial reef. Every inch of it is covered in life. Gorgonians, sponges—it's a beautiful mix of colors. It shelters a very important fauna, with thousands of anthias, large schools of all kinds of fish, groupers, dentex and more. Fun fact : we submitted a photo of the Donator's stern to UPY last year, but it didn't make the final cut. Determined to improve this photo, my friend Florian and I went back to shoot the Donator this year, and this time it's among the winners. Never give up guys!

Donator Wreck, Le Lavandou, France

Sony A7RIII, Nauticam NA-A7RIII, Canon 8-15 f4 Fisheye, 400 , 10, 1/60, 2x Retra Pro X plus Bigblue dive lights

Judge's comments: A classic wreck image packed with life that invites you into the scene, with purple gorgonians on the stern and clouds of damselfish thronging above. Makes us want to dive right in.

Alex Mustard

Wrecks



Third

Silent Heart

Atsushi Hori (Japan)

This engine room of the Kenschō Maru is one of the most iconic and popular photographic sites in Truk Lagoon. With careful pre-planning, I brought in five video lights to precisely illuminate the engine piston, spare piston, and the ladder leading to the catwalk, balancing them with the natural light filtering through the skylight. While shooting, another group of divers ascended from the lower level and entered this beautiful space. As one diver moved toward me, I instinctively released the shutter from what I felt was the perfect position. The diver's presence enhances the sense of scale, completing the composition and turning this image into a decisive moment. This moment connects human presence with the silent remains of history beneath the sea.

Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon, Federated States of
Micronesia

Canon EOS 5D Mark IV, Sea&Sea MDX-5D Mark
IV, EF8-15mm F4L fisheye, 2500, f/4.5, 1/40,
2xFeefine WF Solar Flare?3×FIX NEO video lights

Judge's comments: A favourite, but challenging location for photos is captured expertly with atmosphere, detail and a strong sense of exploration. Amazing to learn, on reading the caption, that the perfectly placed diver, was simply passing through.

Alex Mustard

Wrecks



Highly Commended

Wrecks

Nicolai Posininsky (Germany)

Tanks are symbols of war, of noise, fear, and destruction. But here, in the Underwater Museum of Jordan, they rest side by side in complete silence, embraced by the sea and gently shaped by light.

Shot as a wide-angle scene with carefully placed illumination and a model in the background, the image gains depth and a dreamlike, almost otherworldly atmosphere. In this mystic calm, the wrecks transform into a quiet memorial: not loud or accusatory, but peaceful – and perhaps for that very reason, even more powerful.

Aqaba, Jordan

Canon 1dx mark ii, Seacam , Canon fisheye, 100 , f/6.3, 1/125, SEACAM Seaflash 160D and 3 keldan lamps

Judge's comments: A dramatic angle and a dramatic photograph, but with a strange sense of peace. In a world of turbulent politics photos of machines of war are increasingly thought-provoking.

Alex Mustard

Wrecks



Highly Commended

One Breath Explorer

Wojciech Dopierala (Poland)

Captured at our favourite shipwreck in Tabaiba, this site is our weekly sanctuary for teaching, training, and exploration. Having photographed it countless times, we sought a fresh perspective. Both on a single breath, we descended behind the wreck where Tadeo stood at 35 metres.

Using a wide-angle lens, I framed him in a "heroic" stance; the absence of fins emphasises the raw human form against the massive silhouette of the ship, providing scale and depth. Excellent visibility and swirling schools of fish added a vibrant atmosphere to the scene. This wreck is deeply meaningful to my journey as a freediver, and having this photograph reach the finals of the wreck category is a profound honour.

Tabaiba, Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain

Sony A1, SeaFrogs, 12-24 f4, 160 , f/4, 1/100, natural light

Judge's comments: This image lives off the atmosphere that it creates! Beautiful scenery with the freediver in an excellent position in front of the wreck with the light in the mask as the "dot in the i". It could have gotten even higher in the ranking if the freediver would be a bit more in the negative space on the right side, but we know it's difficult to do in this situation - well done !

Tobias Friedrich

Wrecks



Highly Commended

Propeller of the HMHS Britannic Dr. Steffen G. Scholz (Germany)

This image captures the immense propeller of HMHS Britannic, resting in silence beneath the Aegean. Once built for speed and scale, it became part of a ship whose story is defined by service, loss, and memory. In the filtered light, the metal feels both powerful and fragile, an engineering marvel softened by time and the sea. For me, photographing this propeller is less about wreck "spectacle" and more about presence: a quiet encounter with history, and a reminder that the underwater world preserves traces of human ambition in a way no museum can. Respect is our mantra here: look, document, and leave nothing but bubbles.

HMHS Britannic , Greece

Nikon D850, Seacam D850 super deep, Nikonos RS 13mm , 7200 , f/5.6, 1/160, Keldan Video 4XR 11000lm CRI 86

Judge's comments: Excellent shot of a very famous and not easy to photograph deep wreck. I like the simple light coming from the other diver to illuminate the one motif in the frame, although I think would be improved with a slight recomposition. But I admit it still works perfectly. Well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Wrecks



Highly Commended

Spooky Sharkplane-O

Dan Mele (Virgin Islands, U.S.)

Sharkeplane-o is one of the most well-known wreck dive sites in the British Virgin Islands. The site features three airplanes damaged during Hurricane Irma in 2017, later transformed into sculptures shaped like sharks. This project was spearheaded by local BVI organization, Beyond the Reef. I originally dove the site to shoot video, but after capturing what I needed, I switched to stills. Visibility was excellent, which allowed me to shoot mostly with ambient light. To add drama, I removed one video light and placed it inside the wreck to illuminate the mouth. This created a much spookier effect than I expected. By setting my white balance for ambient light and then introducing white light inside the wreck, the reds around the mouth became more pronounced, making it look bloody—almost as if the sharkplane-o had just fed.

Sharkplane-o Wreck , British Virgin Islands

Canon R5, Nauticam NA-R5, Canon EF 8-15 f/4L Fisheye USM, 500 , 5.6, 1/400, Ambient light with Keldan 8X video light

Judge's comments: I think this is the very first wreck image which made me laugh out loud! What a great idea to put a light behind the "bloody teeth" to make them stand out even more. Very well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Wrecks



Commended

Where silence weighs tons, and giants sleep.

Anastasia Schmuck (Switzerland)

The Italian steamship Bengasi was torpedoed on May 6, 1941, by the British submarine Truant, sinking less than a mile from Isola dei Cavoli, Sardinia. Once part of Mediterranean supply routes operated by Tirrenia, the ship lost its bow and went down shortly after the attack. Now resting upright at 93 meters, the 85-meter-long wreck is remarkably intact, giving the illusion of a vessel still in motion. The stern rises dramatically with the propeller, rudder, and deck gun intact, while the forward holds are filled with glassware, earning it the nickname "the wreck of the glasses."

This was my deepest dive to date, made possible by rare conditions of calm seas and zero current.

South Sardinia, Italy

Sony A7CII, Nauticam NA-A7CII, Canon EF 8-15mm, 12800, f/7.1, 1/80, natural light

Judge's comments: Inspiring atmosphere with coordinated, eye drawing lighting in a 'less is more' way, this image was a particular favourite of mine. A very powerful wreck garnished with the shoaling fish. Knowing now that it was shot at 93 metres makes it even more awesome.

Peter Rowlands

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Behaviour

Category History

- 2026 Kazushige Horiguchi (Japan)
- 2025 Shunsuke Nakano (Japan)
- 2024 Rafael Fernandez Caballero (Spain)
- 2023 Yury Ivanov (Indonesia)
- 2022 Pekka Tuuri (Finland)
- 2021 Karim Iliya (USA)
- 2020 Pasquale Vassallo (Italy)
- 2019 Richard Barnden (UK)
- 2018 Filippo Borghi (Italy)
- 2017 Qing Lin (Canada)
- 2016 Richard Carey (Thailand)
- 2015 Montse Grillo (Spain)

Behaviour



Category Winner

Clownfish Hatchout

Kazushige Horiguchi (Japan)

This photograph captures the exact moment clownfish eggs hatch in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan. In the late afternoon, my close friend Koji Matsuda told me that the eggs would hatch that day. Even before hatching, the parent clownfish carefully guarded the eggs, constantly watching for predators as they waited for the moment to come. I was able to capture the instant the larvae emerged. Holding a snoot in one hand, I carefully controlled the light so that it illuminated only the clownfish and their newborn larvae, allowing them to stand out against the darkness. I have been photographing clownfish for over three years and pressed the shutter countless times that day, but this single image is the only one that truly succeeded.

Kagoshima Minamisatsuma, Japan

Nikon D500, Anthis Nexus D500, AF-S Micro NIKKOR 60mm f/2.8G ED, 200, f/16, 1/125, INON Z330 + Marelux SOFT Lite

Judge's comments: The moment. We've never seen an image like this before. Kazushige Horiguchi not only shows the egg tending by the anemonefish, but amazingly the moment the babies burst free, with the adult looking on. We also loved the babies' perspective of the adult anemonefish, which looks comparatively huge in the picture.

Alex Mustard

Behaviour



Runner up

Together we can!

Ventura Romero (Spain)

A rare and unexpected behavioural observation. A group of sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) were engaged in social behaviour at a depth of approximately 20 m. While descending and attempting to align the camera housing viewfinder with my mask to frame the scene, a sudden movement in my right peripheral vision drew my attention. Within seconds, an oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) appeared in front of me, briefly approached and visually assessed me, then abruptly turned and retreated.

Approximately 30 seconds later, the shark returned, swimming directly toward me at a closer distance. At that moment, the group of sperm whales adopted a compact, head-forward formation resembling a battering ram and rapidly ascended from depth, orienting toward both my camera and the shark. The shark immediately fled the area, followed by a pursuit by the sperm whales that lasted several minutes.

West Southern Indian Ocean, Offshore between La Reunion and Mauritius

Nikon D850, Hugyfot HFN-D850, Nikon AF Fisheye Nikkor 16mm 2.8D, 800 , f/8, 1/400, natural light

Judge's comments: With Cartier Bresson timed perfection, this highly original image of powerful subjects in juxtaposition, capturing unique behaviour, always appeals to the judge's eye. A stand out image in an always strong category. Genuinely groundbreaking.

Peter Howlands

Behaviour



THIRD

Egg Clutcher

Anton Sorokin (United States)

A female California newt holds onto vegetation and a previously laid clutch from another newt to anchor herself in place as she begins to lay her eggs. Her holding onto the eggs this way is a lucky coincidence, but made for an exciting photo opportunity.

San Francisco Bay area, California , USA

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Nikon 8-15mm fisheye, 200 , f/18, 1/100, Seacam 60D

Judge's comments: An image that just shouts parental care. The composition perfectly captures the way the newt is delicately, but protectively clutching her eggs.

Alex Mustard

Behaviour



Highly commended

Connected

JingGong Zhang (China)

A mating pair of pelagic nudibranchs, *Phylliroe bucephala*. Their reproductive organs meet and lock together as they drift through the black water. On most Florida blackwater dives, I encounter only a few scattered *Phylliroe*, if any at all. But that night, as soon as I descended, I realized I was surrounded. I had never seen so many. Some were already extending their reproductive organs while swimming, actively searching for a partner in the darkness. During that single dive I found at least five mating pairs. By the next day, they had vanished completely. Moments like this are why I love blackwater diving: you can plan everything, yet you can never predict what the ocean will reveal. It never ceases to amaze me.

Palm Beach, Florida, USA

Nikon D850, Marelux Housing, Nikon 60mm f/2.8 AF-S Micro-Nikkor, 400 , f/22, 1/250, Marelux Apollo III

Judge's comments: Graphic simplicity, exquisite pin sharp subjects, soft lighting and obvious behaviour make a judge's job much easier. This was a no brainer for all of us.

Peter Howlands

Behaviour



Highly commended

Whale Heat Run

Katherine Lu (United States)

I traveled to Tonga in 2023, three years after my original trip was postponed due to COVID. That year saw unusually high whale activity, possibly due to the long absence of people. But rough seas made photographing them difficult. We pushed farther offshore and spotted what looked like four whales—but on our first jump, we counted ten. It was a heat run! On the second entry, we were better positioned, and the whales came directly toward us. It was an exhilarating and intimidating moment, watching 40-ton giants swim straight at us. I captured this image as they approached and passed beneath us. The female leads the group, just out of view, while the 15 males in this frame compete in an intense courtship ritual, using speed, bubble curtains, tail slaps, body lunges and other displays of physical dominance to win the mating rights.

Vavau, Tonga

Nikon D850, Nauticam NAD850, 8-15mm fisheye, 1250, f/8, 1/250, natural light

Judge's comments: An extraordinary image of perhaps the biggest testosterone rush underwater, and, in terms of sheer tonnage, probably the world. This is the sort of image we judges live for. Great photographically and compositionally, it would be difficult to top this for action.

Peter Howlands

Behaviour



Highly commended

Bait Ball Explosion

Andy Lambert (Belgium)

The Sardine Run is one of nature's most spectacular marine events, occurring along South Africa's east coast, where millions of sardines migrate. This massive movement attracts a remarkable array of predators. After seven quiet days on the boat, we spotted a group of Cape gannets all diving into the water at the same spot. This indicated the presence of a bait ball. Once in the water, it was complete chaos. Cape gannets dove into the water right in front of us at breakneck speed, while common dolphins shot through the sardines with their mouths wide open. Due to the small bait ball, the action was very brief, but fortunately I was able to take the photo I wanted, a photo full of action.

Port St. Johns, South Africa

Nikon Z7ii, Nauticam NA Z7, Nikon Z 14-30mm f4.0 S, 720, f/6.3, 1/400, Natural light

Judge's comments: Very nice image of a rare moment during Sardine Run! As we tend to see only a few images from the South African Sardine Run every year in UPY we really appreciate this amazing and well composed encounter!

Tobias Friedrich

Behaviour



Highly commended

The swift predator of Echizen

Naohiro Takasu (Japan)

Working as a part-time divemaster in Echizen, Japan, I spend my free time exploring with a camera. I had often seen bigfin reef squid with small fish hiding in the seagrass, but one autumn morning, a friend found a squid resting atop the reef.

Perfectly illuminated by the early sun, the sight was mesmerising. We spent the dive captivated, and I eventually captured this individual poised proudly against the deep blue.

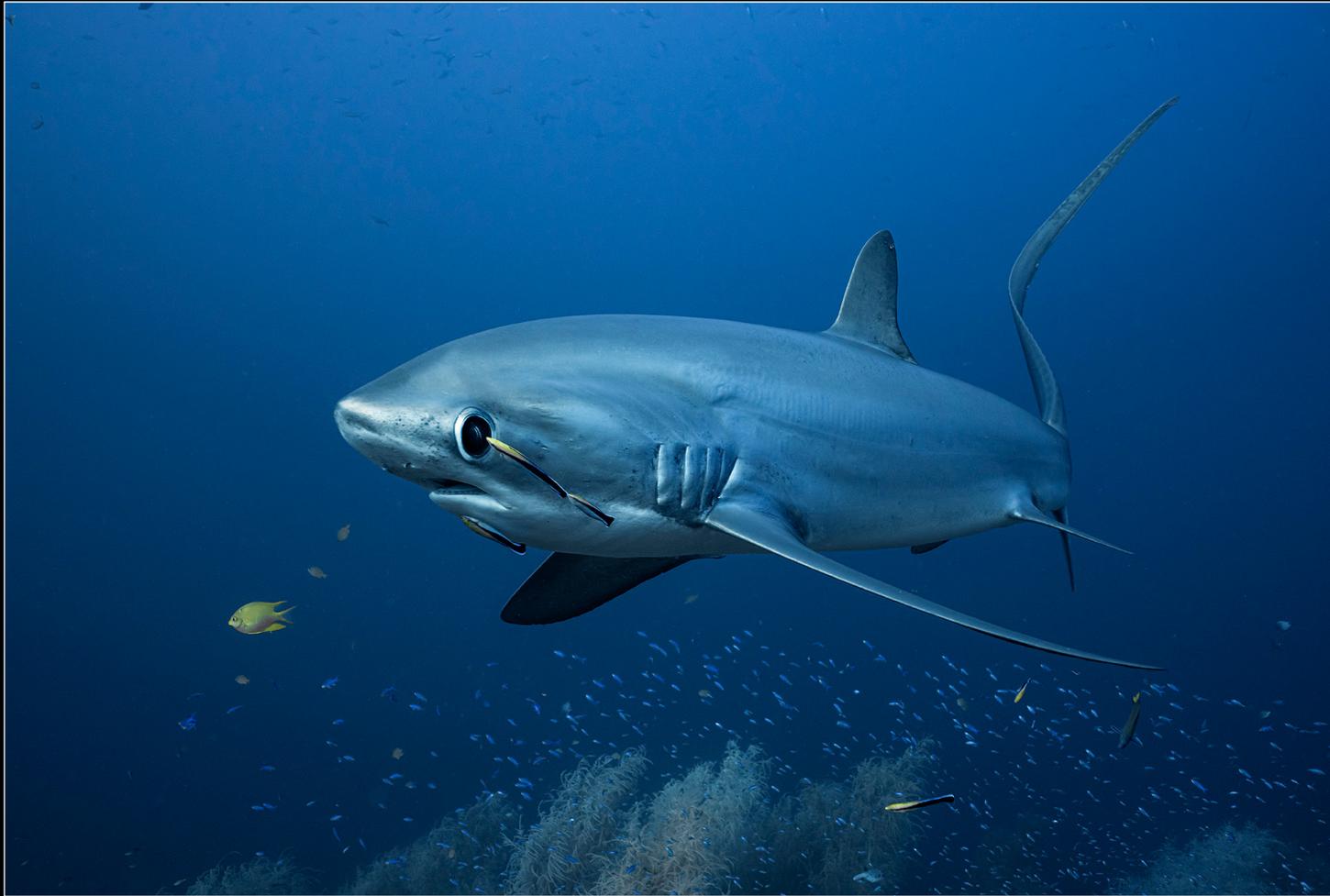
I am deeply grateful to the UPY judges; their work and this competition have been my greatest teachers. That inspiration now allows me to confidently share photography advice with the divers I guide in Fukui Prefecture. It is a privilege to see my growth reflected in this selection.

Sony A7R V, Sea & Sea MDXA7R5, FE 90mm F2.8 Macro G OSS, 100, f/8, 1/160, INON S2000

Judge's comments: Great capture of a really unseen moment or at least un-photographed moment! It's really nice to read that the photographer recognised this special situation and took his time to wait for the perfect background and not only shooting the behaviour. This is the step on photography where you not just take the image but master it!

Tobias Friedrich

Behaviour



Commended

Pelagic Thresher Shark

Noam Kortler (Israel)

The thresher shark is quite a rare shark to see. Threshers spend most of the time in deep water and are considered to be very shy. However, in Kimud Shoal, Malapascua, they come to the shallow waters in large numbers for one reason: to get cleaned. Giving me the chance to capture this amazing animal and this behaviour.

Kimud Shoal, Philippines

Nikon Z8, Seacam, Nikkor Z 14-30mm f/4 S set on 30 mm, 800 , f/7.1, 1/60, Natural Light

Judge's comments: This would have been a quite stunning portrait on its own; beautifully composed and lit, but the subtle behaviour gives it an extra dimension which is exactly the formula which promotes an image like this into the winners' enclosure. Look and learn.

Peter Howlands

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Portrait

Category History

- 2026 Matty Smith (Australia)
- 2025 Abdulaziz Al Saleh (Kuwait)
- 2024 Rafael Fernandez Caballero (Spain)
- 2023 Suliman Alatiqi (Kuwait)
- 2022 Thomas Heckmann (Germany)
- 2021 Ryohei Ito (Japan)
- 2020 Lilian Koh (Singapore)
- 2019 Nicholas Samaras (Greece)
- 2018 Tanya Houppermans (USA)
- 2017 Lorincz Ferenc (Hungary)

Portrait



Category Winner

Rockpool Rookies

Matty Smith (Australia)

Once several weeks old and weaned from their mothers milk, elephant seal pups are abandoned by their parents on shore, left to navigate life alone. On Sealion Island in the Falklands, I watched dozens of them clamber over one another in shallow rock-pools, awkwardly learning to swim, and quite engaging to my presence. I'd come here for this moment, to witness and photograph their first solo lessons in life. On the very first evening of my arrival, the sky ignited with colour. I donned my dry suit and rushed into the water, capturing a handful of frames before the light vanished. It turned out to be the defining moment of the trip, and I'm glad I didn't hesitate.

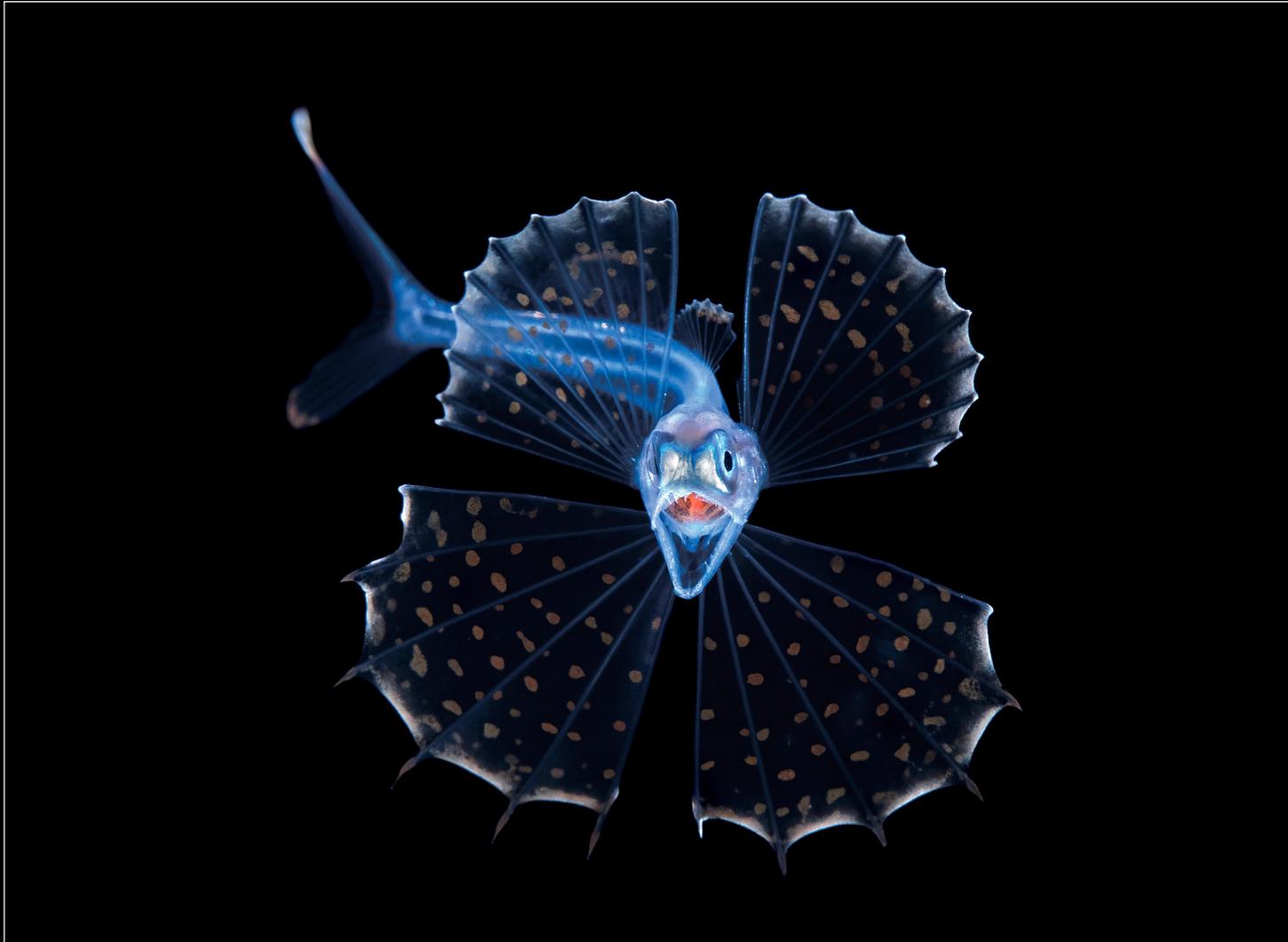
Sealion Island, The Falklands

Nikon Z9, Aquatica Digital AZ9, Nikkor Z 14-30mm F4 S, ISO200 , f/16, 1/60, 2 x Ikelite DS230

Judge's comments: Cold water contrasts with heartwarming cuteness. Southern elephant seals traverse land and sea, born on wild shores, but thriving in the frigid waters. Elephant seals were hunted remorselessly from the end of the 1700s until the 20th century, pushing them right to the brink of extinction. Their oil rich blubber was used for everything from lighting to margarine. Fortunately, the hunt was stopped just in time, and their recovery over the last 100 years is a great example of the resilience of the ocean. A beautiful and hopeful photograph.

Alex Mustard

Portrait



Runner up

Screaming Swallower

Steven Kovacs (United States)

Off the Florida coast, blackwater dives from July to October reveal the *Kali colubrina*, or snaketooth swallower. These deep-sea specialists are famous for their expandable stomachs, allowing them to consume prey twice their length and ten times their weight.

Photographing them is notoriously difficult; they typically hover upside down, facing away from the lens. I was incredibly fortunate to find this cooperative individual fully displaying its elegant fins. While I was framing a portrait, the fish suddenly decided to yawn. I reacted just in time to capture the moment, showcasing the impressive gape that makes this predator so effective.

This image offers a rare, clear look at a creature usually hidden in the dark, highlighting the strange and specialized adaptations of life in the open ocean.

Palm Beach, Florida, United States

Nikon D500, Ikelite, 60mm macro, 320, f/22, 1/250, two Ikelite DS230 strobes

Judge's comments: The enduring appeal of blackwater images was, in the early days, enough to grab our attention but now we need that extra ingredient to create a winning image and here is a good example. Perfectly composed and lit with the menacing yawn fast tracking it upwards.

Peter Howlands

Portrait

Third

White spirits

Merche Llobera (Spain)

Floating on a board with my head and arms submerged, I experienced something truly unforgettable. The belugas came and went freely, approaching me on their own terms, meeting my gaze, vocalizing, and observing with unmistakable curiosity. Laughing with emotion, I responded with a high-pitched voice, which made them even more curious. At times, they gently touched the dome of my camera, as if investigating me in return.

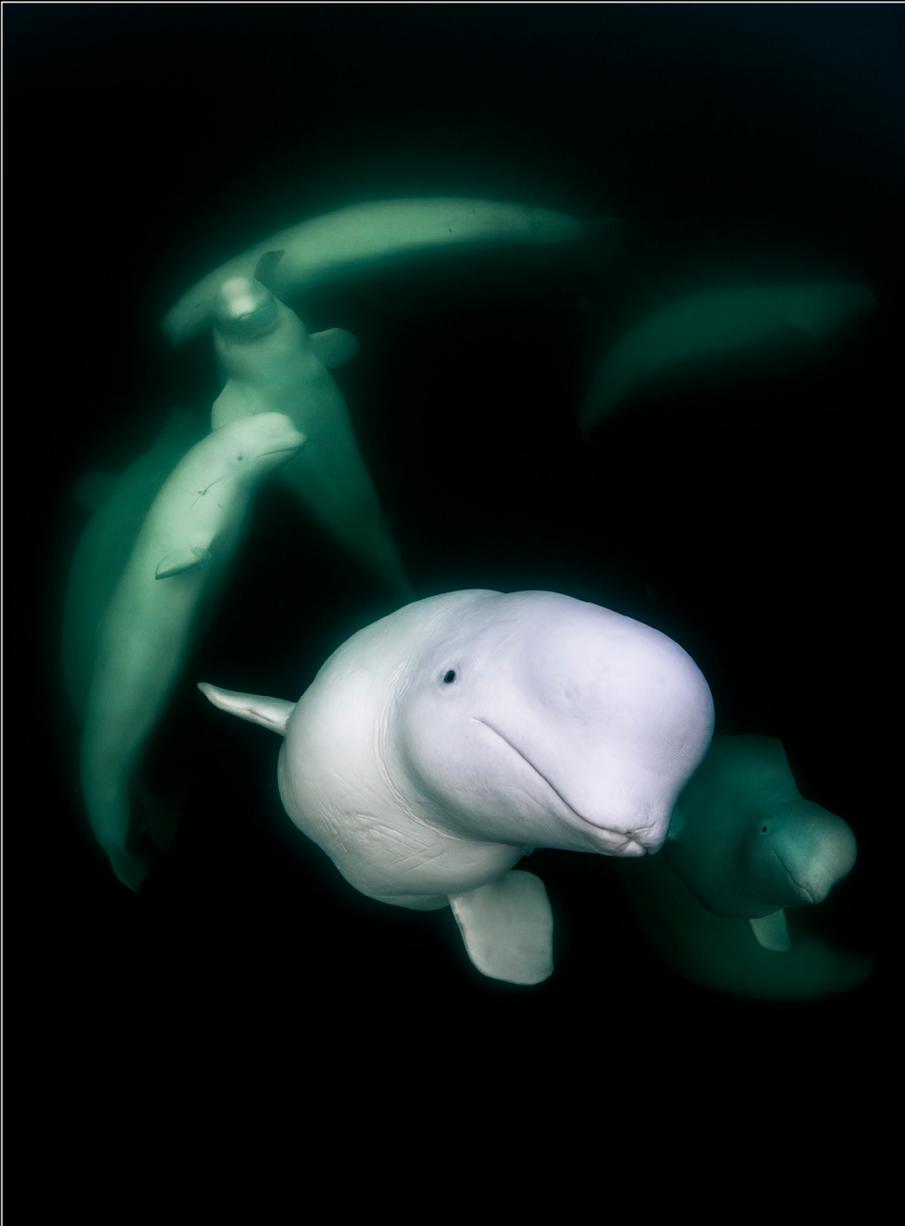
I traveled to Churchill specifically to photograph belugas, but I never anticipated such close, voluntary interactions. My intention was simply to be present, to enjoy the moment, and to create the best image possible while always allowing the animals to set the pace. Photographing from the surface, half submerged on the board, made the encounter feel genuine and unforced. There is nothing more powerful than a real connection with wild animals, one built purely on mutual curiosity. In those moments, I couldn't help but wonder who was truly observing whom.

Churchill, Canada

Sony A1 II, Seacam, 8-15mm F4, 1000 , f/7.1, 1/320, natural light

Judge's comments: Wonderful composition of these beautiful animals! Portrait image are not necessarily just one animal in the frame which this image is a perfect example of. The one Beluga making eye contact with the photographer would have probably already be enough, but the surrounding animals frame it so nicely that it's a well deserved third place!

Tobias Friedrich



Portrait



Highly Commended

Silent Hunter

Lars von Ritter Zahony (Germany)

An experience that will remain with me for a lifetime: he appeared out of nowhere. Silent, like a shadow breaking free from the background. Large, muscular, with a body built for speed and power. His eyes locked on mine. No hesitation, no fear. Only curiosity. And presence. He circled me slowly, almost like a dancer. I could see every movement, the subtle play of his fins, the rhythmic glide through the water. It was no attack, no game. It was communication. A meeting of equals. As suddenly as he had appeared, he vanished again. I stayed in the water for a while longer, not hoping to see him again, but to preserve the moment.

Argentine Islands, Antarctica

Canon EOS-1Dx Mark iii , Seacam, Canon 16-35MM, 640 , f/13, 1/40, Seacam Seaflash 160

Judge's comments: Eyes and teeth, eyes and teeth. Add well chosen movement blur, a kiss of light and a dramatic diagonal and you have a perfect combination. This image is initially simple. Eyes and teeth but as you look at it more and more through the rounds, there is so much more to it.

Peter Howlands

Portrait



Highly Commended

Forest Guardian

James Emery (United Kingdom)

Historically, Monterey was the cold northern limit for California Sheephead, but warming oceans have turned this bay into their new playground. While often skittish, this large male was surprisingly bold during a solitary New Year's Day dive. With no other divers around to spook him, he became fascinated by his own reflection in my dome port. This narcissism bought me 40 minutes of interaction, allowing me to carefully compose the shot. To emphasize his character, I used a Backscatter Hybrid Flash with a custom-made beam restrictor. This controlled lighting allowed me to create a moody portrait that highlights his iconic teeth and 'guardian' status within the kelp forest, turning a lucky encounter into a deliberate study of character.

Breakwater, Monterey, California , USA

Sony A7RV, Nauticam, Canon 8-15mm Fisheye, ISO 400 , f/18, 1/50, Backscatter Hybrid Flash

Judge's comments: What a character. What impact. Boom! An underwater portrait that was impossible to ignore and impossible not to award.

Alex Mustard

Portrait



Highly Commended

Giant Stride

Suliman Alatiqi (Kuwait)

Komodo dragons primarily inhabit savanna grasslands which are ideal for their hunting style and tropical forests which provide shelter and shade. Coastal shorelines and mangrove forests, however, are also an important part of their environment and lifestyle. Komodo dragons are good swimmers and use their tail for propulsion (similar to crocodiles), though always while keeping their head above the water. While they are adept at swimming in the deep, when possible, they prefer traversing in shallow waters where they can more comfortably walk across the seabed. It took two extended field trips over two different years to study their water interactions and to develop the safety protocols with the support of local rangers that enabled me to capture this behavior.

Komodo Island, Indonesia

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, AF-S FISHEYE NIKKOR 8-15mm f/3.5-4.5E ED, 250, f/10, 1/250, Seacam 160D

Judge's comments: A terrifyingly good image of certain death just inches away. Images such as this take my breath away. Artistry, bravery and cool under pressure, some images say I wish I was there, others say I'm glad Suliman Alatiqi was.

Peter Rowlands

Portrait



Highly Commended

Super red

Toni Bertran (Spain)

Seahorses are among the marine creatures I enjoy photographing most. Along the Spanish coast, *Hippocampus guttulatus* is a common yet elusive subject, distinguished by the spines that allow it to blend seamlessly into the surrounding seaweed. For a long time, I envisioned capturing this species in profile, silhouetted against a red backlight that would reveal its distinctive shape while preserving its natural camouflage. Achieving the right position and lighting was challenging, as seahorses are constantly hidden within their environment. In this rare moment, the subject revealed itself perfectly: its natural red coloration harmonized with the backlight, while a subtle snoot illuminated only the body, highlighting its form and texture among the seaweed.

Blanes, Spain

Sony A7RII, Nauticam NA-A7II, Sony 90mm macro, 125, f/8, 1/160, 1 Inon z330 and 1 bigblue cb11000p

Judge's comments: A fantastic marriage of technique and subject, with the backlighting highlighting both the characteristic silhouette of the seahorse and also this individual's beautiful colour pattern.

Alex Mustard

Portrait



Commended

Capybara

George Kao (Taiwan)

Shattering the docile stereotype, this image reveals the capybara's hidden power beneath the surface. To capture this upward angle against Snell's Window, I pushed my settings to the limit: fastest shutter speed and smallest aperture to tame the backlight, balanced by maximum 250W strobe power to illuminate the dark fur.

Applying the rigorous standards I use for high-speed action in Magdalena Bay, I pre-set Full Auto Focus, trusting the algorithm to track erratic movement. This freed me to focus on composition via an external monitor. When the animal suddenly dashed overhead like a Manta Ray, my freediving instincts kicked in to intercept its path—a split-second intersection of rigid technical discipline and wild, explosive freedom.

Pingtung, Taiwan

Canon R5 Mk2, Nauticam NA R5mk2, Canon 15-35mm, 200 , f/22, 1/250, SUPE D-MAX

Judge's comments: A new subject to the UPY judges always creates excitement, even if in what looks like captive conditions. This charismatic portrait of a new subject was a favourite with all the judges right from the start. I can't help but wonder if it would have been even better if all the whiskers were in frame? Nit picking, I know, but I still wonder.

Peter Rawlands



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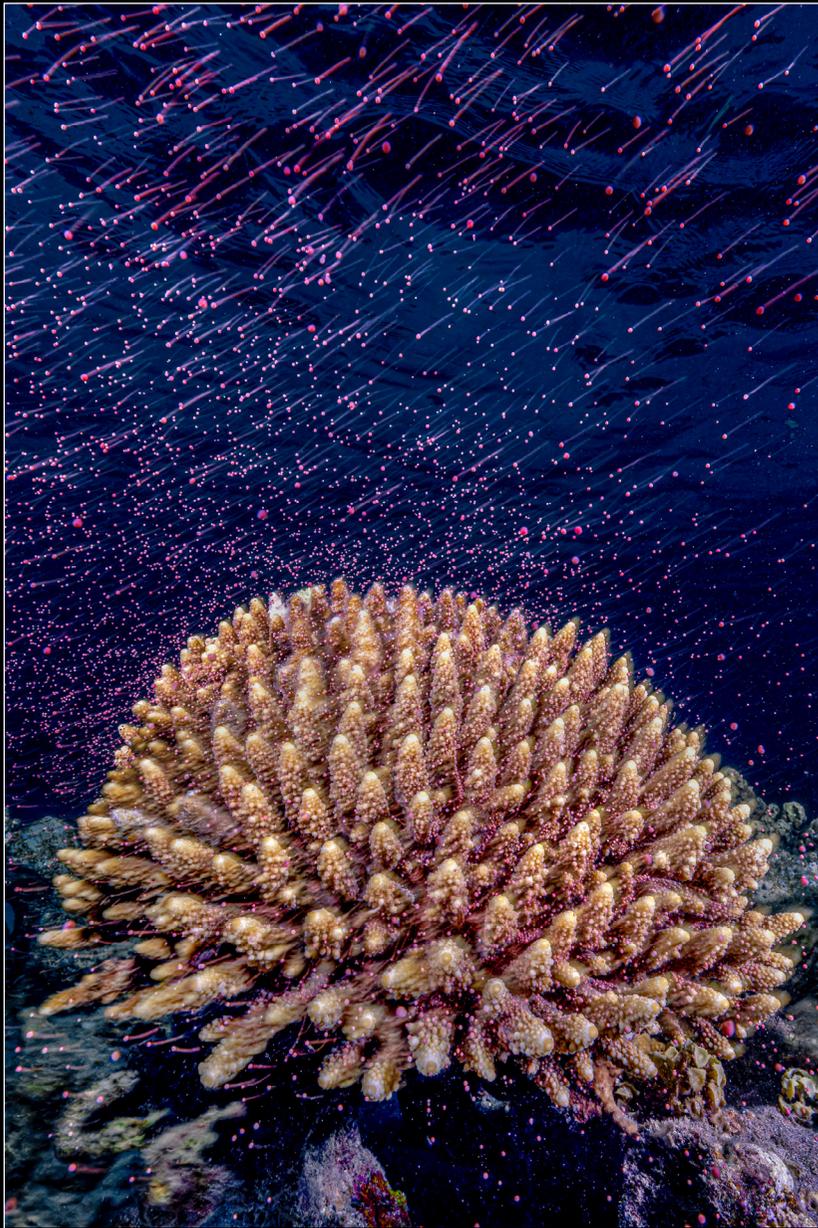
Coral Reefs

Category History

2026 Dr. Tom Shlesinger (Israel)

2025 Catherine Holmes, (UK)

Coral Reefs



Category Winner

Underwater Meteor Shower

Dr. Tom Shlesinger (Israel)

Corals are animals, and this is how they reproduce. Revealing the hidden world of coral reproduction exposes one of the ocean's most extraordinary spectacles. Like clockwork, thousands of corals across hundreds of kilometers synchronize to release egg-and-sperm bundles into the open sea. Capturing this fleeting event is exceptionally challenging: it occurs only once a year, on a specific night of a particular month, within a narrow window of just minutes. Using a slow shutter speed as waves break and sweep the buoyant bundles upward transforms the scene into a colorful underwater meteor shower. This image is part of an ongoing scientific-documentary journey exploring the vibrant nocturnal life and reproductive rituals of corals in the northern Red Sea, a project shaped by more than 300 nights spent underwater during spawning season.

Northern Red Sea, Israel

Sony a1, Nauticam , Sony FE 12-24mm F2.8 GM, 200 , f/18, 1/5, Retra Flash Pro Max

Judge's comments: Coral reefs are under pressure and struggling around the world, so it was fantastic to award such an uplifting image, celebrating the effervescent start of the next generation.

Alex Mustard

Coral Reefs



Runner up

Sunset Patrol

Renee Capozzola (United States)

This half and half image of a shark patrolling a vibrant coral reef at sunset was shot in Fakarava, a coral atoll in French Polynesia's Tuamotu Archipelago renowned for its pristine ocean environment. Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1977, sharks thrive here in their natural habitat due to strong protections. Sharks signify a balanced reef ecosystem so it is my hope that this image can help serve as a model for successful conservation and sustainability. This image was captured using a wide angle rectilinear lens, a small aperture, a large dome port, and dual flash guns. This is a single in-camera image.

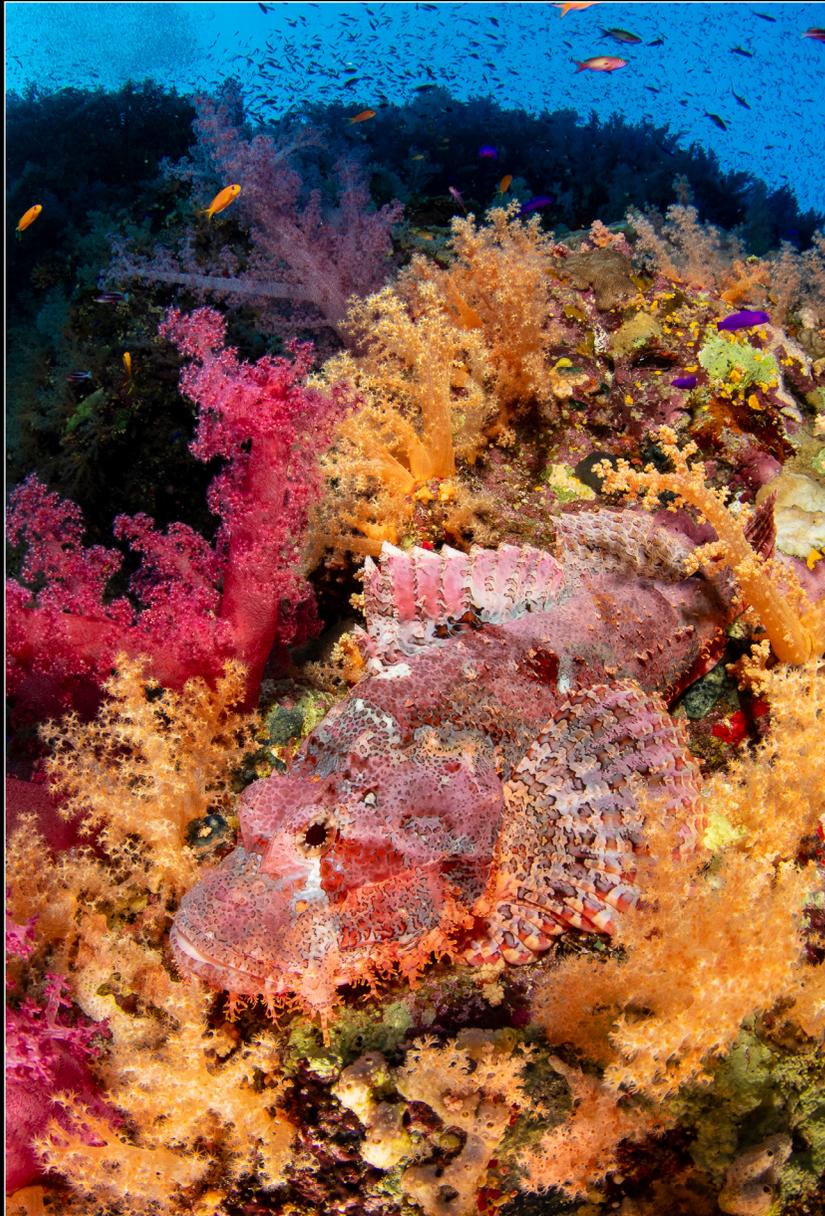
Fakarava, French Polynesia

Canon 5D Mark IV, SEACAM, Canon EF11-24mm f/4L USM, 400, f/20, 1/160, Seaflash 160

Judge's comments: Extraordinary split shot of this famous motif! Very good technical execution of an image which needed to be timed very well, especially including sharks! It was a strong candidate for the judges to also win the category, but not having the biggest part of the image being a coral reef it still went to runner up which is a great achievement!

Tobias Friedrich

Coral Reefs



Third

Veiled in Vibrance

Neil Roseworn (United Kingdom)

The Red Sea scorpionfish is a master of camouflage, perfectly adapted to the vibrant reefs of Ras Mohammed National Park. Here, on Shark Reef, it blends effortlessly with the soft corals, relying on its textured skin and mottled colours to remain invisible to both predators and prey. Common throughout the Red Sea, this ambush hunter waits motionless for small fish or crustaceans to pass within striking distance. Despite its beauty, it carries highly venomous spines along its dorsal fin, an effective defence that makes it one of the region's most formidable reef inhabitants.

By allowing me to approach closely, the scorpionfish became the centerpiece, its colours and textures brought to life by the flash amid the glowing soft corals. In a place where every creature depends on the health of the reef, encounters like this are a reminder of how vital it is to protect these fragile ecosystems for future generations.

Shark Reef, Egypt

Nikon D500, Nauticam, Tokina 10-17, 400 , f/13, 1/160, 2 X Retra Pro Max

Judge's comments: The soft corals in the Red Sea are world class but are as delicate as their colours. The soft lighting, intricate subject detail and profusion of colourful life receding into the background is a classic and sometimes you don't need to do anything more.

Peter Howlands

Coral Reefs



Highly Commended

Late afternoon lettuce

Olivier Delorieux (France)

The visibility was actually poor this day, hardly ideal for photography, yet this remarkable lettuce coral felt like an invitation to slow down and look closer. As ambient light faded, the strobes brought it to life, revealing an intricate graphic structure hidden in the gloom—proof that even in subdued conditions the quiet beauty of corals can shine through.

Koh Tachai, Thailand

Nikon D600, Hugyfot D600, Sigma 15mm f2.8 EX DG, 800 , f/11, 1/50, Inon Z240 x2

Judge's comments: A transporting photo that takes us straight to the reef and into a rarer sight of pristine coral growth as far as we can see.

Alex Mustard

Coral Reefs



Highly
commended

Parrotfish Frenzy

Kat Zhou (United States)

This photo shows a school of greencheek parrotfish in Raja Ampat. I came upon them hovering over the reef and was mesmerized by the shapes the school formed as they swam around, moving from place to place and chomping on coral together. I followed them around for the entire rest of the dive, watching them reshape the reef.

Raja Ampat, Indonesia

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Nikon 8-15mm Fisheye, 400 , f/9, 1/250s, Inon Z330 x2

Judge's comments: Parrotfish are arguably the most important fish on coral reefs; constantly cleaning healthy and removing dead corals. Always on the move this vibrant, well lit image captures the action with great eye contact and contributing but not confusing reflections.

Peter Howlands

Coral Reefs



Highly commended

Chromatic Reef

Bryan H. Blauvelt (United States)

Fiji lingered on my travel radar for more than fifteen years before I made my first dives there in October, 2025. "Chromatic Reef" was captured on the final dive of a ten night adventure aboard the Nai'a liveaboard, at Coral Corner in the renowned Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park.

I back-rolled off the skiff, deflated my BCD, and dropped beneath the surface. Inspired by a healthy reef so densely encrusted in lush soft corals and sea fans, I found that pinpointing one composition amongst the explosion of color and texture became an enjoyable challenge. I spotted this branching fan adorned with delicate pink and peach corals and was instantly drawn in. Framed against the deep blue water above, it became the natural focal point of my image. A perfect finale to a fulfilling trip, capturing why Fiji is celebrated as one of the world's most vibrant and popular diving destinations.

Coral Corner, Vatu-i-Rah, Fiji

Sony A1 mk1, Nauticam NA-A1, Sony FE 28-70 mm and Nauticam FCP, 500 , f/11, 1/125, Retra Pro Max II

Judge's comments: Life upon life, shape upon shape, colour upon colour. There is no habitat that can rival a coral reef for its exuberance of animal life, which is expertly concentrated into a stunning single frame by Bryan Blauvelt.

Coral Reefs



Highly commended

Who's a pretty boy, then?

Nicholas More (United Kingdom)

On a Red Sea reef, parrotfish are common and a favourite of mine due to their polychromatic colours and beautiful plumage. At night, these Norwegian Blues can appear resting, tired or shagged out after a long squawk but during the day, they can be observed bimbling around, biting chunks out of the reefs, whilst pinning for the fjords.

They process their stony diet and ultimately excrete it as fine white sand, making Polly both a keystone reef species and a tropical beach realtor.

So...rather than taking photos parrot fashion, I chose a slow shutter speed to highlight their vooomy, lackadaisical nature, whilst framing the coral prominently, to show their importance to the reef. Polly wanna cracker? :-)

Gifton Island, Hurghada, Red Sea., Egypt

Sony A1, Nauticam NA A1, Sony FE 28-60 & Nauticam WACP., 100, f/18, 1/8th, Retra Pro Max

Judge's comments: Perfect execution of a standard image in the Red Sea! All of this image just screams "coral reef" which is why almost all judges (I'm not saying who didn't like it ;-)) loved this image. Well done and excellent choice to enter it into this category!

Tobias Friedrich

Coral Reefs



Commended

Shimmering Reef

Catherine Holmes (UK)

In the early morning light at Shark Reef, the coral reef is a masterpiece of motion and color. As the nutrient-rich current picks up speed, the soft corals fully bloom, their translucent polyps stretching out to feed in the rush of water. A vibrant cloud of Red Sea Anthias dart in and out for protection, creating a shimmering golden halo around the reef. Swimming hard against the fast moving current to capture all the elements at their best was challenging, but in this protected marine sanctuary, the sheer abundance of life is breathtaking. The fish and corals are at their most brilliant, in the brief, perfect window where the strong current, the light, and the marine protected ecosystem align to create a glowing, kaleidoscopic display of nature at its finest. I have mirrored the coral reef wall image in post production photo-shop to create maximum impact.

Shark Reef, Ras Mohammed National Park, Red Sea, Egypt

Nikon D500, Nauticam NA-D500, 8-15 (f3.5-4.5)@11 Fisheye, 500 , f/11, 1/250, Retra Pro strobes

Judge's comments: Very creative and great idea how to make something more out of an amazing image! Turning it into vertical makes me think that it almost looks like a totem pole with faces forming though the mirroring. Well done!

Tobias Friedrich



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Henley Spiers photo

Black & White

Category History

- 2026 Shunsuke Nakano (Japan)
- 2025 Enric Gener (Spain)
- 2024 Jasmine Skye Smith (Australia)
- 2023 Don Silcock (Australia)
- 2022 Kerrie Burow (Australia)
- 2021 Daisy Fernie (Australia)
- 2020 Mok Wai Hoe (Singapore)
- 2019 Henley Spiers (UK)
- 2018 Borut Furlan (Slovenia)

Black & White



Category Winner

Coral Window

Shunsuke Nakano (Japan)

Light enters the wreck through a window, a square cut into history and now taken over by life. Choosing to shoot in black and white, I am inviting the viewer to contrast the thick, straight manmade lines with the delicate and intricate patterns of nature. Gorgonians fan outward like frozen breath, turning rust into art. Between them, a lone wrasse punctuates the frame, providing movement in an otherwise still composition. Off Sado Island, the past is not lost, it is inhabited. The window no longer looks out; it invites us to look in, framing the story of nature reclaiming metal.

Sado, Japan

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Nikkor 28 70mm f3.5-4.5 d, 320 , f/16, 1/50, Ambient light

Judge's comments: The ocean framed. Simply a perfectly observed scene for an underwater monochrome image. But the image also captures the decisive moment. I suspect there was also a lot of patience waiting for the wrasse to so perfectly complete the composition.

Alex Mustard

Black & White



Runner up

Silver-Tone Seductress

John Pfisterer (United States)

In addition to my seascape and marine life images, I've been lucky enough to work with fashion models, freedivers, and sometimes even mermaids in a range of environments. This particular image was shot in a pool set up like an above water studio. The image was captured with a Sony A1 in a Nauticam housing with a 12" port. Natural light was diffused with a scrim and fill light was added with a continuous light, which allowed subtle changes of the light to be seen.

This moment captures the fluidity and beauty of a classic muse enhanced by water to both further diffuse the light and suspend the subject. I created rich black-and-white tones to convey a cinematic film noir style. The model's composure and technical skill brought a palpable calm to the frame, reminiscent of Bette Davis, and I am sincerely grateful for her cooperation.

Pool, United States

Sony A1, Nauticam NA A1, 16-35mm, 100 , f/8, 1/100,

Judge's comments: What a great studio setting and perfect postproduction. Even though I often love harshly contrasting black and white contrast in this category I really like how the photographer is mostly working with tones of grey. Personally, this could have been my category winner!

Tobias Friedrich

Black & White



Third

Power and Pace

David Alpert (United Kingdom)

December in Cape Town and the young fur seals are super active, playing in the waves as they crash onto the jagged rocks of Duiker Island. Joining them in the surf is exhilarating, though photography is incredibly difficult. These animals shoot through the swell like lightning bolts; there is no time for autofocus, only instinct. I have returned to this spot for over five years to capture this exact moment. Sadly, such an experience is currently unattainable as seal colonies along the Cape coast struggle with a rabies outbreak. One wonders if these encounters will ever be safe again.

Duiker Island, Cape Town, South Africa

Canon 5D MKiii, Nauticam , Sigma 15mm Fisheye, 1000 , f/8, 1/400 , natural light

Judge's comments: Great capture and a perfect conversion to black and white ! This is what black and white images are all about, the sheer contrast and interesting structures which only get really visible with the right image and postproduction. Kudus to the photographer to select this image and having the creativity to see something more in it.

Tobias Friedrich

Black & White



Highly
commended

The Fever

Kaushiik Subramaniam (UK)

This is what it looks like when you're in the middle of a stingray tornado. I took this image of a fever of pink whiprays (*Pateobatis fai*) as they scoured the reef in search of their next meal. When I saw the group moving in my direction, I calmly sank down to be directly in their path and took this image as they glided over the top of me. Stingrays, unjustly, have a bad reputation, and I wanted to capture an image of this group that makes people see these animals in a different light.

Hulhumale, Maldives

Sony A7Riii, SeaFrogs, 28-70mm f3.5-5.6 OSS, 1000, 5.6, 1/800, No Lighting

Judge's comments: Like a squadron of stealth planes, these spectacular schooling stingrays create depth and drama in a stunning black and white image.

Alex Mustard

Black & White



Highly commended

Face to Face in the Frozen Deep Lars von Ritter Zahony (Germany)

Eye to eye in the frozen silence, I meet the gaze of a leopard seal (*Hydrurga leptonyx*) a sovereign of the Antarctic deep. Its presence radiates raw power, a silent warning that I am a trespasser in its hunting realm. In that moment, respect outweighs fear, and the wild reminds me who truly rules these icy waters. With its gaping jaws, it shows me its dominance. Its presence commands respect, a living embodiment of power in a world where only the fiercest endure.

Argentine Islands, Antarctica

Canon EOS-1Dx Mark iii , Seacam, EF 8-15mm
1:4L with 1,4 Converter, 640 , f/22, 1/200, SEACAM
Seaflash 160

Judge's comments: A good choice and perfect use of black and white to keep it graphically simple and emphasise the portrait and, more importantly the message being imparted by this apex predator. Perfectly timed, lit and exposed. A meeting of power and talent.

Peter Howlands

Black & White



Highly commended

Storm Beneath the Surface Nur Tucker (United Kingdom)

After years of dreaming and a weather-cancelled first attempt, I finally reached Shetland to photograph northern gannets. The conditions were brutal; the sea was so wild and the current so powerful that the skipper had to strap a heavy line across me to prevent me from drifting into the open ocean.

Peering through the choppy swell, I braced for birds hitting the water at nearly 100 mph. Everything happened in a heartbeat. Rather than a standard close-up, I chose a wider perspective to capture the complete chaos. This frame conveys the raw energy and frantic mayhem that unfolds beneath the surface as dozens of gannets transform the water into a storm of bubbles, wings, and light. It was a visceral experience that perfectly illustrates the power of these incredible seabirds.

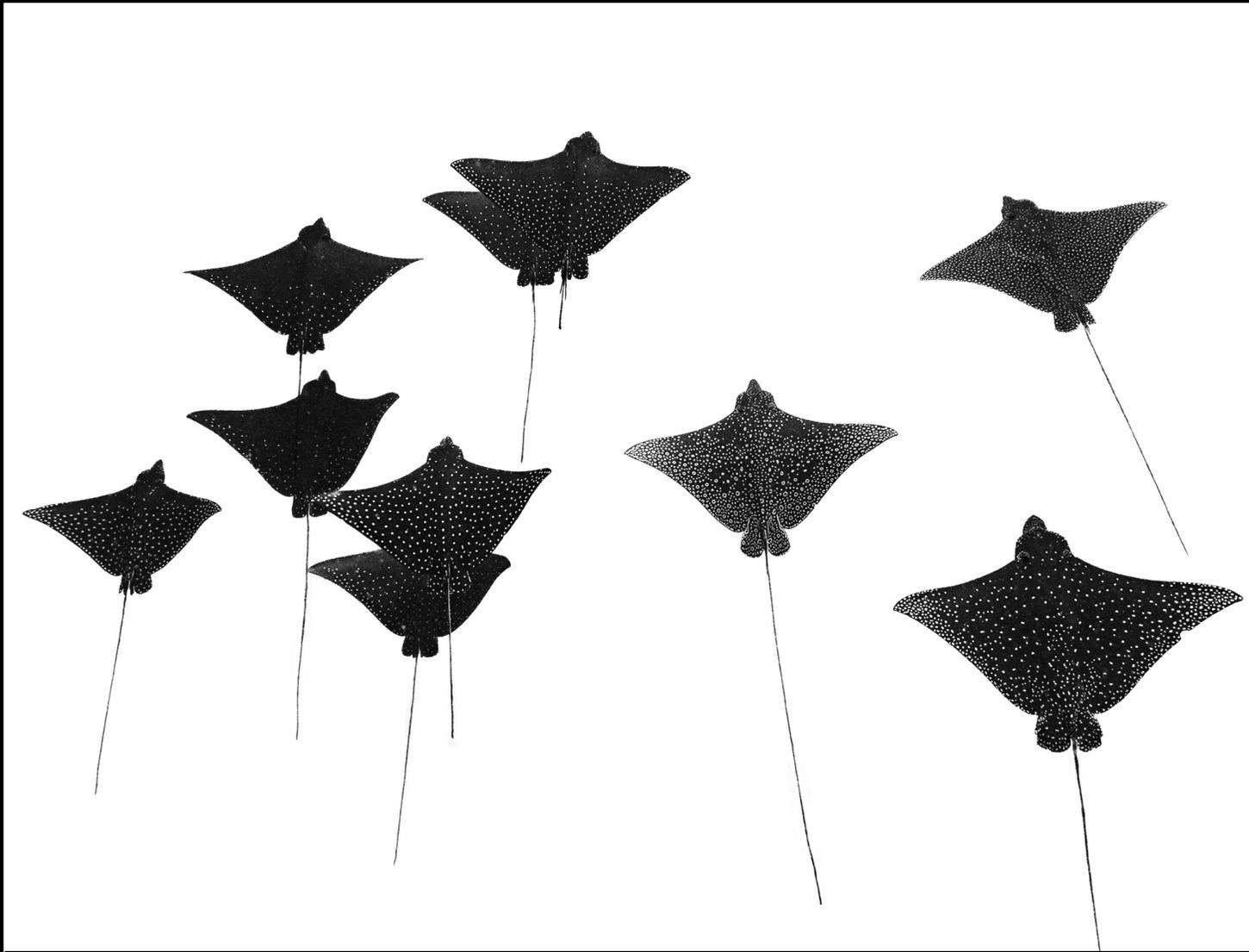
Noss, Shetland Islands, Scotland

Nikon D500, Subal ND500, Tokina 10-17mm, 200, f/13, 1/250, Inon Z240X2

Judge's comments: Action frozen in time. For just a millisecond, the melee of gannets and bubbles forms a perfect composition with an arrowhead of bubbles and spearing bodies all pointing to the bird that got the prize.

Alex Mustard

Black & White



Highly commended

Drifting

Billy Rolls (United Kingdom)

Seeing a single eagle ray is special, but witnessing ten together is unforgettable. While freediving at a cleaning station to ID reef mantas for the Maldives Manta Conservation Programme, this group unexpectedly drifted into view—a first for me at this site despite daily visits.

I immediately switched focus, following these “kites on the breeze” as their formation shifted. I chose a black-and-white finish to emphasise the unique, ornate patterns of each individual without the distraction of colour. I particularly love the moment the group parted, framing the most intricately patterned ray in the centre. This image serves as a beautiful reminder of the natural variation within the species and the serendipity that makes underwater photography so rewarding.

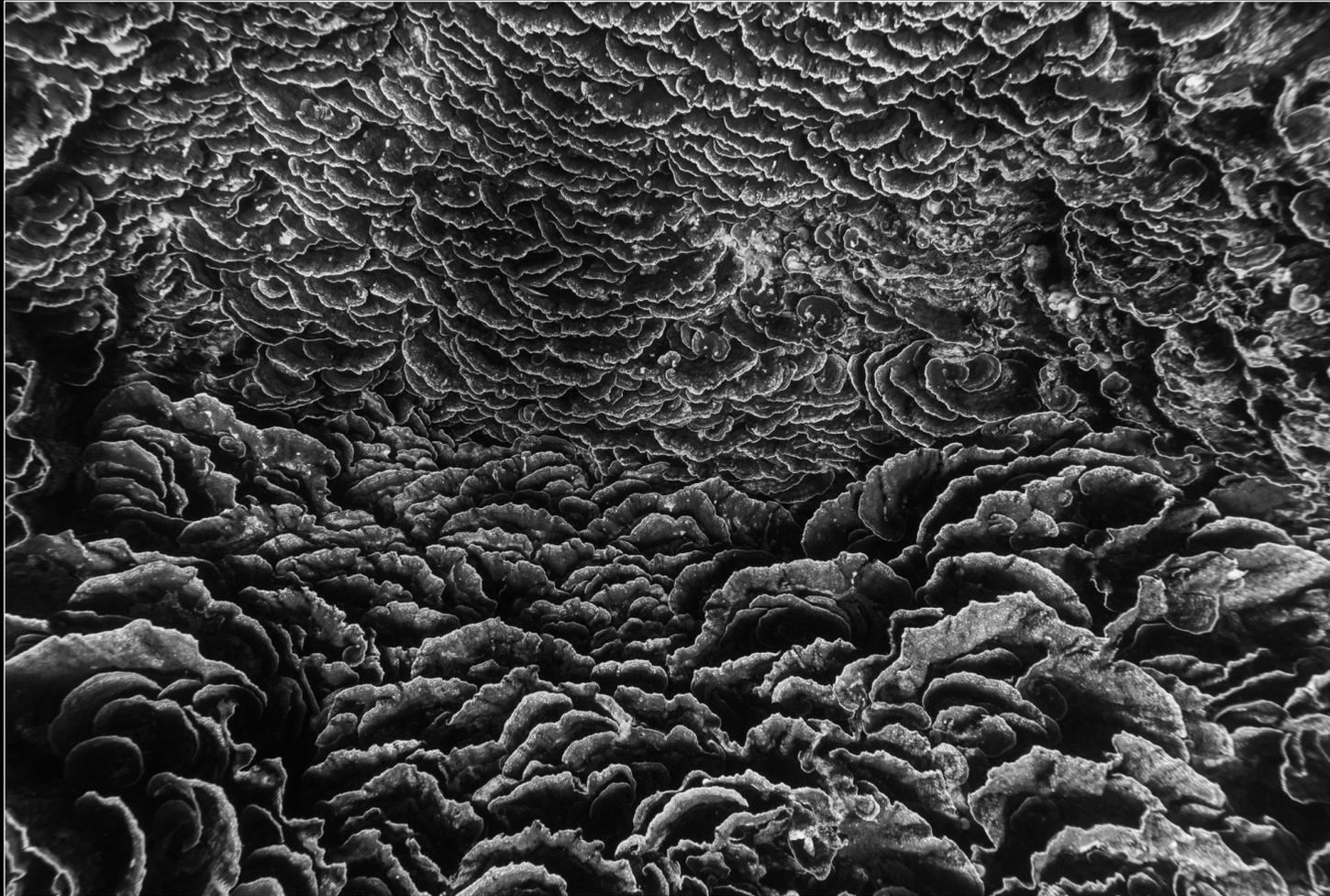
Baa Atoll UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Maldives

OM System TG-7, Ikelite , Internal Lens, 100 , f/2.8, 1/800, Natural Light

Judge's comments: Such a good decision to reduce this to just black and white with very little in between. Graphically simple, well envisaged and composed, it encompasses everything about why black and white still works so well in a colour environment. And impressively photographed with a compact camera.

Peter Rawlands

Black & White



Commended

Echinopora lamellosa
Ishino Shota (Japan)

I have spent many years photographing coral reefs. And I have seen it takes a long time for coral to grow large. I wanted to capture the layers of coral grown over many years in monochrome, expressing their mystery beyond the timeline.

Okinawa, Japan

Canon EOS R5 mk2, INON, Canon 16-35mm F2.8L III, 500, f/14, 1/100, natural light

Judge's comments: A great capture and the perfect image to convert into black and white ! I love this kind of artistic images which don't have a subject but are outstanding in composition and absolutely timeless. Very well done, I love this!

Tobias Friedrich



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Up & Coming

Category History

2026 Sam Blount (United States)
2025 Ruruka (Korea)
2024 Lisa Stengel (USA)
2023 Kat Zhou (USA)
2022 Quico Abadal (Spain)
2021 SJ Alice Bennett (Mexico)

2020 Anita Kainrath (Austria)
2019 Taeyup Kim (Korea)
2018 Man BD (Malaysia)
2017 Horacio Martinez (Argentina)
2016 Pier Mane (South Africa)
2015 Fabrice Guerin (France)

“As the world’s largest purpose-driven diving organisation, PADI is committed to making the underwater world accessible for all and creating positive ocean change. Sponsoring the ‘Up & Coming’ category in the Underwater Photographer of the Year 2025 competition aligns with our mission to inspire ocean exploration and conservation. Images have the power to tell impactful stories, with this category celebrating emerging underwater photographers who are capturing the beauty and wonder beneath the surface while inspiring more people to learn to scuba dive so they can join in on seeking adventure and saving the ocean.”

Dave Murray, Managing Director for PADI EMEA

“Our Up & Coming Category is incredibly important to the UPY team. We are so proud that it provides a brilliant platform to showcase the work of new talent in underwater photography. We are very excited to be collaborating with PADI, with their world-leading reputation for developing the skills of both new and existing divers. Thanks to PADI’s world-wide reach these images and the stories of the photographers behind them will inspire a huge global audience.”

Alex Mustard, Chair of the judging panel



Up & Coming category is sponsored by PADI

Up & Coming



Category Winner

Lunging Leopard

Sam Blount (United States)

For years, the leopard seal topped my Antarctic wish list, a predator I dreamed of encountering face to face. I have to say, this dive was everything I could have hoped for: clear water, good lighting, and a playful seal. Leopard seals wield an astonishing array of dominance displays, and this one put them all to use, darting around me with effortless power. Watching that massive mouth lined with sharp teeth charge straight toward me is a thrill I'll never forget.

Antarctic Peninsula, Antarctica

Sony A1, Nauticam NA-A1, Sony 16-35mm f4, 1000, f/10, 1/500, OneUW 160X Strobes

Judge's comments: Probably one of the best shots of a Leopard seal that close that I have ever seen! I think we all agreed very soon that this is the clear category winner as such a shot is everything but easy to take. The sheer short distance and the light that has to be perfect for is just perfect. Very well done in such an intense moment!

Tobias Friedrich

Up & Coming



Runner up

Dancing with Light

Khaichuin Sim (Malaysia)

My wife was snorkeling at the surface while I was below on scuba, in the mangroves of Casa Cenote. As I encountered this magical scene, sunlight filtered through the canopy above, creating ethereal beams that illuminated the crystal-clear water. I used hand signals to ask my wife to free-dive to the perfect spot, where she gracefully suspended herself underwater, appearing to dance with the light.

Casa Cenote, Cancun, Mexico

Sony Sony A7RM4, Nauticam NA-A7IV, Sony 12-24mm F4 , 400 , f/4, 1/125, no lighting

Judge's comments: A photo that is all about capturing the beauty of light. Both as the shafts of sun radiate down through the canopy, but also how the highlights and shadows perfectly reveal the contours of the model. High quality.

Alex Mustard

UPY2026



Up & Coming



Third

Shared Time

Jinny Kim (Republic of Korea)

"Heaven's Gate," a breathtaking section of the Nohoch Nah Chich underwater cave system in Mexico, is where I took this photo. The experience of entering this space felt less like a simple passage and more like a journey across time, a profound shift from the present into the distant past. Within this sacred space, fundamental elements converge in a powerful dance: nature and humanity, light and profound darkness, and the ephemeral trail of the diver's rising air bubbles. Photographically, I aimed to capture this convergence, striving to express, as grandly and beautifully as possible, the intense emotions and sheer awe that overwhelmed me in that ethereal place. It is a moment of pure, raw connection with the planet's hidden wonders.

Tulum ,Sistema Nohoch Nah Chich, Mexico

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye, 2500 , f/8, 1/20, Bigblue Lights

Judge's comments: Very well composed and excellent light distribution in this image. Despite not being 100% perfect in centring the diver and lacking a bit of noise reduction from the post-production it was very well received by all judges and a most deserved third place!

Tobias Friedrich

Up & Coming



Highly commended

Crowded House

Natalie Yarrow (United Kingdom)

Peering into the crevices of this vibrant barrel sponge, I could see several dark figures moving around like shadow puppets. This turned out to be a large colony of hinge-beak shrimps, living together in very close quarters! While somewhat of a tight squeeze, communal living suits these social and cooperative creatures, as well as providing 'safety in numbers' against predators. Further, the craggy pink walls allow for great camouflage. I selected a wide aperture so that each shrimp is rendered increasingly out of focus as the eye is drawn deeper into the sponge. Those individuals at the back are reduced to a fuzzy puzzle of white dots and stripes. I would like to thank my guide, Wix (Scuba Seraya), for finding these shrimps for me, and also for taking me back to the same spot a second time as I liked them so much, which resulted in my getting this shot.

Bali, Indonesia

Sony A7RV, Nauticam NA-A7RV, Sony FE 90mm f/2.8, 80 , f/5.0, 1/200, Retra Pro Max

Judge's comments: Sometimes you don't have to shout to say 'Look at me'. You let your image do the talking and this image made the judges listen and take notice. The stepped, receding depth of field leads the eye effortlessly through the frame and back to the subject. Talent indeed.

Peter Howlands

Up & Coming



Highly commended

Drawn to Light

Leticia Carbajal (Mexico)

This school of Caribbean reef squid was photographed on the Mesoamerican Reef System in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. Cephalopods are among Earth's most intelligent invertebrates, possessing advanced visual systems that perceive light beyond human capability.

Encountering them at the end of a dive is always a joy. I approached slowly, using my strobes to pique their interest. As their curiosity intensified, they moved closer, their behaviour becoming increasingly animated. The resulting "dynamic frenzy" captured in their movement and expressions made me wonder who was truly observing whom. For a moment, the boundaries between observer and observed dissolved. This mesmerising ambiguity is exactly why encounters with cephalopods are so profound—reminding us of the deep intelligence found beneath the waves.

Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico

Sony A7RIV, Isotta, 16-35 mm, 400, f/11, 1/160, Inon Z-330

Judge's comments: We all loved this image from the beginning when we first saw it. It's just such a nice formation of squid but also very well composed and edited. Despite a bit of lacking quality the sheer atmosphere of the image brought it to the Top 8!

Tobias Friedrich

Up & Coming



Highly commended

Hells Bells

Gabriel König (Switzerland)

The origin of the “Hells Bells” remains a mystery to this day. Chemical or even biological processes could have created these structured calcium deposits. We used a backlit silhouette method to showcase these beautiful features in el Zapote, Cancun Mexico. The picture takes the viewer into the darknes, the crystal clear waters and showcases the hundreds of formations that lay within the Cenotes. This collaborative picture was only possible with the help from my good friends and my partner.

El Zapote, Mexico

Sony A7iv, Nauticam NA A7IV, Sony FE 12-24mm f/2.8 GM, 400 , f/2.8, 1/160, Hellfire 10K (Home-made Lights held by Models)

Judge's comments: We all thought this was a highly original take and very well choreographed. Almost mysterious with differing poses and creative lighting, it creates a new, fresh image which illustrates the up and coming talent behind the camera.

Peter Rowlands

Up & Coming



Highly commended

Alone in a crowd

Keith Kirkpatrick (United States)

Keen-eyed divers in Monterey had been noticing signs of a squid run for almost two weeks. When someone finally located the spawning grounds, we assumed we were too late. When a friend and I scouted the site after work and found endless fields of egg sacs, but not many squid - our fears seemed confirmed.

We returned later that night to maximize our chances of seeing squid. As the sun set, birds were diving and whales were feeding exactly where we thought the spawning grounds were. Our excitement increased. When we descended for our second dive, we were engulfed in hordes of squid. I dove the site three more times the next day. I had to abort the second dive when my housing leaked, but after drying my housing alone in dark on shore, I rejoined the other divers and risked it for one last dive—when I finally got this lucky shot.

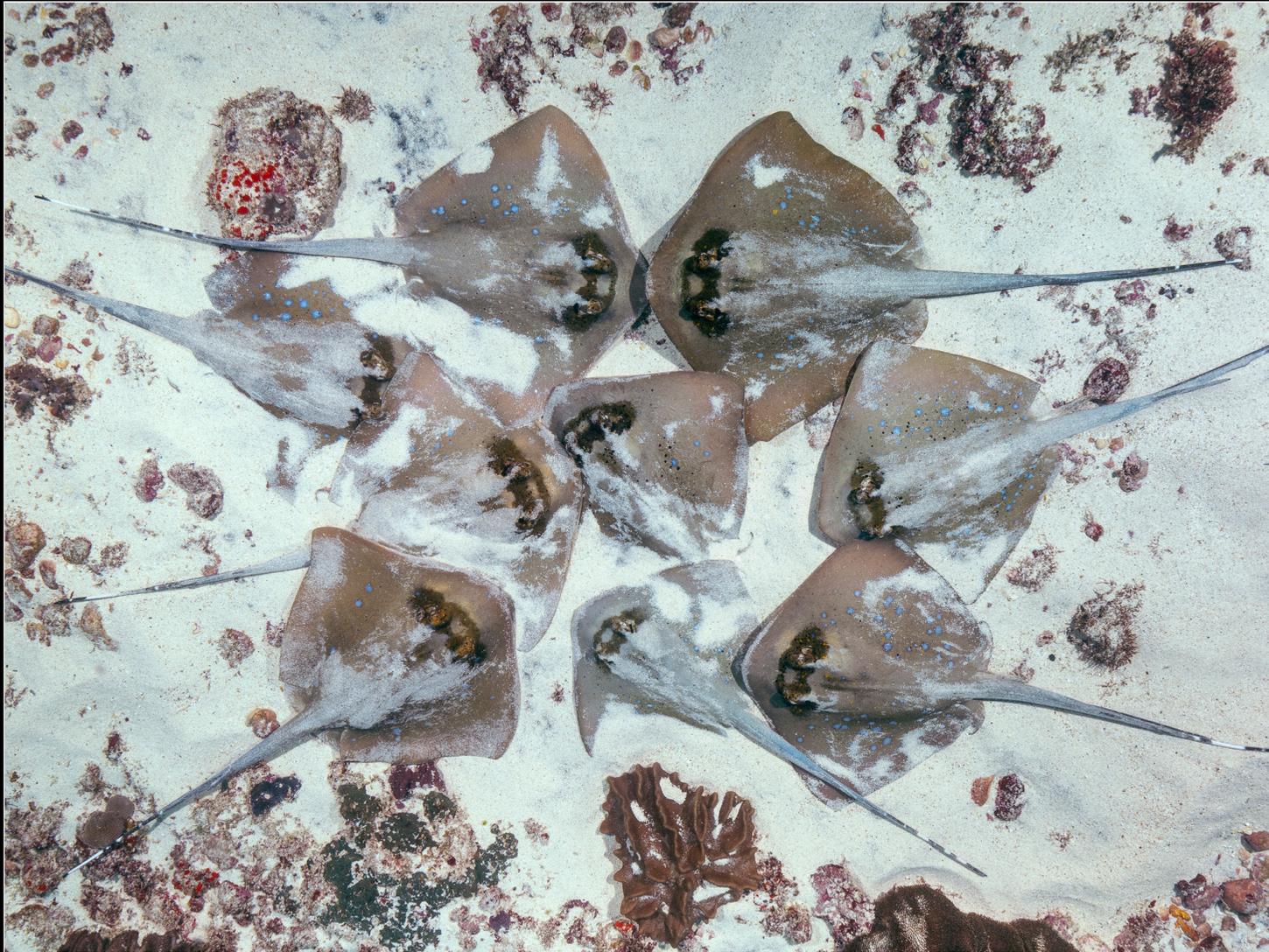
Monastery Beach, Carmel, USA

Panasonic GH5, Nauticam, OM 14-42mm F3.5-5.6 EZ, 400, f/14, 1/400, Sea & Sea YS-D3

Judge's comments: The squid run is spectacular and rare and this picture cleverly takes us into the heart of the action, focusing on this lone individual surrounded by mating pairs. Very much worth the hasty housing repair on the beach.

Alex Mustard

Up & Coming



Commended

Meeting of Minds

Keith Kirkpatrick (United States)

Manta Point in Nusa Penida, Bali, is an incredible dive site, but its accessibility and the guarantee of oceanic mantas mean it's typically crowded. I assumed I wouldn't be able to get any interesting shots of the mantas with so many divers around, so I decided to venture off the beaten path and look for other subjects. Blue-spotted stingrays had quickly become one of my favourite critters on this trip, though they aren't particularly photogenic. Almost by accident, I watched one ray spiral gracefully around a small group, then nuzzle its way into and round out the circle. I honestly wasn't focusing on capturing a unique perspective; I simply enjoyed the moment unfolding in front of me and wanted to save it and to share it.

Manta Point, Indonesia

Panasonic GH5, Nauticam, Leica DG 8-18/F2.8-4.0, 200, f/8.0, 1/160, Sea & Sea YS-D3

Judge's comments: A well seen and captured image with the right viewpoint to create a different and visually arresting image. Just the sort of confident which says I am different and here's why.

Peter Howlands

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Photo taken by: Winner Kirsty Andrews

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Compact

Category History

- 2026 Andrea Michelutti (Italy)
- 2025 Bryant Turffs (United States)
- 2024 Enrico Somogyi (Germany)
- 2023 Enrico Somogyi (Germany)
- 2022 Enrico Somogyi (Germany)
- 2021 Jack Berthomier (New Caledonia)
- 2020 Man BD (Malaysia)
- 2019 Enrico Somogyi (Germany)
- 2018 Simone Matucci (New Zealand)
- 2017 Jenny Stromvoll (Mozambique)

Compact



Category Winner

Alpine lookout

Andrea Michelutti (Italy)

After years of waiting, I dived into a cold Alpine lake near my home in northeastern Italy. Its clear, deep-blue waters rise from a spring, making it a gem among the mountains. Low nutrients favour green algae growth, the constant low temperature (around 9–11 °C) contributes to the water's clarity and unique colour. Life is sparse, but I spotted a freshwater crayfish (*Austropotamobius pallipes*) among the aquatic plants. Impetuous, it swam toward me until it was touching my wet lens. With the housing too low to use the LCD, I had to shoot blind, holding the camera in one hand and one strobe in the other. I turned off my second strobe, positioning the remaining light above the dome for natural top-down illumination. The composition I'd planned for years is built on the transition from green vegetation to deep blue water, with mountain peaks framed in Snell's Window.

Lake Cornino, Forgaria nel Friuli (Friuli Venezia Giulia), Italy

Sony RX100 M7, Marelux, Integrated, 125 , f/11, 1/50, Single Inon Z330

Judge's comments: A distinctive image with complementary colours, unambiguous composition and a great upward angle up through Snell's window to the distant mountains. A compliment to the capabilities of compacts in the right hands.

Peter Rowlands

Compact



Runner Up

Veins of the Earth

Manuel Wüthrich (Switzerland)

Cenotes have always fascinated me - these ancient windows into the underworld where light, water and geology meet. In the Cenote Dos Pisos, I discovered a chamber whose ceiling was pierced by powerful roots. They reached deep into the water like veins, connecting the subterranean world with the life above. To capture this image, we planned a special cave dive to reach the exact spot under safe and optimal conditions. For a brief moment, everything seemed to merge: stone, water, light and time. In that silence, nature felt like a single, breathing organism. My goal was to reveal this fragile connection, the vulnerability of the cenotes, their spiritual atmosphere, and the power of life that finds its way even in the most unlikely places.

Dos Pisos, Mexico

Sony DSC-RX100 VII, NA RX100VII, Nauticam WWL-C, 1600, f/2.8, 1/50, Videolight 3x X-Adventurer M8000

Judge's comments: Wow, what a good shot from the Cenotes, especially because it's taken with a compact camera. All judges were very impressed by the sheer quality of the image. We are super happy to award to as a runner up too as the composition and handling of the light inside the cave is just perfect. Well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Compact



Third

Natural barriers

Rémi Conte (France)

This image was taken in the lagoon of South Fakarava, French Polynesia, close to the southern pass, within a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. While the pass is world-famous for its spectacular shark dives, it was the lagoon that drew me back again and again. Whenever conditions were calm, I entered the water to explore these shallow reefs, remarkable for their clarity. I returned to this spot several times, spending long hours in the water waiting for the right light and surface conditions to create this split shot. From the surface, I wanted to bring together environments that are often seen separately: sky, land and ocean. Beneath the surface, coral reefs form an essential natural barrier, protecting the islands and their inhabitants. Although this place remains remarkably well preserved, it is also deeply vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

South Fakarava, French Polynesia

GoPro Hero 11 Black, SHOOT Dome Port,
GoPro fixed lens, 100 , f/2.5, 1/16000, Natural
light

Judge's comments: This image would have been a serious contender in the 'grown up' Wide angle and Coral reef categories too despite being taken on a comparatively minuscule GoPro. That is a testament to how good this image is. Pretty perfect.

Peter Rowlands

Compact



Highly commended

Nemo and Eggs

Enrico Somogyi (Germany)

To photograph a clownfish guarding its eggs in Tulamben, Bali, I used a Nauticam EMWL160 macro wide lens, perfect for capturing the intricate details up close. First, I carefully approached the anemone, maintaining a slow, steady pace to avoid disturbing the fish. With the lens, I focused on the clownfish and its eggs, ensuring the composition captured both the vibrant colors of the fish and the delicate eggs. I adjusted my camera settings for optimal lighting and fine-tuned the focus to highlight the clownfish's protective stance. The wide lens allowed me to capture the broader context of the anemone while still getting sharp details of the fish and its eggs. Patience was key, as I waited for the clownfish to become accustomed to my presence, allowing me to snap the perfect shot without disturbing its delicate family.

Tulamben, Bali, Indonesia

Sony RX100M7, Marelux RX100vii, Nauticam EMWL160, 125, f/8, 1/160, 2x Backscatter MF2

Judge's comments: Amazing perspective of this clownfish taking care of his eggs! The photographer did a great job capturing the moment, but also having the technology to make the perspective happen. The light, which is not easy to get in this small frame is also just as good! Well done!

Tobias Friedrich

Compact

Highly commended

Night drifters

Daniel Halmi (Thailand)

After drifting in the darkness for some time while watching tiny critters swim past, I noticed a larger shape moving slowly through the blackwater. As I got closer, I realised it was a box jellyfish without tentacles, which made it easier to approach. After a few test shots, the jellyfish turned and revealed a juvenile female paper nautilus riding on top of it. In that moment, excitement was an understatement of how I felt. I had never heard of a living paper nautilus being seen in the Gulf of Thailand before. This encounter is believed to be the first photographic record of a living paper nautilus in this region. A simple reminder of the vast diversity of our oceans.

Koh Tao, Thailand

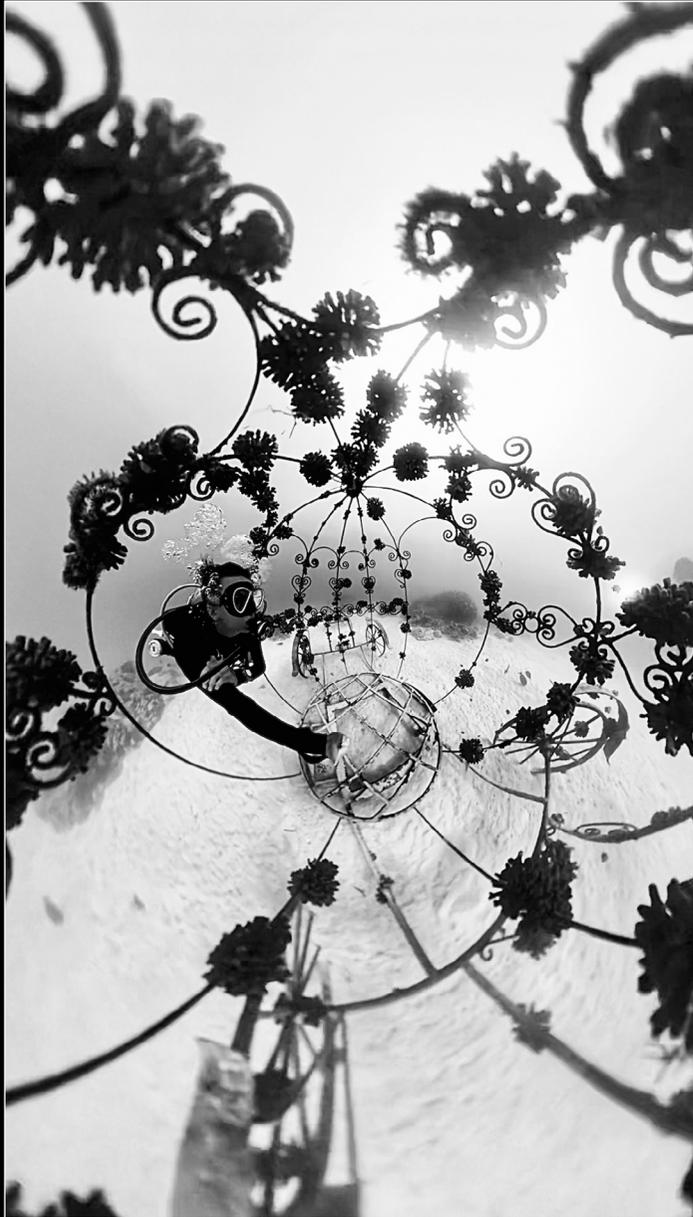
Sony RX 100 IV, Fantasea line, no additional lens, 320 , f/8, 1/250, Sea & Sea YS-D1, Backscatter Mini Flash 2

Judge's comments: Loaded is the only word to describe this jelly, with two fish inside, two fish outside and a large female argonaut! We really appreciated the wider perspective of this image.

Alex Mustard



Compact



Highly commended

Cinderella's Coral Carriage Isidora Dekalo (Germany)

You are looking at a reframed 360° image taken inside a coral propagation structure, shaped like Cinderella's carriage. The camera is held in a diver's outstretched arm (me). Because this is taken with a 360° camera, in addition to this photo, you can also even see a full video and behind the scenes footage on my Instagram @dive_into.life.

House Reef, Four Seasons Kuda Huraa Resort, Maldives

Insta360 X4, Insta360 X4 Invisible dive case,

Judge's comments: A fantastically immersive picture making use of the 360° camera perspective which takes us into the heart of the pattern of this underwater coral propagation structure.

Alex Mustard

Compact



Highly commended

The Guardian

Vadim Belakhov (Australia)

Deep inside her PVC-pipe den, a Pale Octopus (*Octopus pallidus*) tends to her clutch, gently aerating and cleaning each egg to ensure the survival of her future generation. It is a quiet display of remarkable maternal sacrifice — she rarely leaves the nest, fasting for weeks while guarding her young until they hatch, her life fading away in silence.

Mornington, Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, Australia, Australia

Olympus TG-6, Olympus OM System PT-059, none, 400, f/13, 1/80, Backscatter Hybrid Strobe HF-1

Judge's comments: A great example of how simple equipment can produce excellent results to compete at any level. It starts with the vision of the photographer, shooting to the compact's strengths with perfect lighting. A tender, yet visually strong, image.

Peter Rowlands

Compact



Commended

Arctic Mariner
Catherine Holmes (UK)

On my first expedition to the Arctic, I arrived with a specific goal, to capture a “split” image of a walrus. Having practiced in the Red Sea with a GoPro and a three-meter pole, I felt prepared, but the Arctic environment proved to be a far more formidable opponent. The challenges were relentless. Beyond the biting temperatures, the constant motion of the zodiac caused the GoPro to flip unpredictably in the wake. Furthermore, the walrus themselves were overzealous and remarkably fast. Their movements above and below the surface were erratic, requiring me to constantly retract my gear to avoid getting too close. But when reviewing I finally found the perfect frame. It captures the immense power and scale of this magnificent marine mammal, complete with piercing, engaging eye contact. It's a testament to the wild, unpredictable beauty of the north.

Phippsoya- Sjouyane-Seven Islands , Northern Svalbard. North of NordAustlandet

Go Pro Hero 13 Black, Fit Still 60m Go pro housing
- Gepuly dome port , Integral wide lens, Natural light -3meter extendable carbon fibre pole

Judge's comments: An amazing, powerful image and well worth the effort to get the perfect frame. Effort in equals images out. Great eye contact and pin sharp detail of this iconic subject.

Peter Rowlands



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Coral Triangle - Indonesia



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SeaTouch 4 Max Plus
Advance Macro Kit



SeaTouch 4 Max Plus
Deep Dive Kit



Smartphone

Category History

2026 Jack Ho (China)

"DIVEVOLK has always been dedicated to providing divers with innovative products, making underwater photography, safety, and entertainment more convenient and enjoyable. The advancement of smartphone photography systems has made capturing images increasingly easy and accessible, turning smartphones into everyday photographic tools for everyone.

However, underwater photography has long been seen as a high-threshold activity by divers. UPY is widely recognized in the industry as the most influential and far-reaching representative of underwater photography competitions. By introducing a smartphone category, UPY lowers the entry barrier, allowing underwater smartphone photographers from around the world to submit their work for the selection of top-quality pieces. This not only highlights the potential of smartphone photography to divers but also makes underwater photography more accessible. It encourages more people to create and share underwater imagery, helping to spread awareness and understanding of the ocean and diving."

Louis Chen, Marketing & Sales Dept

"Ever since shooting panoramas became available I personally have been a fan of the cameras in mobile phones. I think this technique creates unique images, especially in limited visibility, and add to that the high quality still images and 4k video footage possible from a very a small package and I find this hugely appealing.

As a result I am delighted that DIVEVOLK are sponsoring this new category in 2026; their housings are game changing and they enable the full potential of these cameras to be achieved so I am really looking forward to seeing the images in this category in 2026."

Peter Rowlands, UPY judge

The logo for DIVEVOLK, featuring the brand name in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. A registered trademark symbol (®) is positioned to the upper right of the text. The logo is centered within a white rectangular box.

Smartphone

Category Winner

The Roar

Jack Ho (China)

While shooting on the sandy seabed at 15 meters in the Lembeh Strait, Indonesia, I found this well-camouflaged frogfish patiently lying in wait for prey. I waited for at least 15 minutes. To get a clean shot against the messy background, I aimed a macro light at its head to capture the split second it opened its huge mouth. Luckily, I got the perfect moment.

Lembeh Strait, Indonesia

VIVO X100, Divevolk, 22mm, 200 , f/2.7, 1/460,
X-ADVENTURER M2000

Judge's comments: Wow! The focus, the image quality, the composition, the light and the moment are just perfect! Very well done by the photographer and an impressive showcase of the potential of the smartphone category. The clear and well deserved winner of this category.

Tobias Friedrich



Smartphone



Runner Up

The curious gaze of grey shark Clotxa (Spain)

This image was taken in the South Pass of Fakarava, inside the legendary "Wall of Sharks." Carried effortlessly by the strong current, I had no time to plan or compose, only to feel, observe, and react. Suddenly, a gray reef shark filled my frame, its gaze calm, curious, and powerful. Behind it, other sharks fade into soft blur, hinting at the hundreds surrounding us. This photograph is not about control, but about surrender: letting the ocean lead, trusting the moment, and becoming part of a living, breathing ecosystem that remains almost pristine. Drifting among these majestic predators was both humbling and exhilarating. For a brief instant, time slowed, fear dissolved, and I felt deeply connected to the wild rhythm of the sea.

Fakarava, South Pass, French Polynesia

iPhone 14 Pro Max, Divevolk SeaTouch 4 Max Plus, 24 mm, 64 , f/1.78, 1/351, Leton Power Turbo SX 6.000 lm

Judge's comments: If ever proof was needed that Smartphone cameras can produce top quality results, this it it. Pin sharp where it matters, delicate depth of field and vibrant colours combine to great effect. A game changer if ever there was one.

Peter Rowlands

Smartphone



Third

Intertidal world

Martin Stevens (United Kingdom)

Existing at the threshold of land and sea, the intertidal is a world of harsh extremes. It's also a world of enormous biodiversity, concentrated into a relatively small area, and one of my favourite places to visit. I'm also a big fan of splitshots and couldn't resist trying to see what was possible with a smartphone and dome port, and in trying to capture the diversity of the intertidal zone. This photo is of a snakelocks anemone, set amongst the kelp and colourful seaweed of the Cornish rocky shore, on a low spring tide, showing the beauty of this diverse environment on the doorstep of a major town.

Falmouth, Cornwall, UK

Apple iPhone 17 Pro, DiveVolk SeaTouch 4 Max Plus and DiveVolk Dome, Ultra Wide Lens (14 mm), 20 , f/2.2, 1/230, Dive torch

Judge's comments: As optional extras become available for Smartphone housings, so too does their capability. The use of an additional dome port allows very effective split shots to be achieved creating a visual entry from surface to underwater. Move over cameras, Smartphone cameras are here.

Peter Rowlands

Smartphone



Highly commended

Crown Gills

Ben Sarinda (Indonesia)

Mexichromis multituberculata is a dorid nudibranch, a shell-less marine gastropod mollusk in the family Chromodorididae. When I encountered this nudibranch, I carefully explored it by moving my Fotocore Snoot ST-01 torches around the subject to observe how the light working with its shape. I discovered that backlighting produced the strongest highlights on the gills and rhinophores and from the opposite side, I used another Fotocore Snoot ST-01 to add a subtle fill light to the nudi eggs, shaping the subject while maintaining a dark background. By using a Vivo X100 Pro allowed me to reduce backscatter and achieve a cleaner image.

Lembeh Strait (TK 3) , Indonesia

Vivo X 100 PRO, Divevolk Platinum, Vivo Zeiss Internal lens 233.00mm, ISO 50 , f/2.5, 1/500, Fotocore Snoot ST-01

Judge's comments: A stunning composition, natural behaviour and phenomenal detail revealed with expert lighting control.

Alex Mustard

Smartphone



Highly commended

Baby Shark

Martin Stevens (United Kingdom)

Falmouth in Cornwall is a key breeding site for nursehound sharks. It's fairly common to see adults swimming around; impressive fish, much larger than small-spotted catsharks, up to 1.6 m long but very docile. They lay eggs along the rocky shore in tidal pools, but it's rare to see a baby. I was fortunate to be exploring on a low spring tide when this little one settled right next to me. I'd been keen over the last year to see what was possible with smartphone cameras and various set-ups that can go alongside them, and had been trying a probe lens. Like probes for interchangeable lens cameras, the smartphone probe allows up to 2x macro while giving a wide view, opening up a range of possible shots. It allowed me to capture the shark up close in the wider environment it was heading out into.

Falmouth, Cornwall, UK

Apple iPhone 17 Pro, None, Neewer 18 mm 2x Macro Probe Lens, 160 , f/1.8, 1/60, Dive torch

Judge's comments: A ground-level viewpoint that just wouldn't have been possible with any other camera system. Oh, and what a cute baby shark. If only there was a song...

Alex Mustard

Smartphone



Highly commended

Travel companions

Edwar Herreño (Colombia)

I was on a diving trip with friends to Caño Island in Costa Rica, when we stoped the boat half way so we could jump into the water. I saw this tinny juvenile fish swimming along a jellyfish. I have been working as dive master for decades, but I'd never seen this before. My main camera system had a wide angle lens, so I had no choice but to use my iPhone naked (without a housing). I have all my passwords and very important info on it, but determined to get the shot, I prayed that Apple's guarantee of water resistance will hold. It was very tough to focus and take pictures without a housing, so I had to preset everything on the surface, then go down to 8-10 mts to take the shot. Back to boat I rinsed my phone with freshwater and started to pray!!

Caño Island, Costa Rica

Iphone Iphone 13, NO housing! just the camera at 10 mts, Iphone built in camera , 50 , 1.5, 1/1,295, natural

Judge's comments: A fascinating combination of subjects captured with stunning details. A reminder that the best camera is the one you have with you. I am sure Edwar will be investing in a housing for next time...

Alex Mustard

Smartphone



Highly commended

Gray Angelfish

Adrian Smith (United States)

I traveled to Key Largo, FL to have a low key dive trip to celebrate my 60th birthday with my best dive buddy, Linda. I came across this sweet Gray Angelfish on the first dive of the morning on December 21 and I spent a little while with it as we watched each other. It wasn't the least bit disturbed by my presence and I feel we had a bit of telepathy during the encounter, which helped me capture this special portrait.

Key Largo, United States

Iphone 15 pro, Sealife SportDiver Ultra Housing for mobile phone, n/a, 80, f/1.78, 1/495s, n/a

Judge's comments: Delicate shades, a traditional square format and a stand out, perfectly timed portrait with great eye contact produce a properly grown up image. This is the beginning of great era when equipment need not be the dominant force in the right hands.

Peter Howlands

Smartphone



Commended

Reef Safe Sunblock

Billy Rolls (United Kingdom)

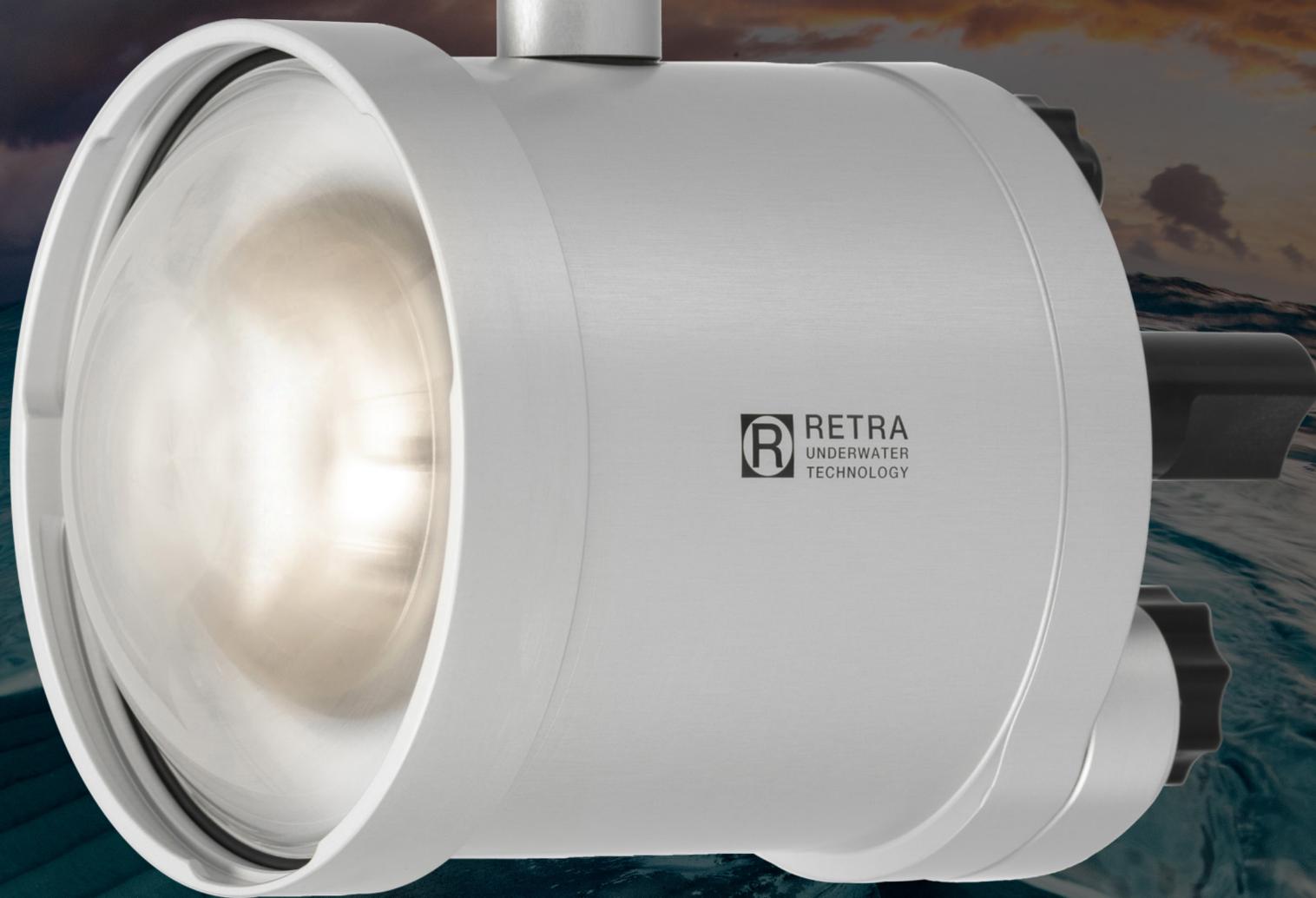
Working for the Maldives Manta Conservation Programme, we use photo-ID to identify individuals by the unique spot patterns on their ventral side. Beyond aiding research, I hope manta photographs like this showcase their beauty and enhance public engagement with conservation. This image was taken in Hanifaru Bay, a protected area and the best place in the world to see reef mantas. On this day, there were 15 individuals, but the bay can host over 200. Unfortunately, much of the species' range remains unprotected, leaving reef mantas vulnerable to extinction. Targeted fishing for gill plates is the greatest threat, while climate change, unsustainable tourism, and bycatch are also driving population declines. Protecting this iconic species requires ending the gill plate trade. In 2025, progress was made with the uplisting of all Mobulid species to CITES Appendix I, a key achievement for the Manta Trust and its global network of affiliate projects.

Hanifaru Bay, Maldives

iPhone 15, DIVEVOLK SeaTouch 4, Internal Lens, 25 , f/2.4, 1/4200, Natural Light

Judge's comments: Great capture, especially with a smartphone! It's really not easy to get sun rays perfectly with "only" a phone, but Billy has managed it perfectly! The composition is great and all the fish surrounding the manta are absolutely beautiful.

Tobias Friedrich



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British Underwater Photographer of the Year Winners

2026 Matty Smith
2025 David Alpert
2024 Jenny Stock
2023: Ollie Clarke
2022: Matty Smith
2021: Mark Kirkland
2020: Nick More
2019: Richard Barnden
2018: Grant Thomas
2017: Nick Blake
2016: Dan Bolt
2015: Matt Doggett
2003: Andy Heath
2001: Pete Atkinson
1999: Pete Atkinson
1983: Peter Rowlands
1979: Warren Williams
1976: Peter Scoones
1970: Peter Scoones
1968: Colin Doeg

Most Promising British Underwater Photographer Winners

2026 Natalie Yarrow
2025 James Lynott
2024 Sandra Stalker
2023: Theo Vickers
2022: Paul Pettitt
2021: Alice Bennett
2020: Nur Tucker
2019: Malcolm Nimmo
2018: Tony Stephenson
2017: Nicholai Georgiou
2016: Marty Engels Dunmore
2015: Mario Vitalini
2003: Andy Heath
2001: Mark Walker
1999: Jeff Collett
1987: Benny Sutton
1983: Alan Youngs
1979: Geoff Tompkinson
1976: Mike Portelly

British Underwater Photographer of the Year 2026



Rockpool Rookies

Matty Smith (Australia)

Once several weeks old and weaned from their mothers milk, elephant seal pups are abandoned by their parents on shore, left to navigate life alone. On Sealion Island in the Falklands, I watched dozens of them clamber over one another in shallow rockpools, awkwardly learning to swim, and quite engaging to my presence. I'd come here for this moment, to witness and photograph their first solo lessons in life. On the very first evening of my arrival, the sky ignited with colour. I donned my dry suit and rushed into the water, capturing a handful of frames before the light vanished. It turned out to be the defining moment of the trip, and I'm glad I didn't hesitate.

Sealion Island, The Falklands

Nikon Z9, Aquatica Digital AZ9, Nikkor Z 14-30mm F4 S, ISO200 , f/16, 1/60, 2 x Ikelite DS230

Judge's comments

Cold water contrasts with heartwarming cuteness. Southern elephant seals traverse land and sea, born on wild shores, but thriving in the frigid waters. Elephant seals were hunted remorselessly from the end of the 1700s until the 20th century, pushing them right to the brink of extinction. Their oil rich blubber was used for everything from lighting to margarine. Fortunately, the hunt was stopped just in time, and their recovery over the last 100 years is a great example of the resilience of the ocean. A beautiful and hopeful photograph.

What a cutie! I love the split image approach that the photographer took to capture this beautiful and emotionally very engaging image. The look of the baby elephant seal below the surface is just magic and a very well deserved and undisputed winner of this year's competition! Well done!

In hindsight, it's easy and obvious but when you have nearly 8,000 images vying for your eye's attention it can be a tough call. Fortunately, this year, the winner almost chose itself by being so good. Cute, puppy eyes and perfectly lit with a sunset background; top it with a perfect split level and you have the judges on their feet. Deserved congratulations.

Alex Mustard

Tobias Friedrich

Peter Rowlands

Most Promising British Underwater Photographer of the Year



Crowded House

Natalie Yarrow (United Kingdom)

Peering into the crevices of this vibrant barrel sponge, I could see several dark figures moving around like shadow puppets. This turned out to be a large colony of hinge-beak shrimps, living together in very close quarters! While somewhat of a tight squeeze, communal living suits these social and cooperative creatures, as well as providing 'safety in numbers' against predators. Further, the craggy pink walls allow for great camouflage. I selected a wide aperture so that each shrimp is rendered increasingly out of focus as the eye is drawn deeper into the sponge. Those individuals at the back are reduced to a fuzzy puzzle of white dots and stripes. I would like to thank my guide, Wix (Scuba Seraya), for finding these shrimps for me, and also for taking me back to the same spot a second time as I liked them so much, which resulted in my getting this shot.

Bali, Indonesia

Sony A7RV, Nauticam NA-A7RV, Sony FE 90mm f/2.8, 80, f/5.0, 1/200, Retra Pro Max

Judge's comments: Sometimes you don't have to shout to say 'Look at me'. You let your image do the talking and this image made the judges listen and take notice. The stepped, receding depth of field leads the eye effortlessly through the frame and back to the subject. Talent indeed.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Wide Angle

Category History

- 2026 Evan Johnston (UK)
- 2025 David Alpert (UK)
- 2024 Kat Zhou (USA)
- 2023 Theo Vickers (UK)
- 2022 Henley Spiers (UK)
- 2021 Mark Kirkland (UK)
- 2020 Arthur Kingdon (UK)
- 2019 Robert Bailey (UK)
- 2018 Grant Thomas (UK)
- 2017 Melvin Redeker (Netherlands)
- 2016 Marcus Blatchford (UK)
- 2015 Matt Doggett (UK)

British Waters Wide Angle



Category Winner

A Meeting of Giants

Evan Johnston (United Kingdom)

What began with two sharks feeding at the surface grew into five over the course of the day. As the feeding ended and the last tail seemed to fade away, I turned to find this incredible sight. The sharks had formed a tight shoal, swimming in slow, rhythmic circles before spiralling into the deep.

This behaviour, known as a torus, is believed to be a courtship ritual and a precursor to mating, though much remains a mystery. Throughout the summer, we observed multiple toruses from the boat, sometimes with nearly twenty sharks circling for hours. Witnessing this felt like stumbling upon an ancient, secret ritual performed far from the world's sight. Capturing this moment was a profound privilege, offering a rare glimpse into the private lives of these magnificent creatures.

Sea of the Hebrides, Scotland

Sony A7R iii, Nauticam NA-A7R iii, Sony FE 28-60mm f/4-5.6, 640, f/6.3, 1/400, None

Judge's comments: The sea still reveals its secrets slowly and the discovery of these toruses is the latest revelation. Traditionally, single basking shark shots were celebrated but now images of several of these large sharks, not feeding but possibly building up to a mating ritual, are a most exciting phenomenon visually and biologically. A first in UK waters.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Wide Angle



Runner Up

Dusk Encounter

Kirsty Andrews (United Kingdom)

2025 has truly been the Year of the Octopus in southern England, as these eight-armed wonders have taken over coastal reefs in significant numbers. Porthkerris in Cornwall has been a particular hotspot for divers to see them. As dusk fell and darkness started to descend, I followed a large, confident individual, patrolling and making fascinating poses as it moved. Turning a corner, it chanced upon another large octopus, and suddenly the two sprang together into this mysterious scene. My chosen slow shutter speed emphasises the dramatic movement. My guess is that it was at least in part a mating overture, as within moments the two cephalopods had enveloped each other in a tight embrace and I watched intrigued as they moved off together into the kelp forest.

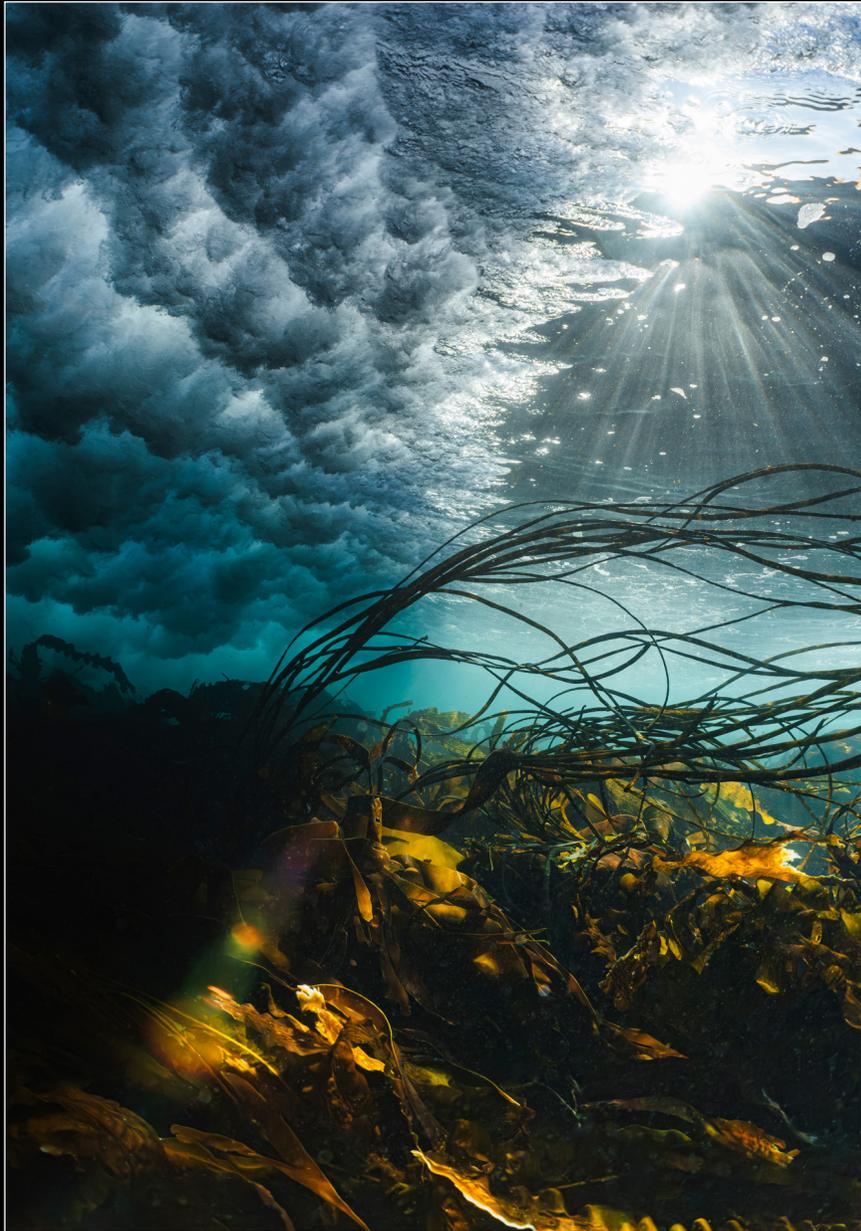
Porthkerris, Cornwall, UK

Nikon D500, Nauticam NA D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 640, f/11, 1/8, Retra Pro

Judge's comments: What a great encounter - especially having been able to take an image of octopus in the UK! Very well executed by the photographer as it's not easy to get good light in such a hectic situation. Very well chosen slow shutter speed as well, which enhanced the rapid movement too! Beautiful image !

Tobias Friedrich

British Waters Wide Angle



Third

Hold on tight!

Billy Arthur (United Kingdom)

Although this is a site close to my home that I've snorkelled many times, the shallow, high-energy conditions posed a real chance of scratching my dome port! But I knew, that on this day, the conditions would align perfectly to make it worth attempting the shot. I braced both myself and the camera to avoid being rolled by the surge into barnacle-covered rocks. I often like to incorporate both light and dark elements in my images, and the shadow cast by the breaking waves gave me the perfect opportunity to do so here. The thongweed helps convey the energy and motion produced by the swell, and I framed it to add another layer of separation within the image. It being a shallow site allowed me to rely on natural light, which I prefer when possible. Thankfully no dome ports were harmed in the making of this image.

Boddam Voe, Shetland Islands, Scotland

Sony A7riii, Nauticam, Sont 28-60mm F4-5.6, 1250, f/13, 1/500, Natural light

Judge's comments: The drama of British seas. Beautiful light, golden kelp, restless waves and mysterious shadows combined in a single frame to tell tall tales of the sea.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Wide Angle



Highly
commended

Devon Blue

David Alpert (United Kingdom)

This photo began life in the gym! Holding onto a rope behind a moving fishing vessel while managing a full camera rig was a physical challenge. The camera was pushed hard against my face by the oncoming wall of water, just one finger could be spared - for the trigger. This pod of dolphins were cruising the still, calm water off the North Devon coast. It was a beautiful sunny day. "News got out" that I was in the water and one or two of the more adventurous dolphins made some close passes to check me out. A fantastic experience and not common in UK waters.

North Devon Coast, United Kingdom

Canon 5D MKiii, Nauticam , Canon Lens EF 16-35mm 1:2.8 L III, 200 , f/9, 1/400 , Natural light

Judge's comments: A strong contender from the start, this is a special image for UK waters. Clean reflections and lovely dappled light on the subject lift it straight off the screen to the judges' eyes. Well worth the physical effort that was needed to keep up with these beautiful creatures.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Wide Angle



Highly
commended

Watch Your Fingers!

James Lynott (United Kingdom)

Back story: The seas around St. Abbs have some incredible scenic diving (and wrecks), it is home to many wonderful marine species, one of which is the Atlantic Wolffish. In July 2025 I had the chance to join Mike Clark on one of his famous Wolffish diving trips. The dive was inside the St. Abbs Voluntary Marine Reserve and as soon as we were underwater Mike led the way to an area home to at least 5 of these weird looking fish. This one in particular was very inquisitive and clearly used to being visited by divers. I just needed to rub my fingers together and it would come right out to investigate, and sometimes got a little close for comfort! I was able to quickly snap a couple of shots each time it came out to investigate, but this was certainly my favourite of the day.

St Abbs, Scotland

OM System OM-D E-M1 MkIII, AOI UH-EM1III, Lumix 8mm Fisheye, 250 , f/8, 1/60, Sea & Sea YS01-Solis (x2) w/ dome diffusers

Judge's comments: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and we saw the beauty in this unusual shot of a Wolffish out of its lair. A charismatic subject with good eye contact and well balanced light, it kept saying 'Choose me'.

Peter Rawlands

British Waters Wide Angle



Highly commended

Turbulence

Henley Spiers (United Kingdom)

What if the most impressive animal you could encounter in British waters wasn't a fish or a whale, but a bird? That was exactly how it felt to me in the frigid sea at Britain's northernmost point. The dark water was repeatedly shattered by the dives of dozens of northern gannets, plunging after their prey. Visibility vanished as the birds hit the surface with astonishing precision, streaking underwater in cascades of bubbles. My heart pounded with adrenaline as I scanned the turbid water, until the gaze of a gannet met mine, its blue-yellow eyes unmistakable even through the haze. The aim was to convey the explosive movement of the hunt using a slow shutter and intentional camera movement. I understood the technical settings required, but the gannets' speed and unpredictability made success elusive. After many failed frames, this image emerged as the one that best captured the energy and intensity of the moment.

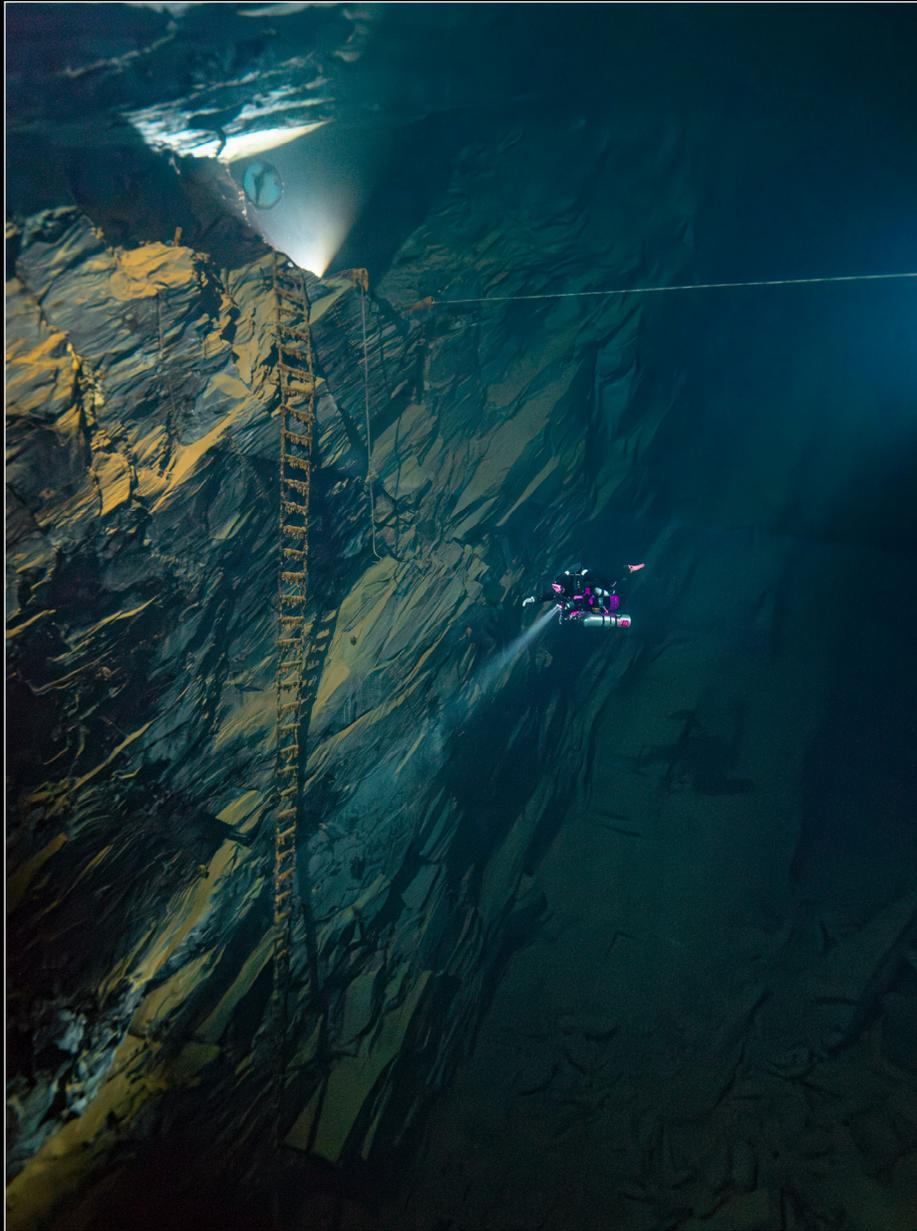
Shetland, Scotland, United Kingdom

Nikon D850, Nauticam, Nikon 28-70mm with Nauticam WACP-1, 80, f/22, 1/8, 2 x ONE UW 160X

Judge's comments: Attitude and art come together in this dramatic image of one of the top predators in British waters.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Wide Angle



Highly commended

Ladder To The Deep

Guy Trees (United Kingdom)

The scale of this now hollow mountain never fails to impress me. My buddy and model, Aithne, hovers silently beside the chain ladder, dwarfed by the vast, shadowed space and the mine floor some 20 metres below. Seen from this perspective, the ladder becomes a simple marker of scale, hinting at the immense volume of rock that was removed during the mine's working life.

While mine diving in the UK is less well known than in some parts of continental Europe, I hope images like this show that we have extraordinary underground dive sites of our own. With the right training and the necessary landowner permissions, these forgotten spaces reveal a dramatic and rarely seen side of the underwater world.

Slate Mine, North Wales, United Kingdom

Nikon D850, Nauticam NA D850, Nikon 14-24mm f2.8, 6400, f/5, 1/80, ERA underwater 50k lm, Big Blue 33k lm, 3x 15k lm

Judge's comments: Guy had a similar image in the last year's competition, but this shot is so impressive that it insisted to be included. The composition and lighting are just excellent. I think with a bit more clarity, structure and contrast in processing the image to get even better it could have finished even higher!

Tobias Friedrich

British Waters Wide Angle



Highly
commended

Reaching out

Dan Bolt (United Kingdom)

These large urchins are very common on many dive sites around the UK, and I wanted to show them in a different light to how we usually see them, as sedentary animals. Using just a standard diver's torch for illumination, it took a good deal of patience, trial and error to eventually hit upon the correct technique to capture this sort of image. Given the low numbers of photos one can take on a dive, and the even lower 'hit rate' of long exposure photography I am very pleased to have this one awarded.

Loch Carron, Scotland, UK

OM System OM-1, AOI UH-OM1, Olympus 12-42mm, 200, f/13, 1/2, Torch

Judge's comments: A highly original interpretation of the humble sea urchin and the movement of its exploratory tube feet during this half second exposure.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Macro

Category History

2026 Tom Ingram (UK)

2025 Dan Bolt (UK)

2024 Jenny Stock (UK)

2023 Kirsty Andrews (UK)

2022 Dan Bolt (UK)

2021 Malcolm Nimmo (UK)

2020 Laura Storm (UK)

2019 Arthur Kingdon (UK)

2018 Henley Spiers (UK)

2017 Kirsty Andrews (UK)

2016 Dan Bolt (UK)

2015 Trevor Rees (UK)

British Waters Macro



Category Winner

Mum

Tom Ingram (United Kingdom)

2025 was undoubtedly the Year of the Octopus. Being such an imposing creature underwater, these intelligent and charismatic animals had brought delight not just to me but many fellow UK divers. Throughout 2025 I've been treated to an array of natural behaviour, ranging from hunting pray to mating, but in this case I wanted to capture a females final act of selflessness, as after she lays her eggs she diligently guards, cleans and wafts oxygen rich water over them to keep them healthy. During this time which can last for several months, she doesn't leave their side not even to feed herself, and once the eggs hatch she will sadly die.

In this bitter sweet and quite poignant time I spent with her, I wanted to try and capture the narrative of her final few weeks by shooting her face on, and encircling her offspring in the background.

Porthkerris Beach, Cornwall , United Kingdom

Canon G7X Mark iii, Isotta housing, Nauticam CMC2 Wet Lens, 500 , f/11, 1/200 , 2x Inon Z-330 Strobes

Judge's comments: Wonderful overall sharpness of the image and great capture of the moment when the octopus surrounds itself with its arms. Especially having such an amazing encounter from the UK makes the image very special as well as the excellent execution.

UPY 2026

Tobias Friedrich

British Waters Macro



Runner Up

Riding the Storm

Sandra Stalker (United Kingdom)

Blackfaced blennies are flirty little things at certain times of the year, the females are also very camouflaged against their weedy backgrounds. On this dive under Swanage pier there were pairs everywhere doing their little dances, posing, and flitting about. I had been trying to get a shot of one or both together for the whole of the dive without intruding on their business too much, but they gave me the run around. Then as the dive neared to an end I came across a female just sitting waiting for her date to show up. I used a long exposure, ICM and a blue light on the red weed, and a snoot on the black faced blenny to freeze her, showing off her gorgeous form and separating her from the theatrical landscape behind.

Swanage Pier Dorset, England

Sony A7RIV, Nauticam NA A7RIV, Sony FE 28-60mm F4-5.6 Lens , 50 , f/22, 2/5 sec, Backscatter miniflash 2 x2

Judge's comments: An exquisite example of the artistic potential there is in British waters. Imaginatively lit and achieved, it moves British waters images into a new and exciting level of possibility. Goodbye black backgrounds; so often the negative portrayal of British waters.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Macro



Third

New Life

Dan Bolt (United Kingdom)

I had to be careful, while getting this shot, not to disturb the attendant adult scorpionfish who was protecting their newly laid eggs. I wanted to capture the tiny, still-forming eyes within each little round embryo, while at the same time having enough depth of field to show just how densely packed they were in the nest. So I decided to go for focus stacking, and this image is a stack of 8 separate photos blended in camera. It took me quite a few attempts, but I finally grabbed the shot I wanted, and on returning to the same spot 24 hours later I was pleased to see the adult still in attendance, my gentle approach had paid off.

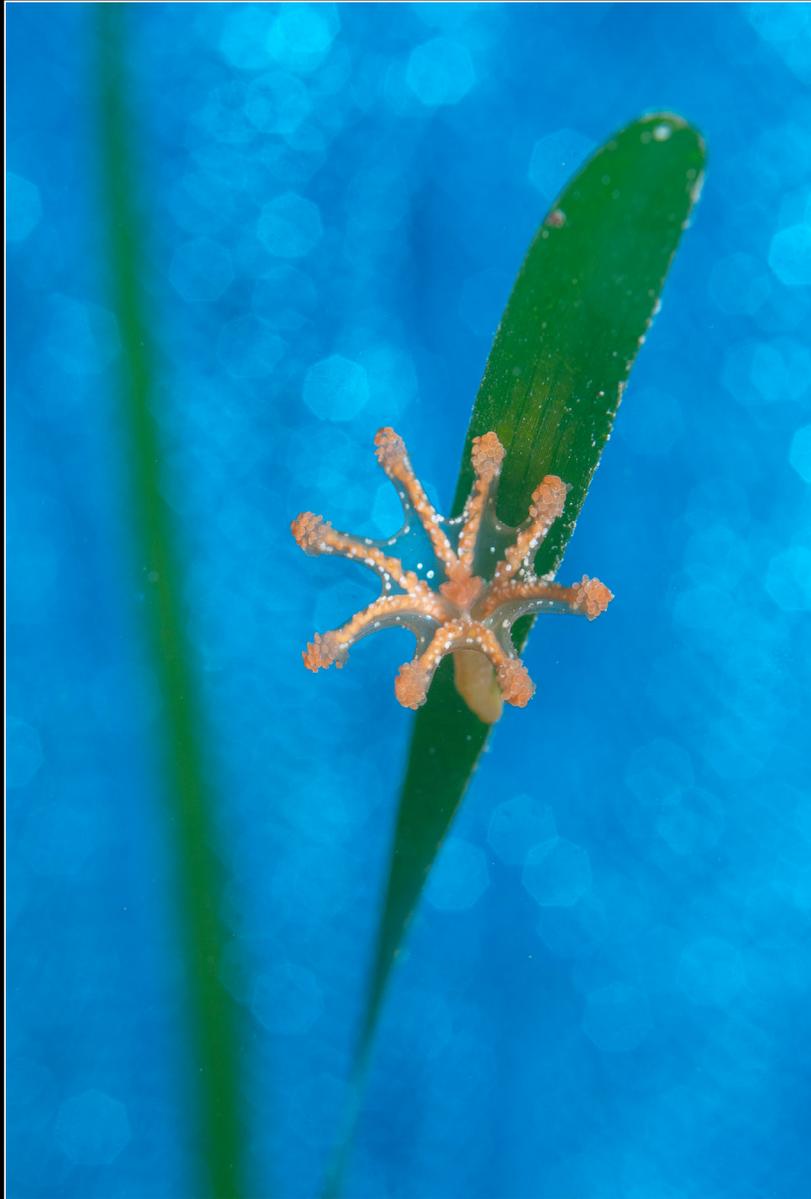
Manse Point, UK

OM System OM-1, AOI UH-OM1, Panasonic 45mm macro, 800, f/8, 1/100, Sea & Sea YS-D3 Duo x2

Judge's comments: The graphic power of spherical fish eggs, captured in razor-sharp details by underwater focus stacking. A more interesting placement of the single, empty egg could have elevated the composition.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Macro



Highly commended

Anchored in the blue

Simon Temple (United Kingdom)

This image marks my progress exploring bubble bokeh techniques in UK waters. My aim was to achieve a clean, pleasing bubble effect in-water, without relying on post-processing. Early experiments with bubble-capable vintage lenses proved frustrating. Manual-only controls made them difficult to use in underwater housings, and results were often soft. Just over a year ago, I shifted to wide apertures on lenses better suited to underwater photography and found that, under the right conditions, they could also produce strong bubble effects. A centrally positioned single strobe and carefully placed reflective material behind the subject delivered the most consistent results, while allowing a slightly smaller aperture to improve depth of field. Even with experience, this technique requires dozens of subtle lighting and distance variations. The seagrass beds around St Martins provided a reliable subject, and over three days of low-water snorkelling I was able to capture this image.

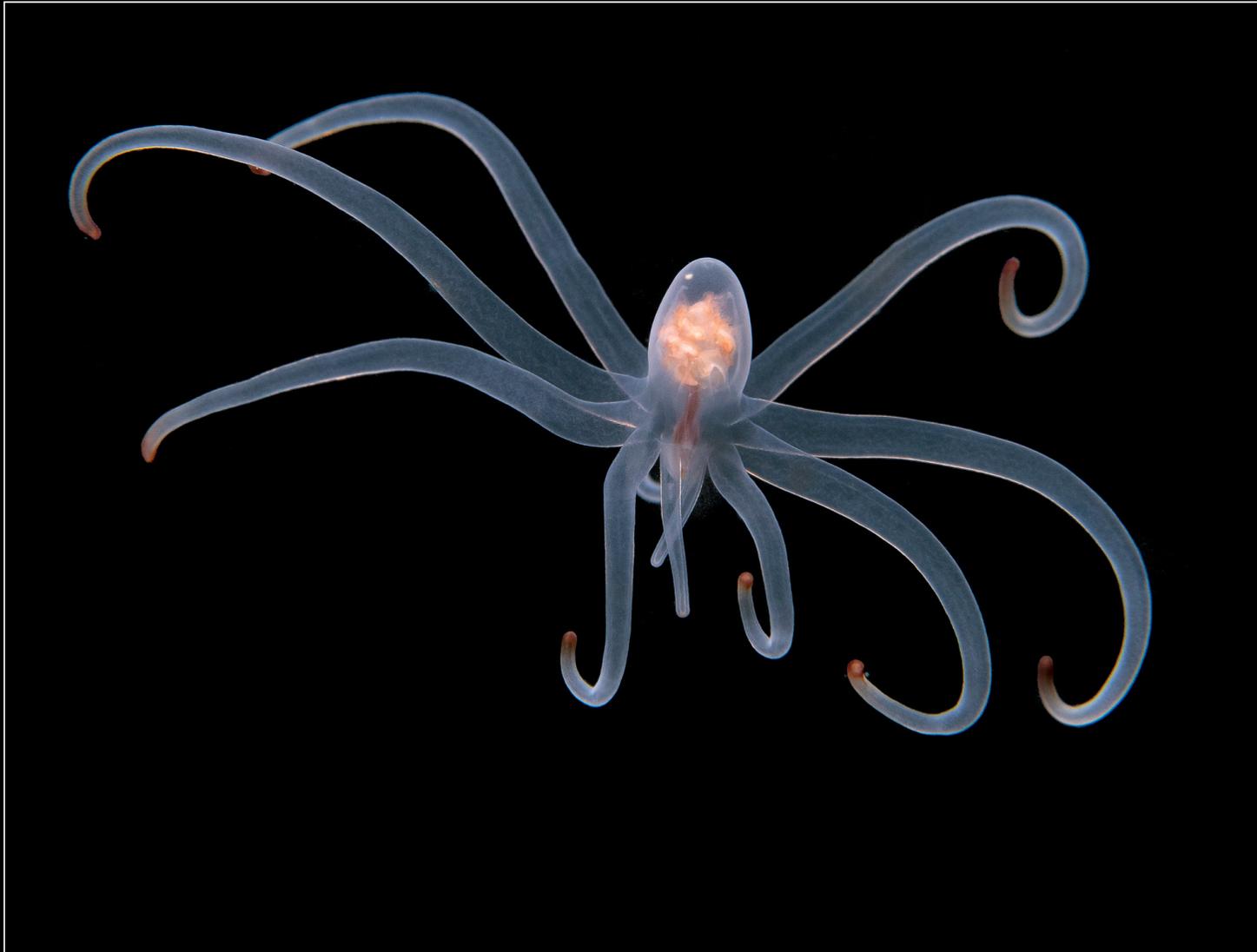
St Martins, Isles of Scilly, England

Nikon D500, Aquatica AD500, 60mm, 400, f/11, 1/160, Single Inon Z-240 Type 4

Judge's comments: A fresh colour palette of greens and blues contrast with the warm coloured stalked jellyfish in this precisely constructed composition of simple subject matter.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Macro



Highly
commended

Anemone polyp

Kirsty Andrews (United Kingdom)

In recent years I've so enjoyed exploring the world of blackwater diving, which has drawn my attention to juvenile animals inhabiting the water column before they settle on the ocean floor. Back home in the UK, of course we have juveniles too, and I've spent many a happy safety stop looking for them. Anemone polyps like this one were relatively common on my midsummer Scottish dives. Capturing these tiny animals as they twist and turn was a challenge but a fun and rewarding one.

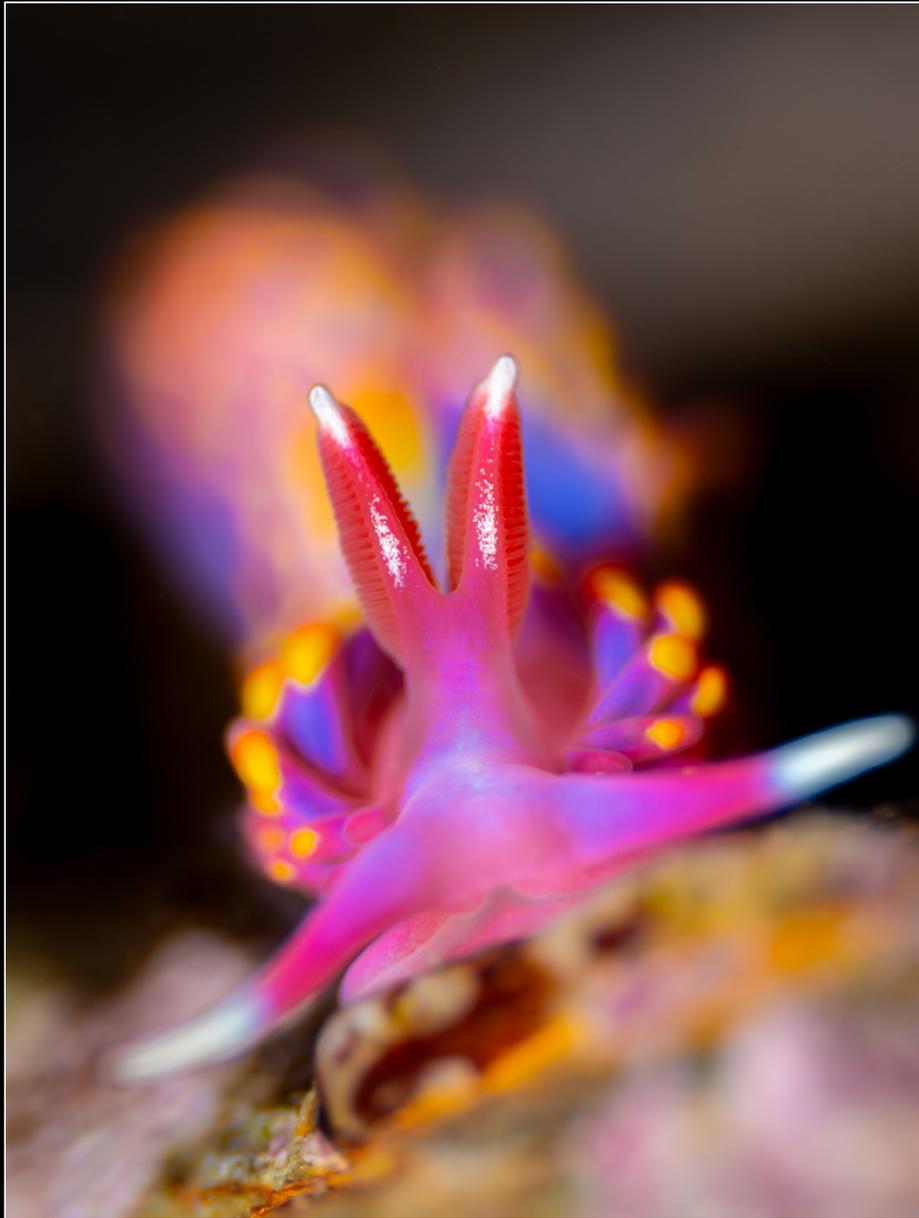
Outer Hebrides, Scotland, UK

Nikon D500, Nauticam NA D500, Nikon 60mm, 400, f/18, 1/250, 2x Retra Pros

Judge's comments: Blackwater images, so often the product of tropical locations, are now possible worldwide, including British waters. The subjects are there in all temperatures. This is an exciting image heralding a new dawn in this style of photography. The future is bright and full of potential.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Macro



Highly commended

Rainbow slug

Martin Stevens (United Kingdom)

As colourful and beautiful as any creature I've seen, rainbow sea slugs look almost unreal. They were first seen in the UK in 2022 and although still rare, are quickly growing in frequency in Cornwall. I've been lucky to see more than half a dozen and they never cease to take my breath away. I shot this head on as the slug made its way over rocks and seaweed. As incredible as they are, the caveat with seeing more of these wonderful creatures is that they are likely a sign of changing climates and warming oceans. In the last decade I've seen many changes in the marine environment locally, such that it's hard to know what the future make up of this critical rocky shore and kelp environment will be. Not that I'll ever get tired of seeing a rainbow slug, however!

Falmouth, Cornwall, UK

OM System OM1 MII, AOI, OM 90 mm Macro, 200, f/7.1, 1/250, One Sea and Sea YS-D3 MII

Judge's comments: Climate change may well be a worrying trend but the arrival of these gorgeous creatures provides a positive twist. Perfectly composed and lit with delicate bokeh, this was a stand out image that got better with viewing. A chance to look on the bright side of life.

Peter Rowlands

British Waters Macro



Highly
commended

Catshark Pup

Ryan Stalker (United Kingdom)

Chesil Beach had been calm, clear and alive with creatures all week. I chose to snorkel that night to try and get closer to the creatures coming out of the darkness. We were primarily in the water looking for the large squid that come in around these months. Getting in without the scuba kit can allow for closer encounters with shy creatures. The squid were there but the creature that stood out was this tiny Catshark feeding off the worms and small prawns spiralling around in the darkness. At around 8cm in length this Catshark had likely hatched that night and it was hungry. I have never seen such a young catshark before and never free swimming in total darkness over 10 metres of water. A challenging image to take of such a small subject whilst snorkelling. We came out buzzing after such a beautiful experience.

Chesil Cove, Dorset, United Kingdom

Sony A7R IV, Nauticam, Sony FE 28-60mm & Wet wide WWL-1B, 250, f/18, 1/160, Two off Inon Z330

Judge's comments: A baby cat shark is kitten-cute in this image. Definitely the most adorable subject we've had from British seas.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Macro



Commended

Who's a pretty boy

Saeed Rashid (United Kingdom)

These amazing little fish can often seem hanging around the pier legs of my local dive site, Swanage Pier. But in the summer months, the male black faced blenny puts on his stunning mating colours, hoping to make himself desirable to females and definitely making him an irresistible subject for anyone with a camera. They will often be very obliging and pose for you as well.

Swanage Pier, Dorset, United Kingdom

Sony A7RV, Nauticam, Sony 90mm , 200 , f/5.6, 200, Inon Z330

Judge's comments: Stunning shot from the British Waters category! It is really amazing, especially for me who never dived in British Waters, how diverse this sea actually is! The image has a very nice bokeh with only little depth of field, which I truly admire. The highlights in the picture could be a bit reduced but otherwise the composition and overall quality is just perfect.

Tobias Friedrich

British Waters Living Together

Category History

2026 Valerie Reid (Netherlands)
2025 Dan Bolt (UK)
2024 Kirsty Andrews (UK)
2023 Dan Bolt (UK)
2022 Lewis Jefferies (UK)
2021 Kirsty Andrews (UK)
2020 Dan Bolt (UK)
2019 Victoria Walker (UK)

This category showcases the coexistence of nature and human activities on the UK seabed.

The Crown Estate is driving the sustainable development of the seabed around England, Wales and Northern Ireland for the benefit of the nation. Our role is central to supporting the delivery of the UK's net zero agenda, including growing offshore wind, supporting the development of carbon capture and hydrogen markets, alongside facilitating the development of other sectors involving the seabed. The demand for marine space is growing at an unprecedented rate.

We work collaboratively with others to accelerate the responsible development of the seabed, while helping the country optimise the economic, social and environmental potential of the marine environment.



The British Waters Living Together category is sponsored by The Crown Estate

British Waters Living Together

Category winner

Life Under the Pier

Valerie Reid (Netherlands)

Last summer, I was fortunate to dive in my native west coast of Scotland after many years, and this pier dive was a particular highlight. The man-made steel piles provide a great substrate for marine life to grow and flourish. I managed to find a pile where the dead man's fingers soft coral had its polyps out. I chose a close-focus wide-angle perspective, using Seacam mini dome with a fisheye lens and Retra strobes in the "12 and 6 o'clock" position. Shooting at an extreme upward angle to capture the pile's full height, keeping it vertically centred for a strong symmetrical image. I was delighted to capture this magnificent scene of British marine life, and especially thankful to UPY judges awarding my image as the winner ! I dedicate this image to the late Martin Edge, who taught and inspired me to appreciate the photographic opportunities under piers and jetties.

Scottish Hebrides, Scotland

Nikon D500, Seacam, Tokina 10-17mm, 400 , f/9, 125, Retra strobes

Judge's comments: A stunning combination of colour and light, both expertly controlled in a flawless composition by Valerie Reid.

Alex Mustard



British Waters Living Together



Runner up

Mr & Mrs

Dan Bolt (United Kingdom)

Last year I purchased several vintage, or no longer in production, wet-lenses and had a lot of fun experimenting. This shot was taken with the tiny Inon bugeye lens which gives an extreme distortion at a tiny working distance. Using the small AOI poly-carbonate housing is definitely an advantage when getting up close to subjects, and these two velvet swimming crabs weren't too bothered by my intrusion. I also decided to use a single strobe with dual fibre snoot to slim down my rig further. I love the combination of the verdant green water, and a vibrant and engaging subject.

St. Catherines, UK

OM System OM-1, AOI UH-OM1, Olymous 12-50mm + Inon bugeye wet lens, 1600, f/14, 1/10, Sea & Sea YS-D1 with dual fibre snoot

Judge's comments: Such a nice small encounter with these two crabs in a pipe! The light from the camera is really good and the photographer definitely captured a great pose. The composition is especially nice, framed by the pipe in the top and the claws of the crabs on the bottom, it almost looks like a porthole. Great image !

Tobias Friedrich

British Waters Living Together

Third

Crowded congers

Kirsty Andrews (United Kingdom)

The St Dunstan wreck in Dorset is well worth a visit, full of life as well as interesting structures, being a bucket dredger originally, which was commandeered as a minesweeper in the first World War and then itself sunk by a U-Boat mine in 1917. On this dive I was immediately surprised by free-swimming congers roaming through the tumble of old dredging machinery, and then surprised even more by this tightly-packed group. It was actually quite difficult to shoot as the congers had made their home in a small crack in the hull, which is not obvious from this angle. I just managed to reach my camera into the available space and shot blindly, hoping to light the faces of the congers and the schooling bib behind them.

St Dunstan wreck, Dorset, UK

Nikon D500, Nauticam NA D500, Tokina 10-17mm, 800 , f/11, 1/30, 2x Retra Pros

Judge's comments: Marine life makes use of any structure underwater whether natural or man-made and this group of congers, captured with dramatic lighting confirms the case on this wreck. A visually arresting image with great eye contact and topped with the shoal of Bib/Pouting in the background. Bang on message.

Peter Howlands



British Waters Living Together



Highly commended

Moored in Feathers

Malcolm Nimmo (UK)

During our regular diving trips to Lochcarron, we are privileged to experience its abundant and diverse marine life and associated vivid colours and forms. Soft coral encrusted reefs, kelp forests and flame shell beds all act as natural ecosystems for marine life. In addition, floating and underwater structures act as artificial surfaces allowing the colonisation of marine life, as well as providing refuges within. One such structure is a moored barge (which is often covered in plumose anemones, hydroids, sea fan worms and sponges) with its associated structures, including the securing ropes and mooring blocks. This underwater image captures a mooring block and associated equipment which has become an important habitat for marine life, particularly the colourful featherstar (*Antedon bifida*) providing a rich and colourful underwater display.

Lochacarron, Scotland

Nikon D500, Nauticam D500, Sigma 15mm f/2.8, 400, f/8, 1/80, 2 x INON 330

Judge's comments: Visually bang on with an especially strong contrast between man made strength and delicate pastel marine life. Photographically the diagonals add power while the slightly upward angle and perfectly balanced light entertain the judge's eye. Absolutely lovely.

Peter Rowlands

British Waters Living Together



Highly commended

Shelter on the Nevada

Tash Yates (United Kingdom)

This image was taken on the wreckage of the Nevada, lying just north of Coll in the Inner Hebrides. The velvet crab is tucked into corrugated asbestos sheeting, where the regular ridges form patterns that resemble waves on the surface. That similarity felt apt, as the swell was still moving through the site even at depth. The swell shifted me back and forth by a metre or more, making the shot difficult and forcing me to tuck myself into a gap to hold steady. The Nevada gradually broke up after grounding and has continued to degrade over time, leaving scattered debris rather than a single intact hull. What remains is man-made material reworked by the sea, now providing shelter and structure that species like this crab use as their home.

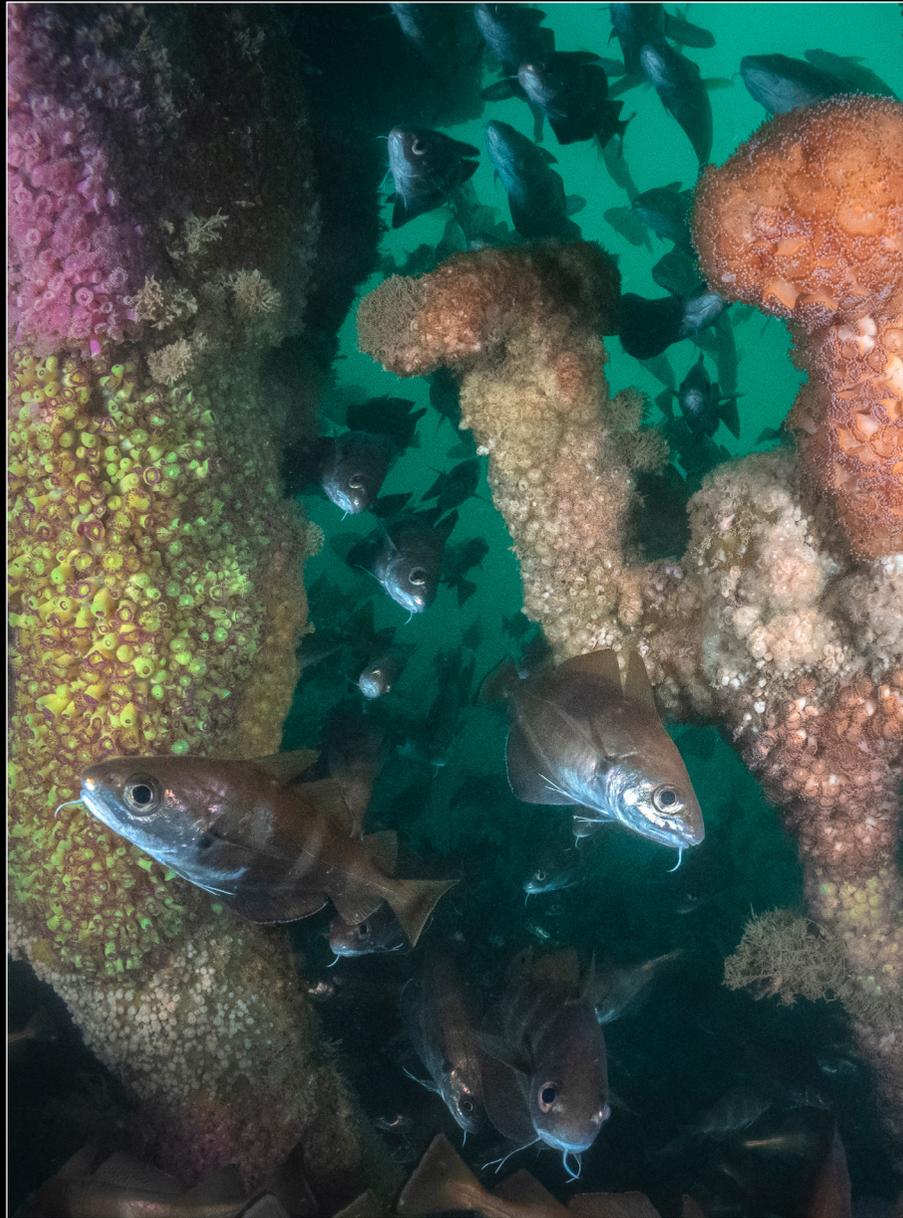
Wreck of the Nevada, Coll , Scotland

Sony A7Siii, Nauticam NA-A7SIII, FE 28-60mm F4 - 5.6, 250 , f/5, 1/100, INON Z-240

Judge's comments: A wonderfully observed scene, precisely framed by Tash Yates to contrast the swimming crab against the curves in the sheets.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Living Together



Highly commended

Baygitano engine fish

Kirsty Andrews (United Kingdom)

This image illustrates one reason I love wreck diving. The rusty structure is to me clearly identifiable as the crankshafts of a triple expansion engine, in this case of the WW1 casualty the Steamship Baygitano in Lyme Bay. Yet no actual metal is visible as every inch is covered in stunningly coloured jewel anemones and fish have entirely taken over, bib swarming through the mechanical scene. The British seabed at its most memorable.

SS Baygitano, Lyme Bay, Dorset, UK

Nikon D500, Nauticam NA D500, Nikon 60mm and Nauticam EMWL 160 degree optic, 2000 , f/16, 1/30, 2x Retra Pros

Judge's comments: A celebratory image of profuse marine life inhabiting every surface of this British wreck visually enhanced by a seemingly chaotic shoal of bib/pouting captured perfectly in a pleasing and well lit formation. Living together in beautiful harmony.

Peter Howlands

British Waters Living Together



Highly commended

Edible Crab on the E-49

Tash Yates (United Kingdom)

This photograph was taken on HMS E-49, a British submarine that struck a mine and sank on 12 March 1917. All 33 crew were lost, and the wreck is now designated as a war grave. Diving a site like this carries a sense of responsibility, but it is also impossible to ignore how completely the structure has become part of the surrounding environment. Despite a week of truly bad weather, we reached Balta Sound, just east of Unst in Shetland, and found unexpectedly clear, blue water below the surface. The wreck now supports a wide range of marine life, including numerous edible crabs. This individual had taken up position beneath the cog of an anchor winch, using it as a sort of home, within a site shaped equally by history and time.

E-49, Shetland, Scotland

Sony A7Siii, Nauticam NA-A7SIII, FE 28-60mm F4 - 5.6, 640, 6.3, 1/160, INON Z-240

Judge's comments: Great lighting reveals both the details in the bevelled wheels and the crab sheltering beneath.

Alex Mustard

British Waters Living Together



Commended

Up side down anchor

Terry Griffiths (United Kingdom)

I have been visiting this upside down anchor for 20 years , watching it become festooned in plumose anemones and then watching nudi-branches devouring them and leaving it barren. And then enjoying the cycle starting again, although it took many years for the anemones to grow to replace those which had been eaten. This is what is special about diving close to home, you have the rare perspective of seeing the passage of time on the underwater world.

Babbacombe Torquay, England

Canon R7, Nauticam NA-R7, Tokina 10-17mm, 400 , f/18, 1/125, Retra Pro

Judge's comments: Profuse life on an iconic subject, soft lighting complements the delicate subjects and an upward angle adds subtle power. Eye catching and bang on message.

Peter Howlands



The Save Our Seas Foundation supports scientific research and conservation efforts to better understand our oceans, and we invest in education and storytelling as the most powerful way to inspire action, and bring about sustainable and effective change. From its origins funding just five projects over 22 years ago, the Foundation now supports over 600 research, conservation, education, and impactful communication projects in more than 100 countries worldwide, all focused on threatened marine wildlife and their habitats.

To find out more about the Foundation, visit [saveourseas.com](https://www.saveourseas.com)



The Save Our Seas Foundation Marine Conservation

Category History

2026 Khaichuin Sim (Malaysia)
2025 Robert Marc Lehmann (Germany)
2024 Nuno Sá (Portugal)
2023 Alvaro Herrero Lopez-Beltran (Spain)
2022 Thien Nguyen Ngoc (Vietnam)

Images have a profound capacity to affect how people view the world, and at the Save Our Seas Foundation we are all about encouraging positive change in how people view and interact with the marine environment. We have been dedicated to protecting life in our oceans, especially sharks, for 20 years, with around 480 marine conservation projects supported in over 85 countries. As such we are delighted to partner with the Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year award, which is uniquely placed to highlight issues our oceans are facing and inspire change.

Dr James Lea, CEO of the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF)



The Marine Conservation category is sponsored by the Save Our Seas Foundation

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Category Winner

Where innocence meets tradition Khaichuin Sim (Malaysia)

In the Faroe Islands, the annual pilot whale hunt known as Grindadráp, remains one of the world's most controversial traditions. Seen by locals as a cultural heritage and source of food, it is condemned globally for its brutality and impact on marine life. In this poignant scene, a young boy sits atop a slain whale amid blood-red waters, a haunting reflection of how tradition, identity, and ethics collide. It captures not just a moment, but a generational question: what should be preserved, and what should change?

Hvítnes, Faroe Islands

Sony Sony A7RM2, Sony FE 85mm F1.4 GM, 800 , f/2.5, 1/8000, No Lighting

Judge's comments: A sad but powerful image which asks more questions than it answers. The message must be that traditions such as these have no place in modern society regardless of the food justification. Photography has the power to bring change.

Peter Rawlands

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Runner up

Get Me Outta Here!

Ross Makulec (United States)

After spending 40 minutes documenting an underwater cleanup effort by the guides from Lembeh Resort, we ascended and decided to refocus our efforts on the large patch of trash floating at the surface. Almost immediately, the dive center manager, Charlie, shouted that he had spotted a sargassum frogfish amongst the refuse. While the guides continued to pick up trash, I followed this frogfish as it swam from plastic to plastic, making its home not among the sargassum seaweed for which it is named, but the detritus we discard without thought. My goal was to capture this unique species in its unnatural home in order to highlight the continued struggle the ocean and its inhabitants face due to the waste produced by human society.

Lembeh Island, Indonesia

Sony A1, Nauticam NA-A1, Canon 8-15 Fisheye, Metabones adapt, Kenko 1.4x TC, 1600, f/14, 1/60, Backscatter MF2 x 2

Judge's comments: Ocean plastic pollution is a well-known issue and one that isn't solved. Fresh images like this, contrasting a fascinating frogfish against the trash will continue to promote this cause.

Alex Mustard

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Thrid

Rescued at CESTHA

Ilaria Mariaguilia Rizzuto (Italy)

This image is part of a photographic reportage produced at the CESTHA marine rescue centre in Italy, documenting the daily work behind marine wildlife rehabilitation. The turtle is a large adult female, estimated to be around 45 years old, being moved from the therapy tank into a tub for transport to the sea after months of care. Her release took place within an hour, just off the coast of Ravenna. My goal was to show the human side of conservation: coordination, responsibility and effort.

Ravenna, Italy

Sony A7RV, no, CANON 8-15, 2500, f/4, 1/400, Natural light

Judge's comments: A very powerful image that all judges immediately liked! The photographer did a great job capturing the intense moment of handling a huge loggerhead turtle and how much physical power is required, as can be seen in the faces of the people, while still having to carefully manage the animal. The composition also turned out very nice with the majority of the action in the golden ratio. Well done !

Tobias Friedrich

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Highly commended

From late cretaceous till 21st Century

Gaurav Pramod Patil (India)

During the late Cretaceous period, the area where the Mumbai resides today had active volcanoes. It created the basalt rock, on which the city is built. But a part of this solidified igneous rock still gets exposed every day for some time. And it's not barren anymore! I have been exploring Mumbai's intertidal zone for last 8 years, and trying to document it from a natural history perspective.

On every low tide, tidepools are formed in the rock depressions, giving marine life a space to survive. While the elevated rock gives space to algae to grow. This photo was taken on a spring low tide. In water logged depressed patch we see soft corals and a cowry snail. And the elevated part shows presence of algae and dead oysters. Sadly, the majority of the city is unaware of the presence of marine wildlife and the struggled the city's marine ecosystem is facing.

Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Nikon D500, None, Tokina 11-20 mm, 125 , f/9, 10 sec, Lumintop EDC UV flashlight

Judge's comments: A highly unusual image and bang on message. Unnatural v natural. Good v bad, depending on your viewpoint. Photographically excellent, too.

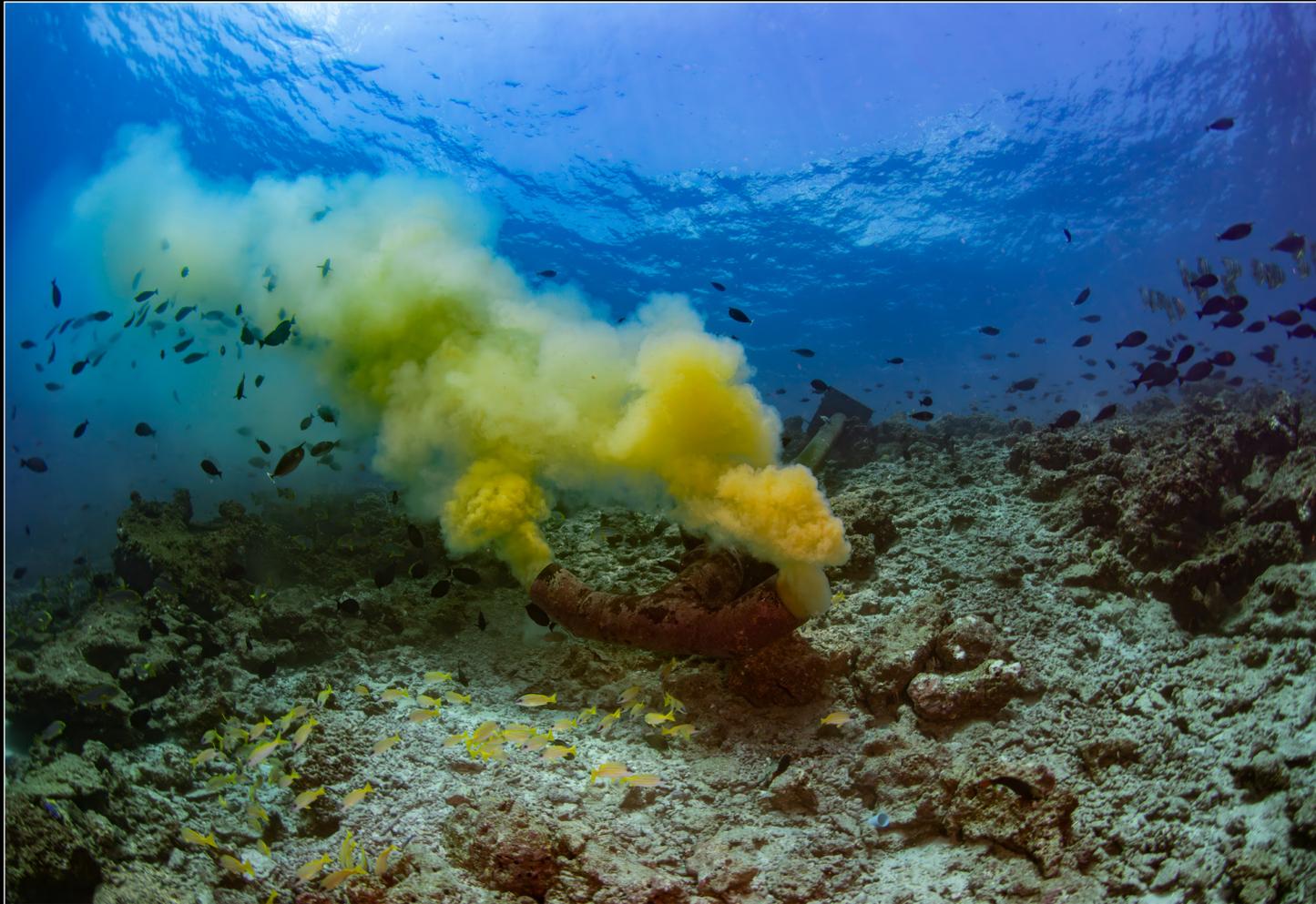
Peter Howlands

UPY 2026



The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Highly commended

Poop Chute

Saeed Rashid (United Kingdom)

While surfacing from a dive on the fringing reef at Hulhulmalé in the Maldives, we encountered a shocking sight. A bright yellow cloud was billowing from the reef, contrasting sharply with the turquoise waters. Closer inspection revealed it was an outflow pipe pumping human waste directly into the ocean. From single-use plastics to sewage, much of our waste ends up in the sea, a global issue we often hear about in the UK but rarely witness firsthand in such beautiful surroundings. I captured this frame to document a common but hidden occurrence before quickly swimming away to avoid the pollution. It serves as a stark reminder of how we treat our oceans, even in paradise.

Hulhulmalé, Maldives, United Kingdom

Nikon D800, Nauticam, Tokina 10-17, 320 , f/10, 160, Inon Z330

Judge's comments: Terrifying and simultaneously stunning image for the conservation category. Not many images are out there, showing a direct pollution of the ocean, especially not in clear and tropical waters. It is devastating to read the story behind the image, but I'm happy the photographer took an image of it and entered it in the category to show the world reality.

Tobias Friedrich

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Highly commended

Into the fiord

Edwar Herreño (Colombia)

We were documenting orcas and whales feeding on herring for couple weeks. We visited this fjord several days were we found amazing natural action with hundreds on Orcas and humpbacks hunting naturally; that day was the first official day where the fisherman are allow to fish. Unfortunately we didn't see a single animal. when the boats are fishing they change the natural behavior as the marine mammals don't have to hunt, instead the follow the fishing boats to get easy food. A boat is like ringing bell: come to eat!

Spildra, Norway

DJI Mavic mini 3 pro, drone, DJI, 100 , f/1/7, 1/125, natural light

Judge's comments: We weren't quite sure what was happening in this image but the Back Story confirmed it and the image is great reportage on a big scale. The dilemma of man's quest for food affecting marine life's natural behaviour never changes.

Peter Howlands

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Highly commended

Human Madness

Ipah Uid Lynn (Malaysia)

This image captures the imbalance of wildlife adapting to us, instead of us adapting to wildlife. If we truly love the ocean, our presence should be lighter than our excitement. Because if the cost of witnessing wonder is disrupting it, then we need to ask ourselves: are we observing nature... or slowly overwhelming it? The ocean remembers everything and so should we...

Hanifaru Bay, Maldives

Canon EOS R5, Marelux MX-R5 housing, Canon EF 8-15 f/4L Fisheye, 1000, f/11, 1/100s, ambience lighting

Judge's comments: This category is all about content rather than just photographic quality. This image perfectly captures the chaos we put marine life through and should make us question whether it can really be justified on any level. An effective image raises questions.

Peter Rowlands

The Save Our Seas Foundation

Marine Conservation Photographer of the Year 2026



Commended

Catch of the Day

Sandra Stalker (United Kingdom)

Each time there is a westerly storm, Chesil beach in Dorset becomes awash with flotsam vast lines of it along the shore. On closer inspection a huge proportion of this appears to come from commercial fishing kit lost at sea such as line, rope, fragments of nets, parts of lobster and crab pots etc. It forms huge rafts out at sea and often entangles birds, marine mammals and other creatures before finally washing ashore. I have wanted to make this image for a while so I went to chesil and on one short walk collected the items on the plate along with bag loads more. I am hoping it makes people consider some of the unseen impacts of the fishing industry on our seas.

Weymouth, Dorset, England

Sony A7RIV, no housing, Sony FE 28-60mm F4-5.6 Lens , 1600 , f/14, 1/60, natural light

Judge's comments: An excellent and interesting interpretation of the conservation topic! Sometimes it just needs a good idea and a bit of time to execute a great image. The quality of light is a bit lacking in the image. It could have placed higher if the lighting was more dramatic or better conjured the atmosphere of a restaurant.

Tobias Friedrich

Underwater Photographer of the Year AWARDS

2026

UPY: Matty Smith (Australia)
BUPY: Matty Smith (Australia)
U&C: Sam Blount (United States)
MPBUPY: Natalie Yarrow (UK)

2025

UPY: Alvaro Herrero (Mekan) (Spain)
BUPY: David Alpert (UK)
U&C: Ruruka (Korea)
MPBUPY: David Alpert (UK)

2024

UPY: Alex Dawson (Sweden)
BUPY: Jenny Stock (UK)
U&C: Lisa Stengel, (USA)
MPBUPY: Sandra Stalker (UK)

2023

UPY: Kat Zhou (USA)
BUPY: Ollie Clarke (Australia)
U&C: Kat Zhou (USA)
MPBUPY: Theo Vickers (UK)

2022

UPY: Rafael Fernandez Caballero (Spain)
BUPY: Matty Smith (Australia)
U&C: Quico Abadal (Spain)
MPBUPY: Paul Pettitt (UK)

2021

UPY: Renee Capozzola (USA)
BUPY: Mark Kirkland (UK)
U&C: Alice Bennett (UK)
MPBUPY: Alice Bennett (UK)

2020

UPY: Greg Lecoeur (France)
BUPY: Nick More (UK)
U&C: Anita Kainrath (Austria)
MPBUPY: Nur Tucker (UK)

2019

UPY: Richard Barnden (UK)
BUPY: Richard Barnden (UK)
U&C: Taeyup Kim (Korea)
MPBUPY: Malcolm Nimmo (UK)

2018

UPY: Tobias Friedrich (Germany)
BUPY: Grant Thomas (UK)
U&C: Man BD (Malaysia)
MPBUPY: Tony Stephenson (UK)

2017

UPY: Gabriel Barathieu (France)
BUPY: Nick Blake (UK)
U&C: Horacio Martinez (Argentina)
MPBUPY: Nicholai Georgiou (UK)

2016

UPY: Davide Lopresti (Italy)
BUPY: Dan Bolt (UK)
U&C: Pier Mane (South Africa)
MPBUPY: Marty Engels Dunmore (UK)

2015

UPY: Nuno Sa (Portugal)
BUPY: Matt Doggett (UK)
MPBUPY: Mario Vitalini (UK)

UPY: Underwater photographer of the year
BUPY: British Underwater photographer of the year
U&C: Up and coming
MPBUPY: Most Promising British Underwater photographer of the year