



Extreme Exposure

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Capturing images of nature's shyer creatures takes a photographer to the limits. Graham Dickson had to enter icy waters to get this shot of a Greenland shark.

Underwater photographers are masochists. They have to be. Their luggage is awesome. It costs them excess baggage charges to take it anywhere. And, while everyone else is lazing in the sun enjoying themselves, they spend hours skulking in the saloon or hiding in their cabins while they prepare and maintain their precious equipment. They even skip meals so they can dive when everyone else is out of the water. In short, they suffer for their art.

But how many would be prepared to "suffer" as much as Graham Dickson? In the frozen wastes of the Arctic, he slithers down through cracks or "leads" in the region's thick ice into sub-zero water to photograph Greenland sharks, the largest of all deep-water fish. It is one of the largest sharks in the world as well as one of the most elusive and least known. But first he has to entice them up from the cold black waters which are their home - typically they live in depths of 150 to 1,200 metres - by lowering bags of meat hundreds of metres down through seal holes and cracks in the sea ice for the scent to attract the sharks.

Graham also faces an additional challenge when photographing not only these sharks but also Beluga whales and Narwhals. He is the leader of Arctic Kingdom Expeditions, the only company to offer land-based diving in multiple locations throughout the Arctic. Therefore, he has to cater first to the needs of everyone else, many of whom are serious photographers with three and even four underwater cameras before he can even think of taking pictures for himself.

The only way he can do so is by keeping his own equipment simple. In contrast to his guests' arrays of cameras, he dives with a Sea & Sea MX-10 fitted with a YS40A strobe. Outfits seldom get simpler than that! But the simplicity works for him. He has a collection of striking photographs of these citizens of a cold and daunting kingdom.

Explained Graham: 'Best use of the natural lighting in the deep blue water is to shoot upwards from beneath the subject. Then the blue hues of the ice and cracks above form a backdrop to your pictures and you take advantage of the increased ambient light.

'This was possible with the shark and the light from the YS40A highlighted its face. The ambient light was very strong, even through the ice, so it was possible to use an aperture of f16 for maximum depth of field even with a slow slide film. Nevertheless, I frequently play safe and bracket from f8 to f16 to ensure at least one good image.

'However, the biggest factor in getting the best shots has more to do with the clarity of the water than any special photographic technique. Any successful Arctic expedition must coincide with the natural movements and congregations of the animals. At the same time, as the sea ice melts, the run-off can significantly reduce visibility from hundreds of metres to as little as ten. The midnight sun, which shines 24 hours a day, also contributes to the exponential growth of algae.

'Little is known about Greenland sharks because they live in such a remote habitat. However, they seem docile and are not aggressive around divers. They can be photographed under the sea ice through late June and then in shallow, open water in August when they gather in large numbers to follow the Inuit whale hunts because they can feast on the left-overs. The sharks are most abundant in the Lancaster Jones Sound region north of Baffin Island and range down from Ellesmere Island through the Gulf of the St. Lawrence.

'By contrast, Belugas and Narwhals can be found in enormous numbers in shallow bays but these situations only suit surface photography, they dart away at the slightest movement. They are in their element and much more playful and comfortable interacting in the deep bottomless waters of the Arctic Ocean. They prefer to have the security of that deep water beneath them. There are always trade-offs in the numbers of whales, visibility and accessibility of locations.

'Photographing Belugas is particularly challenging. Their white bodies reflect a tremendous amount of light, making it difficult to get the right texture when contrasted against the dark background. Though you cannot get underneath the Belugas to frame them from below, it is possible to shoot sideways as they rise to breathe at the surface. Such pictures can be dramatic as the surface of the water is visible. Half-and-half shots, which I normally take with a (what camera and lens?) in an Aquatica housing, can be particularly effective.





'The Belugas are incredible, friendly animals. Large pods will come towards snorkellers to interact and play. They will blow bubbles underneath the snorkellers, wanting to play and also "buzz" them. Also, they will "shadow" a diver, swimming a few metres beneath him or her.

'Such proactive and friendly interaction is extremely special and a real treat to enjoy. However, photographing the whales can be tantalising because, when they come close, for instance within two or three metres, it is all but impossible to capture the entire animal within a single frame. When the fish is further away, it is more difficult to get the exposure right. Using fast film for animals close to the surface helps to minimize the effect of the light bouncing off the Belugas but is not as effective when shooting down into the deeper waters unless the whales happen to be within a few metres.

'I have to plan the expeditions I lead to coincide with very limited windows of opportunity, especially when and where amazing visibility coincides with large concentrations of animals.'

