

# Underwater Speleology

*Journal of the Cave Diving Section of the National Speleological Society*



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Wes Skiles

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*Self Portrait Wes Skiles  
(Above)*

*Kenny Broad probing the  
Narrows in Sagittarius Cave. Part  
of the Zodiac Caverns on Sweetings  
Caye, Grand Bahamas  
Photo by Wes Skiles, courtesy of the  
National Geographic Society.  
(Opposite)*

## Through the Lens of Wes Skiles

My first passion, before cave diving and surfing, was photography. My grandfather from my mom's side was an avid photographer, which no doubt rubbed off on me. When I was eight years old he bought me my first camera, a Brownie Automatic. As my interest in surfing and then diving began to evolve, I found myself wanting to capture the feelings I experienced pursuing these two fantastic activities. One of my neighbors was an avid inventor who specialized in underwater contraptions including wet-dry submarines, camera housings, and scooters. Ironically, he didn't dive, so it was up to the kids in the neighborhood to test his inventions. How we didn't kill ourselves has always amazed me... His inventions were regularly featured on the covers of *Skin Diver* and *Popular Mechanics*. One fateful weekend I got invited to model with my brother for a feature story in *Popular Mechanics*. The photographer, Howard Holland, took us to Ginnie Springs where I got my first experience riding the "SCUBA Tow" in the cavern of Ginnie at the ripe age of 12. But what interested me the most that day was his camera system, a Calypso (later named the Nikonos) fitted with Sub Sea Strobes. From that moment on my sole focus was to purchase a Nikonos and get started taking pictures of surfing and diving. The rest, I guess you could say, is well documented.

I could not think to describe how I evolved as a photographer without acknowledging my graphics art teacher in high school, Hugh Epps. Mr. Epps was a cigar-chomping disciplinarian that virtually all my schoolmates were terrified of. In reality he was one of the most inspiring, kindhearted people I've ever known. All you had to do was be interested in what he had to offer. What he had was unlimited access to a darkroom, and all the chemicals and paper that he had to offer. He was thrilled to have a student who wanted to learn the art of developing and processing. The only problem was I never was satisfied with my images. Frustrated early on, I crumbled my work, which got me a memorable tongue-lashing and a warning to always follow through and preserve what I wasn't happy with in a designated pile. In my senior year, unbeknownst to me, he displayed at the school what would be the first gallery of my photographic work. Humorously he titled it: "Wes Skiles-The Trash Collection". With his hand on my shoulder he said: "You need to strive to be the best, but don't be so hard on yourself; other people like what you think is garbage." It was a valuable lesson, but ironically, I'm still seldom happy with what I shoot, a classic artists' dilemma.

Sheck Exley and I often discussed both our interests and differences. He was of the philosophy that "you can always write about it;" I being a visual person always felt like pictures were the way to go. I soon discovered this was a bigger challenge in underwater caves than I had originally imagined. Around this period I became aware of a man that would become a hero, mentor, and friend, Dr. George Benjamin. Dr Benjamin was the first cave diver to explore, map and photograph the Blue Holes of the Bahamas. His images in Jacques Cousteau's Blue Hole Adventure captivated me beyond words and showed me that fantastic images could be captured inside the wondrous and mysterious realms of underwater caves. Armed with what could be, and a





*The Apex Predator of the Bahamas Blue Holes, Remipedia*  
Photo by Wes Skiles, courtesy of the National Geographic Society.  
(Above Inset Top)

*Agnes Milowka traversing the Alley in Dan's Cave, Abaco Bahama.*  
Photo by Wes Skiles, courtesy of the National Geographic Society.  
(Above Inset Bottom)

*National Geographic Blue Hole Expedition team floating weightless over the abyss of Stargate's North Passage.*  
Photo by Wes Skiles, courtesy of the National Geographic Society.  
(Opposite)

mind that pre-visualizes virtually everything I do, I began my pursuit of cave diving photography in earnest.

I started out like most people with a camera and strobe. It didn't take long for me to realize that on-camera lighting produced flat, boring pictures. John Zumrick suggested that we try using slave sensors that were built into our strobes to add that extra dimension we were looking for. His strobe fired for my pictures brilliantly, while mine never fired for his images once. I got my first magazine cover for the effort, and John got the right to badger me to this day about how he came up with the idea and I received all of the credit. The next step was to build reliable slave sensors that would allow us real separation between the camera and light sources. It was only after I convinced a specialty slave manufacturer to tune the slaves to receive ultra-violet and not infrared that we finally got the slaves to work with any kind of consistency. The advent of digital cameras, and high-powered HID lighting has really opened up the world of "seeing what you are shooting." As always, there are trade-offs, but the benefits far outweigh the negatives. The ability to mix color temperatures, set white balances, and shoot rear curtain sync have all played important roles in creating new and pleasing results in capturing the elusive world of underwater caves. Perhaps the most important element of all is willing and patient dive buddies. If it weren't for Tom Morris, Mark Long, Woody Jasper, and Lamar Hires lifetime of unflinching support, I would have practically nothing worth showing. I owe them my deepest gratitude, credit, and thanks.

Forty four years after Granddad gave me a Brownie Automatic, I still have a childlike fascination with capturing images. My style, and approach is always changing, but ultimately I'm always after capturing and sharing with people what it feels like to be inside one of the most special places on earth.

*Wes is a passionate explorer with a deep love and curiosity for the environments he has dedicated his life to filming. He has photographed and filmed over two dozen expeditions worldwide. As leader of a National Geographic expedition to Antarctica, Wes was the first human being to set foot on and film B-15, the largest iceberg in recorded history. His eleven hour, 800' deep, history making dive to film deepwater 6 Gill sharks inside the "Newtsuit", a flying underwater body submarine, remains the longest dive ever performed in a body submarine.*

*Wes was also one of the first cave divers to explore, map, and document many of North Florida's most treasured springs. Over his lifetime he has explored, surveyed and mapped over 1 million feet (nearly 200 miles) of previously unexplored passages within the Floridan Aquifer. These unique experiences exploring our drinking water combined with a deep love for his native state, has driven him to be one of the most vocal advocates in preserving and protecting Florida's precious water resources.*

*His most recent project is both a National Geographic/NOVA TV Special, and upcoming cover story on the Blue Holes of the Bahamas. The stories focus on myriad new scientific discoveries found within Blue Holes. The project was led by National Geographic "Explorer" Dr. Kenny Broad, PhD University of Miami, School of Rosenthal.*





*Agnes Milowka negotiates a tanks-off restriction in the deep reaches of Dan's Cave, Abaco Bahamas  
Photo by Wes Skiles, courtesy of the National Geographic Society.  
(Above Inset Top)*

*Nathan Skiles descending into Devils Ear.  
(Right)*

*Jason Sapp grappling in the high flow of the entrance restriction in the Rock Bluff Cave System.  
(Above Inset Bottom)*

*Kenny Broad enjoying the pristine beauty of Suwannee Formation in "Wrong Cave" on the Withlachochee River.*

