

Newbert Off Line

Photographer Chris Newbert has become somewhat of a legend in underwater photography circles. His distinctive camera work has graced the pages of *National Geographic Magazine* and many other publications, including his book *A Rainbowed Sea*.

AquaCorps (AC): There's this rumor floating around the industry about you hanging at 200 feet or so alone in the middle of the night with a big light shining down, waiting to photograph creatures that come up from the depths. What's the story?

Chris Newbert (CN): It's an absolutely false rumor. The truth is, it was a very small light.

Actually, the basic facts as outlined are quite true. I was doing some open ocean drift diving, going out maybe eight to ten miles from shore into water about 5,000-10,000 feet deep. I would stop my boat and descend to 200 feet to shoot and then gradually work my way back to the surface. I would go as deep as that and basically drift in the open ocean with the boat unattended just above my head.

At night, the deep sea scattering layer* would migrate vertically towards the surface. I would only dive on dark, moonless nights, because only on the darkest of nights would the creatures come close enough to the surface to photograph. (By "close enough," I'm talking about the first 200-foot layer.) Whereas on a bright night with a full moon, the animals might only come up to 300-400 feet deep.

AC: Were you on a line?

**The deep scattering layer is a layer of phytoplankton that migrates in depth in response to changes in light intensity, inducing the creatures that feed on it to migrate as well—ed.*

CN: No, actually I wasn't.

AC: What were you shooting? Large pelagics? Sharks?

CN: There's no point in trying to film large pelagics out there—you could see them during the day under much more favorable photo conditions. I was looking for things that were unique to that environment and time of day—the

"You just put the fear
out of your mind.
And that's easily
done by your
fascination with the more
important things—
the real things.
Not abstract fears,
but the concrete things."

migration of animals in the deep scattering layer that occurs only at night. Generally these were small things: larval forms of life; little fish; pelagic octopi or seahorses; or flying fish at night.

AC: Why solo?

CN: Well, you have better interaction with animals when you're alone than when you're with another person. My feeling is you're always going to have better animal activity, more intimate contact with [aquatic life]. I would also say I dive alone because I'm a photographer. All photographers have to admit, if they're honest, that they dive alone. That is, they don't perform their half of the bargain in the buddy system. You're not paying attention to your buddy; you're paying attention to your photography.

AC: Do you ever feel afraid working like that?

CN: The scariest part is when you're still on the boat: you're thinking about going in and the lights on the shore are 10 miles away and the water looks dark and cold. But once you're in the water, it doesn't feel that different from any night dive. You have no sense of depth, really. You're surrounded by black so you can't tell that it's 10,000 feet to the bottom or 100 feet to the top; 10 miles to the shore or 10,000 miles to Japan.

You're just in a black void and your perception extends only as far your underwater light. God knows what's lurking over your shoulder. You could turn your head around and you wouldn't see it. All you can see is what's in that beam of light. So it was actually fairly tame.

I suppose if I was out there and something huge showed up that started chasing me around I'd be damn afraid. But the concentration required by photography, to a large extent, keeps your mind from wandering. So much of your attention is drawn toward all the things around you. You just put [the fear] out of your mind. And that's easily done by your fascination with the more important things—the real things. Not abstract fears, but the concrete things. ▀

*Chris Newbert can be contacted at :
P.O. Box 1953, Kailua-kona, Hawaii.
96745*



© Photo by Kim Harwood 1989