

UNDER THE SEA

Avid scuba diver Jim Wainwright captures beauty and majesty through underwater photography.

BY JENNIFER Z. EKMAN • PHOTOS BY JIM WAINWRIGHT AND ROBERT ZIMMERMAN

His business card says, “The adventure begins beneath the waves.” Jim Wainwright, right, enters a secret, sacred world when he dives beneath the water. “When you go down beneath the waves,” he says, “you’re going to see something new and different every time you go. The color and value of sea life, versus what’s up here, is completely different. It’s not necessarily prettier or uglier, it’s just different,” the Mobilian explains. Wainwright has always loved to share that world with others. At first, he did it through teaching diving. Now, he shares his vision through underwater photography.

DIVING INTO DIVING

As a boy, Wainwright sailed wooden skiffs, with sheets for sails, near his grandmother’s Dog River home. By age 15, he was in Gulf Shores making his own surfboards. At 16, with a friend, he made his first scuba dive in Dog River.

That initial experience propelled Wainwright to a career as a deep-sea diving instructor. From 1975 to 1985, he schooled 1,000 people in his hobby. During that time, he also ran a small tour business in the Caribbean. As an instructor, he preached “safety first.”

“I have confidence in my diving. But, I’m not overly confident, or it takes away from safety,” Wainwright says. “I never become complacent, and I always check my gear,” he continues.

SEALIFE SHUTTERBUG

In the mid-1980s, he bought his first underwater camera and began experimenting. A few years later, he met fellow Mobilian **Robert Zimmerman**, an underwater and nature photographer. He gave Wainwright some tips and encouraged his interest.

At the time, Wainwright was working as dive master on a large dive boat in Panama City, Fla. He still marvels at that experience. “I had the ocean world at my fingertips.”

He and his wife, **Cheryl**, now enjoy traveling to exotic places for international diving and photography. During a recent trip to Bonaire, in the Netherlands

Antilles, the couple photographed seahorses and sea turtles. On another trip, they swam with manatees, capturing a shot of a mother and baby coming to the surface to breathe in unison. He has also seen many sharks. “Sharks are like bad dogs,” he says. “You just have to watch them.”

Wainwright is always careful to remain an observer, not disturbing anything but capturing it — in vivid color — on film. He typically finds the best photographic opportunities from 20 feet to 80 feet down. Night diving is a special thrill. “Most of the animal life and plant life come alive at night,” he says. “A multitude of fauna is out when the moon and stars are overhead.”

Most often, Wainwright dives with two cameras: one for macro scenes to encapsulate a larger area and a wide-angle lens for close-up opportunities.

His love of diving and photography has never diminished. Now age 60, Wainwright still does not need to use his reading glasses underwater. Under the sea, everything seems a quarter closer and a quarter larger. He laughs, “Nobody should have this much fun.”

Jennifer Z. Ekman, a freelance writer, was encouraged to try underwater photography after interviewing Wainwright for this story.

To enjoy some additional photos by Jim Wainwright, as well as the art he has created for Mardi Gras, log on to: aquaspherephotography.com, Jimwainwright.com or Mardigrasprints.com.



WAINWRIGHT'S GUIDE TO BEST LOCAL DIVES

I frequently dive in the Gulf of Mexico — off Mobile and Pensacola. Most all of Mobile deep-water diving areas are great for underwater photography, because of bright colored soft corals, sea whips, and reef fish that exist there. The water clarity, which is regularly at 100 foot of visibility, makes this some of the best diving in the world.

To dive from Mobile, simply go straight out, between nine and 30 miles offshore. Have your pick of oil rigs, natural reefs and shipwrecks. Oil rigs, above, are easy to find, and the structures act as vertical reefs that support a diverse and thriving marine ecosystem. The wrecks and reefs are a little more difficult to find. The Trysler Grounds is a natural reef system about 20 miles south of Mobile in 80 to 110 feet of water. In season, the area has large lobster and an abundance of fish for the taking.

Pensacola is now considered a world-class diving spot because of the USS Oriskany, an aircraft carrier that was decommissioned and sunk as an artificial reef 20 miles off Pensacola, in 248 feet of water. Only technical divers venture deeper using mixed gas systems for an extended period of time. I have dived “the big O” several times.

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OPPOSITE "The elusive seahorse is difficult to photograph," says Jim, "because it is constantly swaying and moving with the currents. It can be found in many colors in shallow and deep waters." **ABOVE** Wainwright enjoys the challenge of photographing playful, rambunctious dolphins. **BELOW LEFT** Jim snapped this photo of his wife, Cheryl, gliding over a Bonarian reef in the Dutch Carribean. **BELOW CENTER** Macro photography, seen here, allows the viewer to get much closer to the colorful world of tiny oceanic organisms. **BELOW RIGHT** Offshore oil rigs in the Gulf act as vertical reefs abundant with marine life and spectacular color.



ROBERT ZIMMERMAN