

# The Photographer's Dive Buddy

*by Bob Bailey*

Like many of you, I like to take pictures underwater. And before I got a camera, I dived frequently with other people who took pictures. Bringing a camera underwater ... or diving with someone else who does ... can put a strain on a dive buddy relationship. I'd like to share with you some of the things I've learned over the years about being a photographer's dive buddy ... and about diving with others while I was the photographer.

When one or both divers in a buddy team take a camera with them, the picture-taking demands a great deal of the diver's mental "bandwidth" ... and the diver is less able to maintain a good buddy relationship. In order to maintain the team, both divers need to compensate for this fact by establishing "roles" that give each diver certain responsibilities. Discussing these roles before the dive helps establish a routine that maintains the buddy relationship during the dive.

Being a photographer's dive buddy takes a certain mental approach. You need to view the successful achievement of the photographer as a critical part of your dive plan, rather than something that's incidental to it. You need to tailor your role to that of a helper rather than a passive observer with goals of your own. Often this requires an adjustment in how you dive.

As a photographer's dive buddy you need to maintain a position where the photographer can easily see you at all times ... keep in mind that photographers are spending even more than the usual effort actively seeking photo opportunities. It is especially important to make an active effort to be "seen" while your buddy is taking a picture. Looking through the camera's viewfinder narrows their field of view considerably. You want to be in a position where your buddy doesn't have to look around for you when taking pictures, but instead simply has to look up or slightly to the side to find you. In high ambient light, this means positioning yourself facing the photographer, where they can see you without taking their eyes off the viewfinder. In more "normal" Puget Sound conditions, shining your dive light to the side of the subject is a good way to achieve this ... just remember to keep it out of the field of the photo, because it's also important not to interfere with the photographer's ability to get the shot. And be careful with your trim and buoyancy control ... the last thing a photographer wants is a silt tsunami rolling across the subject as they're lining up the shot. So facing the photographer and keeping your fins pointed away from the subject is always a good idea. Proper positioning is a learned skill that takes forethought, effort and practice ... just like good buoyancy control, trim and finning techniques.

The photographer has some additional responsibilities too. Diving with a camera narrows your view and increases your task-loading. Managing both a camera and a buddy is easier if you maintain good communication protocols with each other. Before taking a picture, establish eye contact with your dive buddy and make sure that they are where you expect them to be. Don't wander off or change direction if you spot something interesting ... get

your buddy's attention first and signal your intention by pointing out the subject to your dive buddy. Be patient and move slowly, to allow your dive buddy the opportunity to get in position before you set up the shot.

Establishing roles becomes even more important when both divers have cameras. Diving side-by-side becomes almost mandatory, because both of you will be looking for things to take pictures of, and will have less mental bandwidth than usual for your dive buddy. A lot of times, agreeing to "alternate" roles as observer and photographer helps keep the team integrity intact. And when one diver finds a particularly interesting subject, you alternate roles while each diver takes a turn photographing the subject. It is rarely a good idea for both divers to be taking pictures simultaneously ... unless conditions allow you to both be taking pictures of the same subject at the same time. Always keep in mind that seeing the dive through a viewfinder dramatically narrows both your vision and awareness ... and consciously maintain a part of your awareness for your dive buddy.

It really boils down to setting mutual expectations and determining roles before the dive by talking about it and agreeing to it, and then putting those roles into practice during the dive. At first it may seem awkward or cumbersome, but with practice it becomes easy and automatic ... and buddies who dive together regularly tend to pick up these skills rather quickly.

And remember that not everyone will make a good photographer's dive buddy ... our personalities, goals, and diving styles determine both our comfort level and ability to dive with a photographer. Some divers find it boring ... or even annoying ... to hover in one spot while a photographer lines up a shot (or shot-after-shot in some cases). Others don't mind, but prefer to be passive observers. While still others get enjoyment out of actively finding subjects to photograph and diving in a way that contributes to the photographer's success.

It is up to each of us, as a photographer or someone who's contemplating being a photographer's dive buddy, to determine where in that continuum our interests lie ... and being honest with ourselves and our dive buddy about our comfort level diving with someone who wants to take pictures while diving.