

Juvenile
wonderpus on
blackwater dive in
Anilao, Philippines

Text and photos by Don Silcock

Don Silcock returns to Anilao in the Philippines to experience blackwater diving. He offers insights and tips to divers and underwater photographers on how to get the most out of this unique experience.

It really is an unusual way to spend an evening... not so much a night dive as a nocturnal sojourn into another world. Sure, it is just underwater, and you have been there many times, but



Juvenile bigfin reef squid



Anilao Night Shift

Blackwater Diving in the Philippines

not like this, you haven't!

Beneath you, deep water. All around, apart from the lights on the downline, there is complete darkness, and I mean absolute blackness.

Some of the ocean's most photo-

genic creatures lurk in that blackness. Most are small; some are really small. But first, you have to spot them, then frame them in your viewfinder, lock on to the eye and then fire at will while quickly checking and adjusting

exposure on the fly.

All the while, you must maintain neutral buoyancy, keep an eye on your depth, air consumption and no-decompression limit (NDL) and, crucially, not lose the downline. And

then there is the nagging question: What else is lurking out there in the Stephen King darkness?

As I said, it is an unusual evening's entertainment by anybody's standards—but this is blackwater diving!



Argonaut (right) and *Chrysaora* sp. jellyfish (below) on blackwater dive



Season I

In late January 2024, I travelled to Anilao for the first time with two goals in mind. First, I wanted to explore the area's renowned macro life, and secondly, I wanted to experience what is now universally known as "blackwater diving".

I stayed at the Crystal Blue Resort, run by Mike Bartick—one of blackwater diving's most influential advocates. With his stunning images and numerous articles, he has probably done more than anyone else to popularise this unique style of diving.

I spent the first five days focusing on daylight macro photography and quickly discovered why Anilao is a world-class destination for critter lovers. The variety of marine life was spectacular, spread across a diverse selection of dive sites.

After five days of shooting macro in daylight, it was time to try something completely different. That evening, I set out for my first two blackwater dives. Calling it "differ-

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The overall area referred to generically as "Anilao" is somewhat of a misnomer. From a diving perspective, it refers to the 13km-long Calumpan Peninsula that extends south from the village of Anilao, with numerous dive resorts located along the rocky edge of the peninsula, all linked by a winding paved road.

To the west of the peninsula is Balayan Bay, while on the eastern side is the smaller Batangas Bay. Both bays have some excellent macro dive sites, but Balayan Bay is where most of the blackwater diving is concentrated. ■

ent" turned out to be a significant understatement.

The basic mechanism—diel vertical migration

Diel vertical migration (DVM) is the largest synchronous movement of creatures in the world. It happens



Inspiring underwater photographers since 1989.



Come visit us at
www.seacam.com







Solomon Islands

EMPEROR
divers.com

11 liveaboards
4 destinations

PROVIDING QUALITY
DIVING HOLIDAYS
SINCE 1992



Indonesia



Maldives



Red Sea

Juvenile moray eel (above) and juvenile mantis shrimp (right) on blackwater dive

every night in every ocean, but very few people are even aware of it.

Those creatures are mainly zooplankton (tiny fish, shrimps and jellies) together with the juvenile stages of larger animals, and they literally number in the billions. As the sun disappears over the horizon and night falls, these tiny animals rise up from the depths to feed on the phytoplankton—the sun-

light-dependent tiny plants of the plankton world that inhabit the surface layer of our oceans.

Location, location, location...

Anilao itself is a small village on the eastern side of Balayan Bay, which is located on the southwestern tip of Luzon—the principal island of the Philippine archipelago. While vertical migration occurs

across all the oceans, what makes the Anilao area special in general and such a hotspot for blackwater diving is the concentration with which DVM happens in the overall area of Balayan Bay.

Balayan is a large open bay covering an area of almost 500km². Its location means that the nutrient-rich waters of this area of the Philippines sweep past its 23km wide entrance



as they enter the Verde Island Passage between Luzon and the large island of Mindoro to the south.

This large flow of water creates powerful eddies that circulate around the bay, nourishing the macro dive sites. Adding to this rich mix are the

steeply sloping sides of the bay, which drop rapidly down past 100m and onwards to around 300m. All these aspects create almost perfect conditions for an incredible mix of amazing critters and astonishing blackwater diving that the area has become known for!

ANILAO 101

The generally accepted diving season for Anilao used to be October to May, avoiding the notorious Philippine typhoon season. But in recent years, the season has been from late October or early November to late June. Blackwater diving is generally good throughout the season but varies with the tides and phases of the moon.

Anilao and both Balayan and Batangas bays are about a three-hour drive south of Manila, the sprawling capital of the Philippines. Organised by the dive operators, drivers will be waiting for you with signs as you emerge from baggage claim.

Although the water temperature at night in Balayan Bay averages around 23°C, doing two blackwater dives each night does mean you will start to get cold, particularly on the second dive. On my first Anilao trip in 2024, I used a 7mm semi-dry wetsuit, but in 2025, I also had a heated vest, which I turned on for the second dive. ■



Juvenile wonderpus photographed on blackwater dive

The finale

On my first trip, I did two blackwater dives per night for seven days, with the boats departing from Crystal Bay at 7 p.m. and heading north for about one hour. Once at the site, the downline and video lights would be deployed, and soon after, we would enter the water for a one-hour dive. The one-hour surface interval would be spent back on the boat, and then we would go back in for the second dive. So, it was usually well after midnight before we were back at the resort,

and I typically did not get to bed until 2 a.m.; hence, my nickname for the whole thing—the “Anilao Night Shift.”

It took me three of those night shifts to adjust to what we were actually doing underwater so late at night and in such unusual circumstances. Initially, everything seemed to have an additional element of difficulty to what I normally do on a night dive, all compounded by a rather primal fear of losing the downline and getting lost in the darkness.

Photographing what we saw

on these dives was the biggest of the initial challenges, as the combination of tiny zooplankton and phytoplankton meant that backscatter was a major issue. It was not until the fourth night that I got my equipment set up to my satisfaction, and I started to get images that I was happy with. But even then, there were challenges, as some creatures were quite reflective while others were much less so. I had to find a way to deal with this on the fly, as the encounters were typically brief and dynamic in nature.

By the seventh night, three



STEPDive

Big News! NAUI instructors can now become certified to teach using the innovative STEPDive system, designed to introduce young divers to SCUBA!

With the **“Experience Before Depth”** training series & **eLearning courses**, instructors can now guide students through a structured learning process that builds foundational SCUBA skills at shallow depths before progressing further.

This is considered a **NAUI Manufacturer-Specified Specialty eLearning course**. These courses are designed to provide a flexible and interactive learning environment where young divers can progress at their own pace.



To become a **NAUI STEP Dive Instructor**, active status NAUI SCUBA Instructors can now enroll in the instructor course, available through NAUI’s platform. For step by step guide on how to enroll, click [here](#).

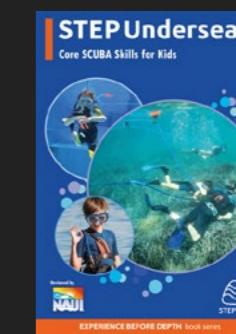
For more details on how to get started, please contact the NAUI Training Department at Training@NAUI.org.

‘EXPERIENCE BEFORE DEPTH’ Training Series



1. STEPSurface

Begin with a focus on basic breathing techniques, regulator skills, calm behavior, and building comfort underwater.



2. STEPUndersea

Introduces core SCUBA skills like equalization, neutral buoyancy, and slow, controlled ascents.



3. STEP Diver

Prepare divers for open water diving with advanced skills such as buoyancy control & air management.





Juvenile blue-ringed octopus on blackwater dive in Anilao

www.explorerverventures.com
 info@explorerverventures.com
 +1.307.235.0683 USA 1.800.322.3577 Canada

EXPLORER VENTURES
 LIVEBOARD DIVING FLEET™

Trustpilot
★★★★★
 TrustScore 4.7 | 463 reviews

dive green

Saba / St. Kitts

Turks & Caicos

Palau

Galapagos

Maldives

Red Sea

Indonesia

Silver Bank

DIVING UNCOMPLICATED.



Anilao Photo Academy is located near the harbour in downtown Anilao.

ANILAO PHOTO ACADEMY

Run by husband-and-wife team Wayne Jones (usually just called “Jones”) from Australia and his lovely wife Rina Yumol Jones from the Philippines, Anilao Photo Academy is a well-run but pleasantly laid-back operation. Both Wayne and Rina are excellent underwater photographers who are available to help and offer advice if you need it. The overall vibe is very relaxed and friendly.

Meals are prepared and delivered freshly cooked around departures for dives and arrival back at whatever time that may be. It was a very pleasant surprise to be served a hot dinner during the surface interval between blackwater dives—although it did seem a little strange to be eating in a wetsuit! ■

things had become very clear to me: Blackwater diving is exciting and quite unique, the photographic potential of it all is incredible, and I would be returning to Anilao for more.

Season II

I timed my flight out of Sydney in January 2025 based on one of the things I learned the year before: Time your stay in Anilao around the new moon, which seems to be the optimum time for blackwater diving.

For the second trip, I was to be joined by my Italian diving buddies—very accomplished underwater photographer Filippo Borghi and technical

CCR instructor and videographer Davide Mottola. We had decided to base ourselves at the Anilao Photo Academy (APA) near the port in downtown Anilao.

Filippo and Davide were determined to dive both in the morning and at night, using the afternoon gap for a well-earned siesta, while I chose to concentrate on the blackwater dives and sleep in each morning. We all thought we had made the right decision, as both Filippo and Davide got some great images on the morning dives in the critter-rich environment of Anilao, while I felt fully refreshed and ready

for each night of blackwater.

It turned out that going with APA was a really good choice, as the staff and methodology used for the blackwater dives were excellent. Also, much to our surprise, when we headed out on the first night, we got comfortable for a one-hour boat ride but were



Anilao

Argonaut on leaf (left), *Chrysaora* sp. jellyfish (above), diamond shrimp (top right) and common seahorse (right) on blackwater dive in Anilao



Location of Anilao in the Philippines

amazed when we stopped only five minutes later.

Basically, APA is located right in front of where blackwater diving is usually carried out in Balayan Bay. This meant that the surface interval was spent back on land eating dinner and drinking hot tea in preparation for the next dive.

Lessons learned

As with all things, repetition is the key to learning and building muscle memory—and knowing in advance what will probably happen allows you to prepare physically and mentally for the challenge ahead. So, when I left for Manila, I had carefully packed the dive gear I knew I would need, plus my photography equipment was configured around what I also knew

I would need, along with some other items I wanted to try.

It worked, and I got good, usable images on the first night. Over the next eight “night shifts”, it only got better.

Finding something new to photograph underwater is always exciting, particularly when it involves elements as radically different as those in blackwater diving. Once the diving and photographic fundamentals have been mastered, blackwater dives truly open up a window into an amazing part of the underwater world that is hidden in plain sight.

Summary

The area around the southwestern tip of Luzon Island is a truly exceptional dive location due to the nutrient-rich waters that flow around it and through the Verde Island Passage. The deep, sheltered bays of Balayan and Batangas provide near-perfect macro conditions and incredible blackwater

diving. Plus, the islands in the passage—Maricaban and Verde—have a reputation for exceptional wide-angle underwater photography.

Frankly, I am a late convert to the general area referred to as “Anilao” and was only drawn there by the mysterious allure of blackwater diving. But like most late converts, I have become quite passionate about the area and am already planning Season III of blackwater diving. I also intend to explore many more of the daytime macro and wide-angle opportunities of Anilao. Watch this space... ■ REFERENCE: WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Don Silcock is an underwater photographer and photojournalist based in Bali, Indonesia. Find extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and “big animal” experiences globally on his website at: indopacificimages.com.

