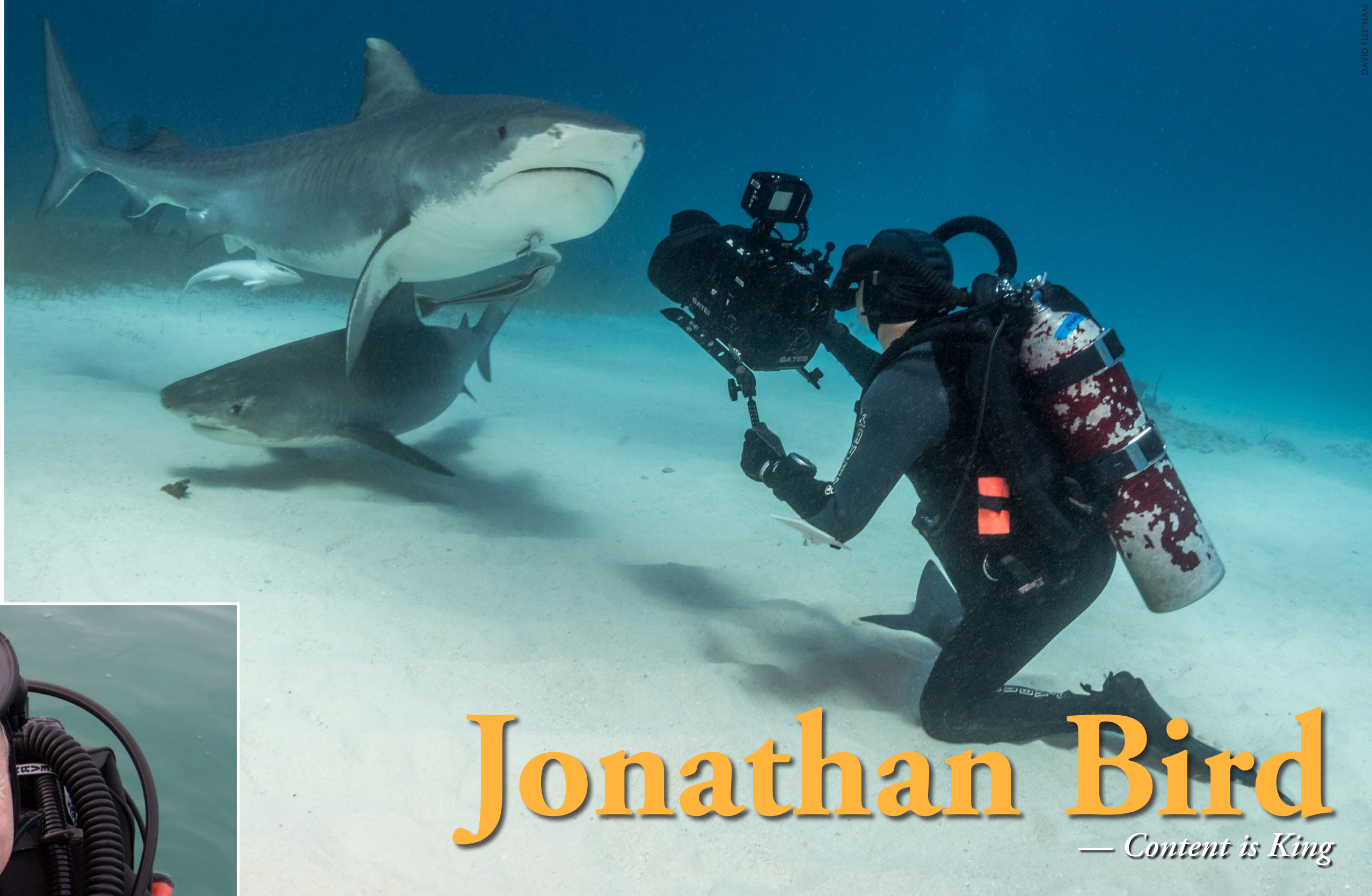


Bird filming a tiger shark in the Bahamas

Interview by Peter Symes
Photos courtesy of Jonathan Bird

What does it take to create a YouTube channel about the underwater realm with more than a million subscribers? BlueWorldTV is arguably one of the most visited channels on YouTube for divers and anyone interested in what lies below the surface. X-Ray Mag editor Peter Symes sat down with founder and principal content creator Jonathan Bird to discuss content creation, creativity and connecting with an audience.



Jonathan Bird

— *Content is King*



Let's start with the humble beginnings. Do you recall the moment you wanted to become a diver?

When I was a kid, I watched Jacques Cousteau on television and thought scuba divers were more like astronauts or superheroes than ordinary people. I

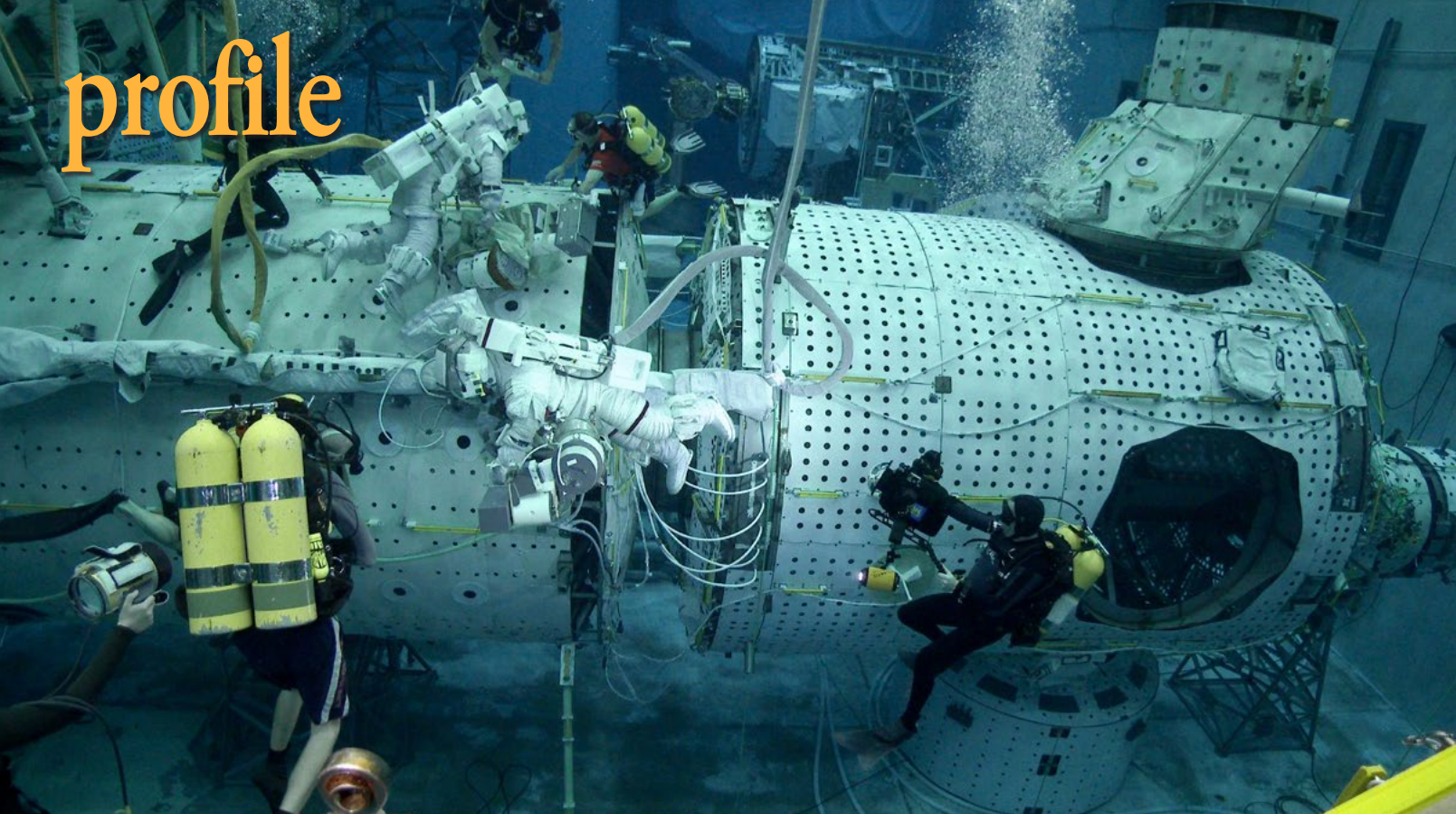
would go to the local lake and spend as much time with my mask as possible, looking underwater. I never imagined that "normal" people could become divers. I used to "swim" under my bed and pretend I was exploring a sunken shipwreck. It wasn't until I was in college (and scuba diving was offered as a phys-

ical education credit) that I got certified. My dad had gotten certified on vacation the year before, and he encouraged me to go for it.

On my open-water checkout dives, I was definitely hooked. I still remember watching a lobster walk by and thinking it was the most exciting thing I had ever

Filmmaker and content creator Jonathan Bird, founder of BlueWorldTV





Bird on assignment filming astronauts for NASA (left and center)

Jonathan Bird

BlueWorldTV.

PCMag did a piece about stuff to watch during the Hollywood strike (2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike – ed.). After that, we did four seasons on PBS. In 2012, it became harder to raise money for PBS. Meanwhile, YouTube took off and started doing revenue sharing. We were able to put up a couple of segments a month for 12 years.

What made you switch from still photography to video?

The storytelling aspect is more interesting, and I find filmmaking to be more creative. In the

days when we were shooting on film, it was quite challenging, but the digital format has made it easier, as you get instant feedback, and you can reshoot.

A lot of still photographers are just collectors of images, shots of this animal or that place and other stuff considered “cool.” Still photographers are looking for a money shot, and that is different from being a photojournalist. When you do video, you need to document everything.

When you shoot video, you have to try to capture behavior with sequences and think about

what shots you need to make the sequence work. It is short form. It is easy to tell a 15-minute story. A full-length feature is a completely different challenge.

It has become a bit of a thing in my life, and I enjoy doing it. I don't care about clicks. I pursue topics that are interesting to me. I just like to know why a video does very well or very badly. I won't stoop to do clickbait.

Have you dialed in your procedure?

The process is similar, but the stories are different.

I am cognizant of the fact that I am lucky.

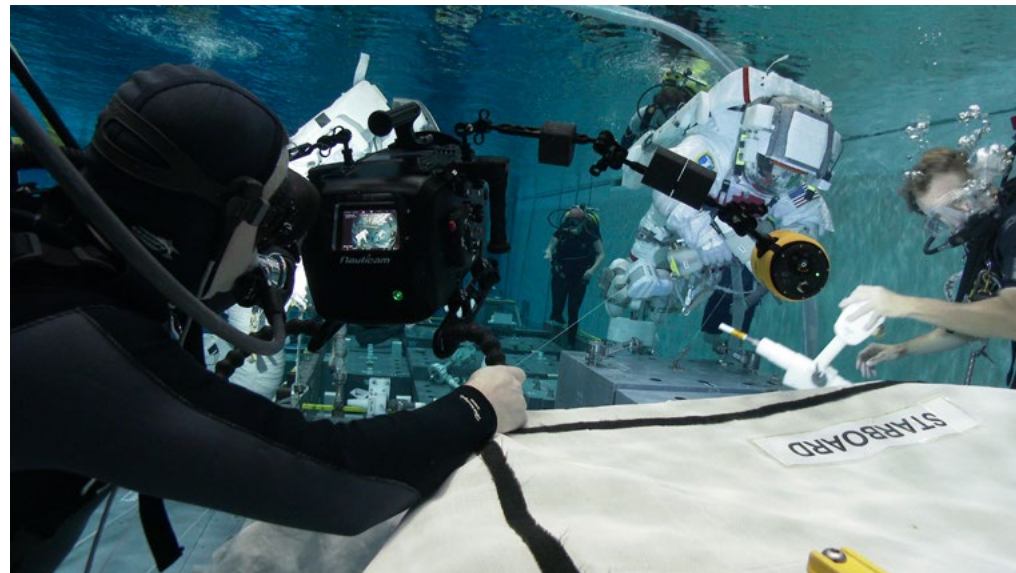
seen. And that class ruined my intended career in electrical engineering!

I met my wife, Christine, at a dive club. My kids really had no idea how amazing it was to me that they could get certified at age 10, which they both did. We are a scuba diving family.

How did you end up doing underwater videography for a living?

My interest in filmmaking came from diving. My first camera was a Nikonos V, so I started with still photography.

I got certified in 1988. A big influence was Howard Hall's *Shadows in a Desert Sea*, which aired in 1992. I started shooting segments with an underwater angle for local Boston TV in 1993. In 1995, I had the opportunity to go to Kwajalein Atoll, where I shot my first full-length film about sharks.

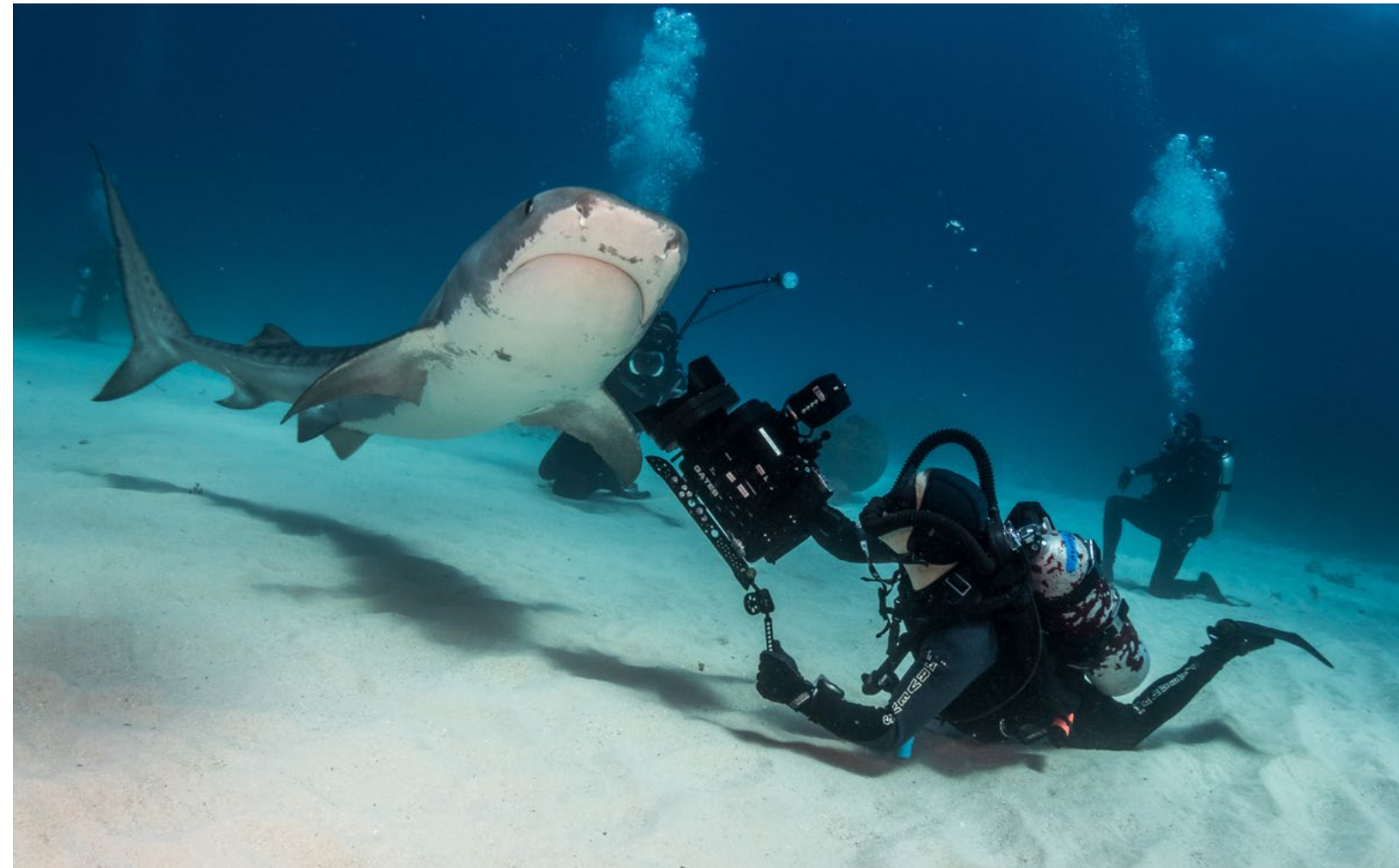


There was a large population of sharks because foreign fishing vessels weren't allowed in those waters because of military installations.

I came back to Kwajalein in 2000 to do a full-length feature for TV. We made a pilot in 2001. It was in a magazine format with two to three stories modeled after a show called *Chronicles*. We shopped it around to several chan-

nels. Discovery said it was too educational, but in 2003, we got a two-year contract with *National Geographic*. The pilot was turned into webisodes on the internet.

We started on YouTube in 2007. It looked bad, as it was crude and had low bandwidth. It was just 360p on our own website. We started doing segments as I retained the rights to put episodes on



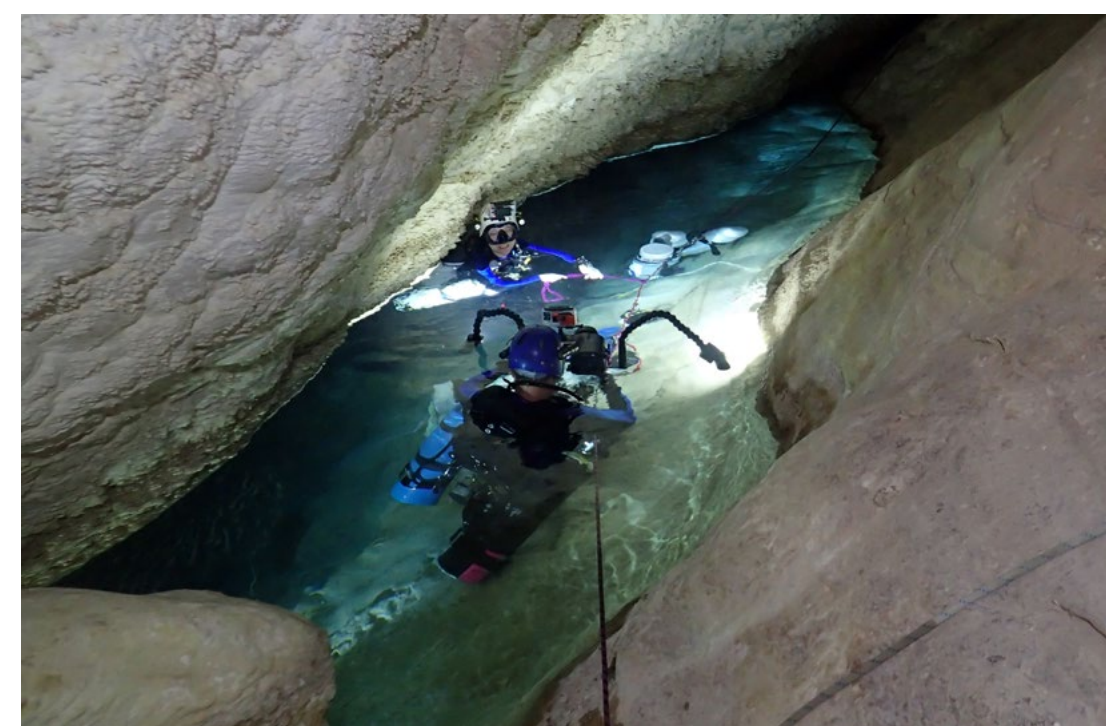
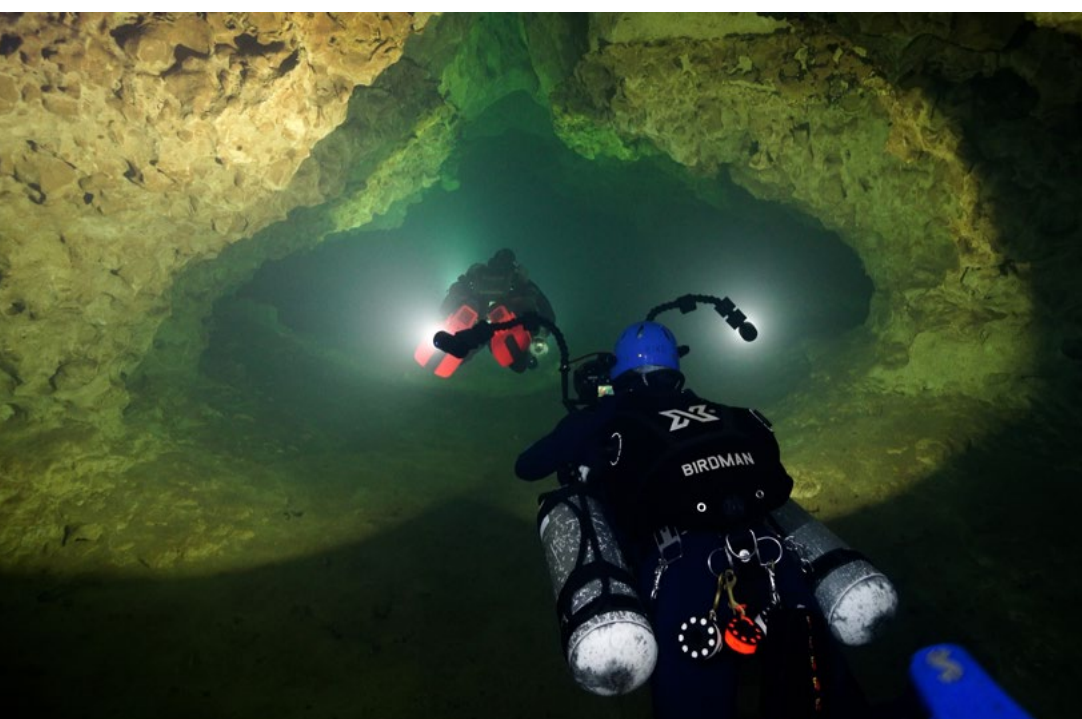
Bird filming a tiger shark in the Bahamas





Jonathan Bird

Bird shooting on location with an IMAX camera (left) and with an underwater camera in caves (above, right and bottom left)



Do you have to wait for opportunities or offers to present themselves?

We are a bit budget-constrained, so we have to work around that. For some segments, we get invited, such

as the segment on NASA. We get unique opportunities out of the blue. It is hard to do something new. Some locations are worked to death.

How do you envisage or get a sense of your audience and their frame of reference?

I don't make a show for divers but for the general audience. It is a show for anyone who likes the oceans. Our target audience is 12-year-olds. The vast part of our audience was probably under 18. BlueWorldTV is about underwater stuff. The bottom line is to tell a good story.

Which of your YouTube episodes is your favorite and why?

The next one is always my favorite. BlueWorldTV has given me the opportunity to travel the world with dear friends and have amazing adventures. When I go back and watch an older episode, it brings back so many great memories of the adventures we had making it, the people I met and the things I learned. So much fun! There is always another adventure to have, another place to go and another thing to see. So, I always look forward, not back.

What destination or location has been your best positive surprise or experience?

I find great joy in any place I've never been, whether it's a place lots of other people

have been or something way off the beaten track. There certainly is a great satisfaction in doing something that not many other people have done, but any place new to me is still new. That being said, coral reef destinations are really popular with the mainstream

diving crowd, but I have grown a little tired of that kind of thing. I seek something a little more special—bigger animals, colder water, rarer behaviors—just for the additional challenge and to produce something new and different.





Unexpected guest? A frogfish attaches itself to Bird's rig (top left). Bird in action, shooting scenes for BlueWorldTV (top right).



Bird's work has taken him all over the world to shoot film and video of dive adventures, including cave diving and diving with sharks.

What places or destinations remain on your bucket list?

The sardine run in South Africa, southern right whales in Patagonia.

With the benefit of hindsight, what advice would you give to your 20-year-old self?

Don't waste 20 years trying to figure out how to do it yourself. Find a mentor and make yourself useful.

If someone wanted to get into doing video reports for YouTube or another venue, what advice would you give them?

Find your voice, do it for fun and don't do it expecting to make a living at it because

that takes a long, long time. Don't give up in six months if you don't have a million subscribers. Underwater videos are not that popular, so if it clicks you care about, make cat videos. Learn video production and spend time on production value. If you don't take it seriously, nobody else will. Learn to tell stories. Get a real camera. Learn to edit. Don't spend too much time and effort on social media; it is largely worthless.

Who has inspired you the most? Who has provided you with the lessons or insights you value most?

I've had an evolution of inspirations and mentors in my career arc. My grandfather, who was an avid photog-

rapher, inspired my love of photography. I was the photo editor of my high school yearbook and president of my college photography club for a couple of years. Jacques Cousteau inspired me to dive and explore the underwater world. Once I was doing that, I became interested in underwater photography, and I was inspired primarily by photographers whose work I saw a lot in books and magazines—in particular, Marty Snyderman, Doug Perrine, David Doubilet and Chris Newbert.

When I became interested in underwater cinematography, I became a student of Howard Hall's work. There is simply nobody else in his league. But as a filmmaker, I also learned a lot from the people I worked

with locally, particularly my friends Art Cohen and Tim Geers, who worked at a local ABC affiliate. Working with them on news and local TV shows in Boston, I learned the art of telling a story, from the camera to the edit. I'm delighted to report that over time, I have been fortunate enough to become friends with all of my heroes, mentors and inspirations.

What are your three favorite books?

Let's go with movies: *Star Wars* (the original), *Love Actually* and *Back to the Future*. ■

For more information, visit: blueworldtv.com or [youtube.com/@BlueWorldTV](https://www.youtube.com/@BlueWorldTV)



In 2019, Jonathan Bird was inducted into the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame.

