

Divers at the surface (in the distance) after a dive in Alaskan waters. Cold water diving can be challenging, but with the right equipment and proper training, it can be very rewarding.

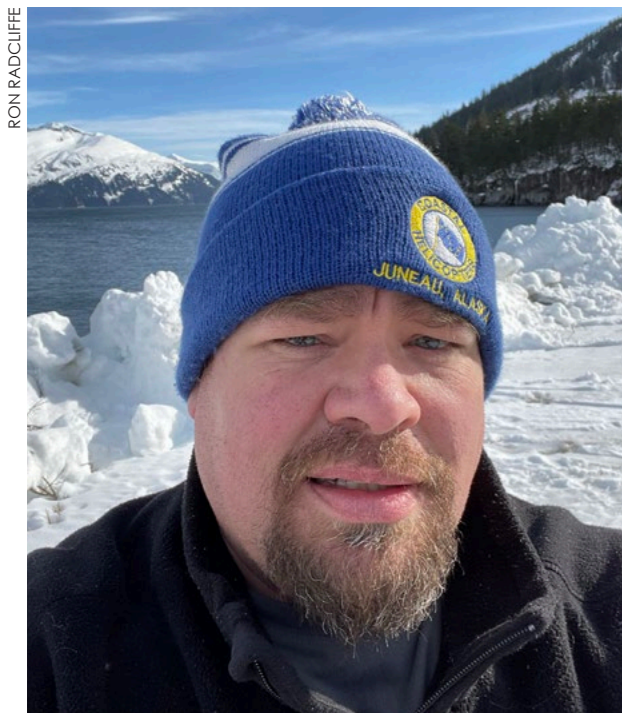
Text by Simon Pridmore and Ron Radcliffe
Photos by Ron Radcliffe, Larry Cohen and Peter Symes

What is it like to go diving in cold waters? Simon Pridmore shares a friend's story about the challenges of diving in Alaska and sums up the key takeaway tips for cold water diving.



Cold Waters

A Dive Journey in Temperature and Time



RON RADCLIFFE

Diver Ron Radcliffe in Juneau, Alaska

Some time ago, I saw and reposted an article about cold water diving by dive writer Candice Landau. It is a terrific piece, and I highly recommend it. One of the many responses I received to my repost was from Ron

Radcliffe, an old friend I had not seen for a long time.

Back in the late 1990s, when rebreathers for sport divers were new, I was invited to Okinawa, Japan, to run some rebreather training courses

for a dive shop called Fathoms, which was based close to Okinawa's famous Sunabe sea wall, where many people have their first experience of scuba diving. Ron was one of my rebreather students in Okinawa, and

his comment on Candice's article about cold water diving was:

"Going from warm to cold was not easy! I thought it was just a drysuit. Twelve years in Alaska and I still don't feel I've gotten a handle on it!"





Divers gather around their dive flag buoy in the cold waters of Alaska.

Ron and I had stayed in touch over the years, and I was aware that he had moved from Okinawa to Alaska. It sounded like he had a good story to tell, so I wrote to him, asking for the details. Sure enough, he had a great tale and told it beautifully, so I thought I would share it with you, with Ron's permission, of course.

This is what he wrote.

Words from Ron

I was fortunate to learn to dive in warm tropical waters, where I was able to dive in a shorty wetsuit almost all year long, but then I moved to Juneau, Alaska. Before I left, my

Okinawa roommate, who was from Seattle and had been diving his whole life, gave me one piece of advice.

"Don't be afraid of the cold, dark water," he said.

After securing work in Juneau, the first thing I did was call a local dive shop and sign up for a drysuit class. I thought the only difference between warm and cold water was the drysuit. I excitedly told the instructor that I was going to be there all summer, and if he needed a divemaster, I was available.

"Let's see how you do first," he replied.

I arrived in Alaska in early April, when there was still snow on the

ground. The air and water temperatures were both about 38°F (3°C). There were four of us in the class: two drysuit students and two open water students. The rental drysuit I wore did not fit very well, and the super-thin fleece undergarment was a size too small, which made putting on fins difficult. All I had, as far as undergarments were concerned, was that fleece and some tube socks. We geared up on the beach of a sheltered cove and waddled into the water. By the time I was up to my waist in the water, I was already beginning to question the wisdom of my decision to do this.

RON RADCLIFFE

A New Dive Book from Simon Pridmore

"Simon Pridmore's new book, *Technically Speaking* is an outstanding tour de force from one of modern diving's most accomplished practitioners and best-selling authors."

— David Strike, Oztek & Tekdive Convenor

"Simon has completed a complex task with consummate skill and has accurately unravelled the when's, the who's and some of the why's, much of which would have been unjustifiably lost in the mists of time if not for this work."

— Kevin Gurr, Technical Diving Inventor & Innovator

"It will take some doing to better this account of tech's first steps... as no matter how much you know or think you know; you will still find many obscure historical gems..."

— Kevin Denlay, Early Adopter & Wreck Finder

Technically Speaking is the latest book from best-selling Scuba series author Simon Pridmore. It is a selection of themed talks telling the early history of technical diving—where it came from, how it developed, how it expanded across

the world, who the important movers were and how, in the decade from 1989 to 1999, the efforts of a few determined people changed scuba diving forever.

These ten years saw the greatest shake-up the sport has ever seen but technical diving's road to universal acceptance was anything but smooth, many obstacles had to be overcome and there were times when even viewed in retrospect, it seemed that its advocates might fail in their mission. Ultimately, success came down to per-

severance, people power, good timing and more than a little luck.

Available in hardback, paperback and ebook at **Amazon Worldwide, Apple, Kobo, and Tolino.** See **SimonPridmore.com**



We completed about an hour of confined water skills and then moved on to dive one at a depth of about 20ft (6m). My memories of this are vague as, by now, the cold had become a serious problem. All I remember was performing what is probably the most important drysuit skill, where you let your feet fill up with air, and then flip over and dump the air out of the suit, to prevent a runaway ascent. I managed to do it with no problem, despite thinking that I was so cold I was going to pass out. My vision was blurred, and everything hurt.

After that, we all surfaced and started talking about dive two, but I

had had enough. I could barely stand, and it felt as if I had knives stabbing me in the soles of my feet. I told the instructor that I was finished. It must have taken me 20 minutes to walk out of the water, stagger to my truck and get my gear off. After a further 20 minutes sitting in the cab with the heater on full blast, I was finally able to function. I drove to the dive shop, dropped off the rental gear and thanked the staff for their time. I figured I was done with cold water diving.

Second attempt

However, that August, I called the dive shop again and asked if it was



Diver photographing a cold-water reef in Alaska

possible to try and do a second dive to complete my drysuit certification. I figured I had paid for it, so I might as well finish it. I discussed my concerns with the instructor, and we did a further classroom session where we talked about underwear and gloves. I decided I should try three-finger mittens, as well as thicker undergarments, on the next dive.

We then met up one evening after work and went diving. At this time of the year, the sun was still out at 10 p.m., the air temperature was in the

60s (°F) and the water temperature was in the low 50s (°F). We had a great dive, and I loved it. Maybe I would be able to get used to this after all.

Drysuits

After the summer ended, I left Alaska and lived in Texas for a while, doing a little diving in warmer waters. Then, two years later, I moved back to Alaska, for good this time. I rented an old, leaky drysuit, then ended up buying it. I was poor, and it was cheap.

I went diving a few times a year,

mostly in the summer. But once a year, I would do one cold, wintertime dive, to remind myself how nice the summer diving was, and because I enjoyed night diving and the only time you can do that in Alaska is in winter.

Eventually, I bought a different drysuit on eBay, which fit me better, although I can't say it made the diving more enjoyable. Every time, I still ended up damp and cold.

Watershed moments

In 2022, I moved farther north, to

LARRY COHEN

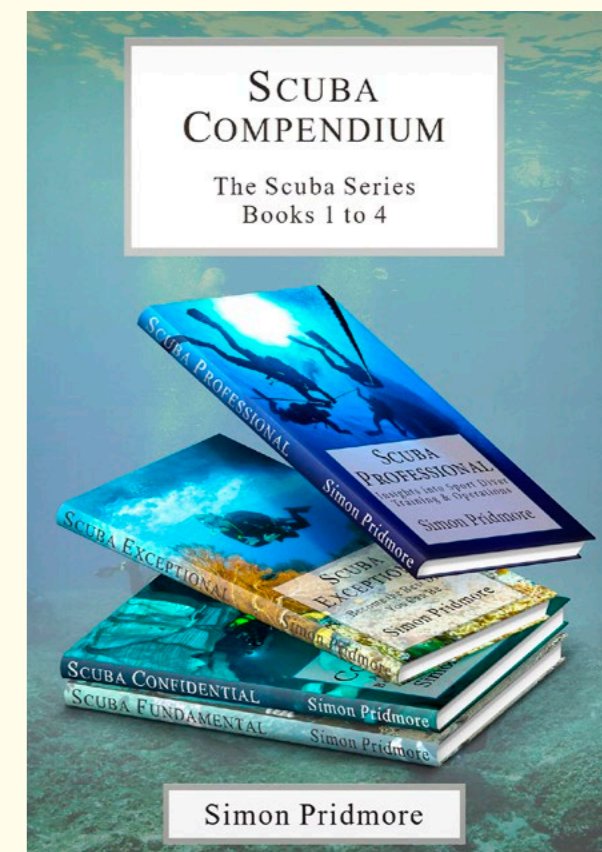
NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling *Scuba* series:

- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

As Simon puts it, this is “a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits.” Nothing is missing. *Scuba Compendium* gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much



of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

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Anchorage, where the diving was not as good, but there were many more divers. I went out diving with the local shop on one of their regular outings, but when I came up, I was soaked inside my suit. The shop owner saw me, offered to check out my suit and changed my life. He sealed the leak at the dump valve, assembled my inflator properly and trimmed my neck and wrist seals. The next dive I did was the first time I dived in Alaska and did not end up wet and miserable.

That was my first learning watershed.

The second came the following year, when I went to Florida to take a rEvo rebreather class. The instructor was adamant that I wear a drysuit, so I did, and over the next six days and after over ten hours in the water, I discovered just as much about drysuit diving as rebreather diving. My confidence in both soared, and the experience made me wish I had learned how to use a drysuit in warm water first.

After I returned to Alaska, I kept diving as much as possible. I found a lake near my house where I could





PETER SYMES

Cold Waters

Diver in the crystal-clear, cold waters of Iceland (left). Diver kitted up for cold water diving in the winter (below). Invest in warm undergarments, dry gloves, a hood and a well-fitting drysuit, and have the seals trimmed to fit you.

She would fill up a half-gallon thermos with water from the kettle before she left the house, and by the time the dive ended, the water would be quite warm but not too hot. As soon as she got her gear off, while still wearing her drysuit, she would open the thermos and pour the warm water on her head.

I copied her and found that this dramatically reduces your recovery time, while also giving you a bit of a rinse. It is as great a game changer as the dry gloves were.

Simon's reflections

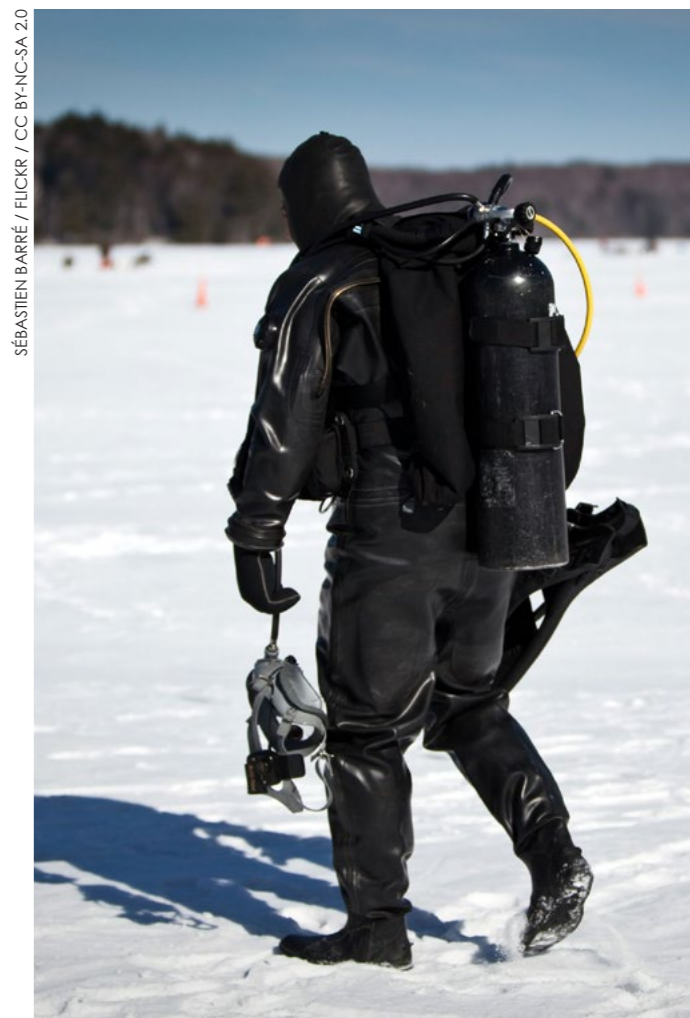
So that is Ron's tale: one of perseverance, honesty, myth-busting and myth-vindicating. It is also a very useful guide for anyone finding themselves in a similar situation.

To sum up, if you are a warm-water diver and ever anticipate moving to colder climes, either briefly or permanently, Ron's account offers some valuable takeaways.

- Learn how to dive in a drysuit in warm water first.
- Get tips from experienced divers in the area you are moving to.
- If you can afford it, buy a new drysuit and have the seals trimmed to fit you.
- If buying a used drysuit, shop carefully.
- Do not put up with leaks, however minor.
- Invest in good undergarments.
- Buy dry gloves.
- Don't give up. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right

Way, *Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*, *Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be* and *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*, now available as a compendium. He is also co-author of the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali* and the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia*. His latest books include *The Diver Who Fell from the Sky*, *Dive into Taiwan*, *Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again!* and the *Dining with Divers* series of cookbooks. Visit: SimonPridmore.com.



SEBASTIEN BARRÉ / FLICKR / CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

jump in on the weekends or after work, and I would still travel to the ocean a few times a month. I still have a love-hate relationship with cold water and my drysuit. Last year, I added dry gloves to my kit, which was a game-changer in the water but made kitting up on the beach more difficult.

Challenges

My usual dives last 45-60 minutes, so I am not using my CCR to its full potential. My next upgrade will probably be a custom-made drysuit.

The cold still sneaks up on me if I am not careful. Last fall, I wanted to dive a lake up in the mountains before it froze over. It was late August, and air

temperatures were in the 70s (°F), so I took my rEvo up there.

As soon as I got in the water, I knew something was wrong, because I couldn't catch my breath. I was not relaxed and had a hard time descending. At first, I thought I was having an issue with my rEvo, so I bailed out to open circuit. No change. Back on the loop. No change. Then I realised that the water temperature was much cooler at this higher elevation. It was 39°F (4°C), and I was only wearing thin undergarments and my summer gloves! I think that dive lasted all of 6 minutes.

Key lessons

Over the years, I have learned some

key lessons, the most important of which is that my "cold water clock" starts as soon as I get in the water. Once I get in, I have about 45 minutes before I need to get out. If I am diving with a buddy, I make it clear that I have no interest in floating around on the surface chatting pre-dive. We do the dive briefing on land before we get in. Then we get in, dive and get out.

My favourite bits of dive gear these days are not for diving at all. They are a fold-up chair and a thermos flask of water. The folding chair makes getting the suit on so much easier when there is no bench around, and the idea of the thermos came from a fellow diver I met in Juneau.

