

Kim WESTERSKOV

Oceans apart

Kim Westerskov could well be referred to as a Renaissance man. He's a marine biologist, a scuba diver, an author and a widely published multi-award winning freelance photojournalist specialising in natural history.

Kim has five times been awarded first prizes in the world's largest wildlife photography competition, the BBC/Natural History Museum 'Wildlife Photographer of the Year' competition. Only two other photographers in the 50 year history of this competition, the world's largest and most prestigious nature photography competition, have won this many first prizes.

It has been a long and rewarding road. He hardly remembers life before his first camera, a Box Brownie.

Of Danish extraction, Kim was born in America and has lived most of his life in New Zealand where he gained his Ph.D. in Marine Sciences from the University of Otago in 1981. Today, he is based in Tauranga, in the North Island's bountiful Bay of Plenty. ▶



Kim Westerskov at minus 50 degrees Celsius in Antarctica. © Kim Macfarlane

A former surfer, with an abiding love of wilderness areas, and the sea in particular, most of his work has been done in, under or around marine environments. He's also an ardent conservationist, and most of his published works have been aimed at children, in an effort to engender the same appreciation for nature in a younger audience.

'Although I write for adults when I have to, I enjoy writing for children much more. I guess I'm still a kid at heart.'

Kim maintains a stock library of over 100,000 images and his work is represented by multiple stock libraries around the world. With a strong background in film photography, his library images are 35mm, medium format 6x7 and 6x17cm, and today, digitally originated. In big years his film costs ran to well over \$10,000.

In addition to comprehensively covering New Zealand's coastal and marine environments, Kim has shot in the Southern Ocean, the subantarctic Islands, the South Pacific and in Antarctica. These southern latitudes are his natural environment and he knows them well.

'For me it's been the best job in the world. My favourite places are the wild unspoilt ones. If it's just me alone with nature somewhere, I'm happy.'

As well as the usual suspects – hard work, knowledge of your equipment and techniques – Kim attributes a lot of his success to research, anticipation and careful observation:

'If you only react to what has happened, then you're going to miss a lot. If you're ready, you'll sometimes get some very special moments. My best photos, the ones which won competitions, were often such special moments. Fleeting. Easily missed.'

Kim's CV reads like a boy's own adventure. He has worked alongside a BBC film crew in the Chatham Islands – stuck on a wave-lashed rock with thousands of albatrosses during the worst

storm in 15 years; with film crews around New Zealand; undertaken assignments for New Zealand Geographic Magazine – White Island, Mayor Island, whales, mangroves; the Department of Conservation – underwater photography; and managed to transport himself to all five of New Zealand's subantarctic island groups getting underwater, wildlife and aerial photos from them.

Nearly a full year of his life has been spent in Antarctica, spread over five visits. In 1982-83 he was the official photojournalist (Information Officer) over summer, and he visited again in late winter and spring in 1988 as a freelance photojournalist.

A major commission to photograph for the Antarctic Visitor Centre in Christchurch necessitated three extended visits to Antarctica in 1991-92. Kim captured over 25,000 images – all on film, from 35mm to 6x17cm – above and below the ice, including aeries, wildlife and sealife. On those visits, he experienced diving with seals below the sea ice, endured (enjoyed he says, seriously I suspect) a Force 10 storm while on an icebreaker in the Ross Sea, and visited the emperor penguin colony at Cape Crozier. Many of the photographs taken now feature as large exhibits at the centre, or are used in marketing collateral such as brochures and their website. ▶

Emperor penguins bowing to each other on sea ice, McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. It's hard not to like Emperor Penguins. I love them – they make living at the very edge of what is possible look easy. And they do it with so much grace, through the bitter Antarctic winter where there is 4 months of darkness, made worse by raging blizzards. Canon F-1N with 300mm f4 L lens. © Kim Westerskov



It doesn't take long to realise that some of Kim's work involves considerable danger, but his equipment has a hard time too. In one 18 month period he sustained combined equipment losses and damage to the tune of \$20,000 and wrote off two cameras, both the result of flooded underwater housings. He's had two Nikonos cameras washed out to sea in a storm, accompanied by three lenses – including what he describes a 'heartbreakingly expensive 15mm lens' – never to be seen again.

On his third visit to Antarctica, at the coldest time of the year in late winter/spring, he had with him four professional film cameras including Canon New F-1s and a Linhof 6x17, all 'winterised' for the conditions, and two more Canon cameras as backup. By the end of that stint, all four main cameras had broken down in the cold, which plummeted to minus 55°C at times.

Reminiscing about the Canon New F-1s he used there, Kim notes:

'Down to about minus 30°C all three performed OK, but below that, down to minus 55°C, they struggled. So too, for the record, did my film (which shatters easily into tiny pieces at those temperatures), my flash, my fingers and my body in general. Sometimes even my enthusiasm. But Antarctica during late winter and spring is stunningly beautiful and my cameras worked often enough to record a great deal of this beauty.'

Friend and owner/skipper of motor ketch Gemini Galaxsea, Graeme Butler, writing about Kim for Waterline Magazine in 2010, said:

'Kim is passion-driven and always has been. He became a wildlife photographer by simply refusing to be anything else. I have been lucky enough to watch Kim dive with a Southern Right Whale and her calf and take pictures of an inquisitive in-your-face 5 tonne baby. Like many extremely talented people, Kim is an inspiration to enthusiastic photographers regardless of their level of expertise. I asked him, 'how long does it take to be a great wildlife photographer?'

and his response at the time was, 'Fifty years so far!' Then I asked, 'How much does it cost?' and his reply was, 'Over a million dollars so far, and climbing daily...'

Kim now shares his experience, artistic vision and techniques with photographers at regular photo workshops, meetings and private tuition he runs from his home studio. His frequent email newsletters share his passion and enthusiasm with a large group of camp followers, mainly enthusiast photographers, and provide opportunities for networking and personal development in a relaxed environment.

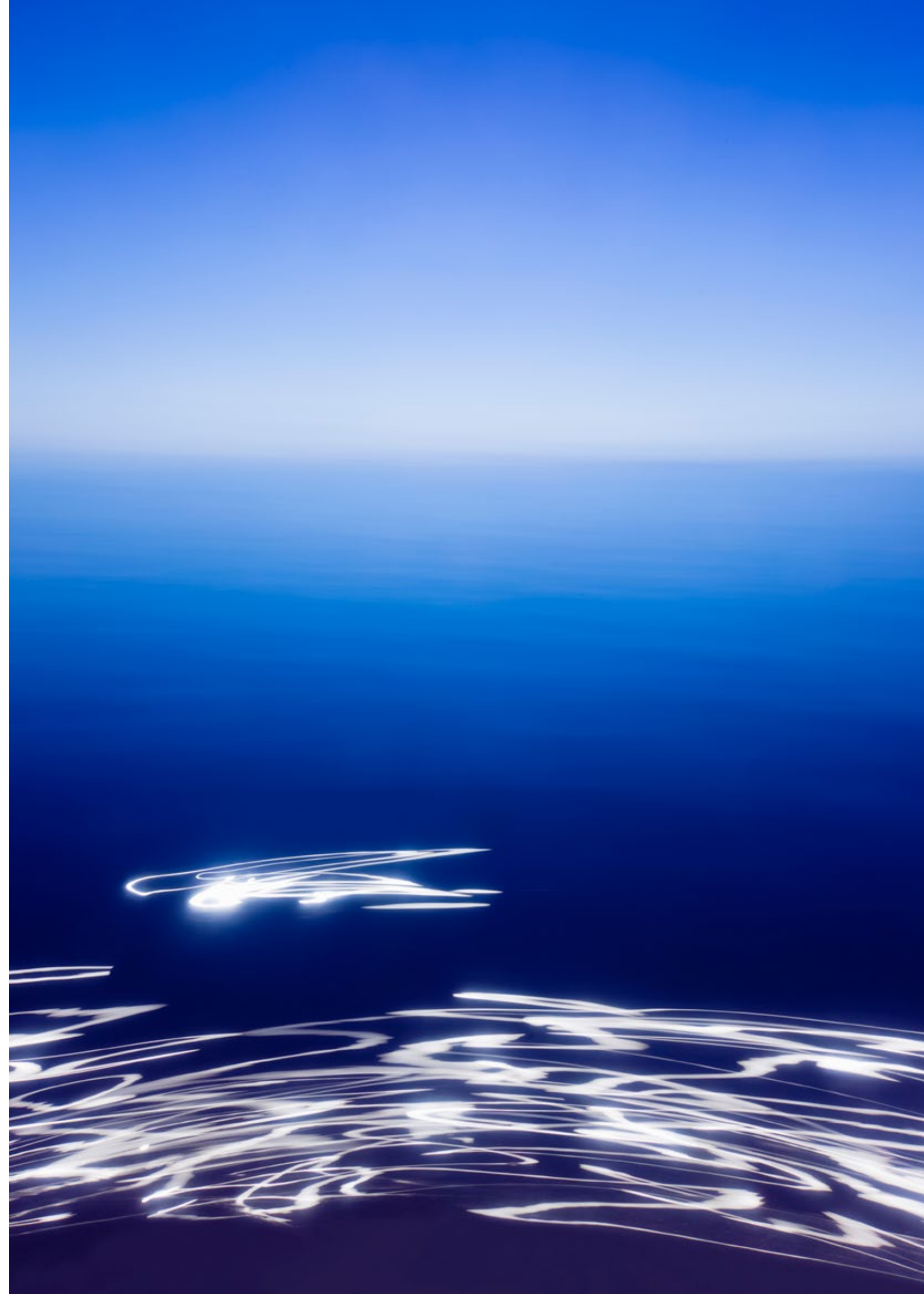
f11: Welcome to f11 Kim, great to have you here at last after what feels like a long courtship process!

KW: Thanks Tim, yes it's been a long time. Thanks for all the Velvia back in the old film days when you ran Fujifilm Professional. I remember teaming up with you and Fujifilm to present Bruno Troublé (former America's Cup skipper and for many years head of the Louis Vuitton Cup challenger selection series) with one of my Emperor Penguin photos after he took a shine to one in your boardroom!

f11: Ah the old days, I remember them well. What sort of doors did winning those BBC Wildlife Photography Competitions open for you? Were these valuable introductions at the time?

KW: Big doors, lots of doors, those doors opening really kick-started my career as a full-time professional nature photographer. If somebody significant overseas says, 'you're good' – whatever field you're in – then all of a sudden you have credibility in New Zealand. ▶

Sea, sunlight and sky, Bay of Plenty, NZ. Photo Impressionism from my Visual Poetry series. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-35 f2.8 L lens. © Kim Westerskov



f11: Tell us about your first serious camera, the one that started the bug?

KW: Every camera was serious at the time: the Box Brownie, the Yashica twin lens reflex, the Exakta 35mm, the Pentax Spotmatic, and then the Canon New F-1s in the mid 1980s when I became full time professional. The Spotmatic died when a rogue wave washed us both off the cliffs on the exposed west coast of the Auckland Islands. I grabbed hold of the very last bull kelp stalk on the way down, and hung on tightly. I was wet and shaken, but the Spotmatic never functioned again. I was a bit more careful on rocky coastlines after that.

f11: What's the main workhorse today, and do you have to frequently replace gear because of the harsh lives you subject your stuff to?

KW: Above water I love my Canon EOS 5D MkII. Its backup is another 5D which has had a hard life and isn't feeling too well. Underwater, I've been a Nikonos man for most of my career, using Nikonos 5s and the standard-setting Nikonos 15mm and 20mm wide-angle lenses.

Many of my dives have been in hard-to-get-to places and the Nikonos is ideal there – it's small and rugged – and takes wonderful photos. I used a Canon F-1 in a housing for a while too. I try not to damage or lose too much gear, but for me the photo is everything. If the camera has to go somewhere unsafe then, well, that's its job.

I've been a fan of Irish singer Van Morrison for a long time. Many years ago I remember thinking: 'Van Morrison takes his voice to places where voices shouldn't go, normally can't go ... but the results are amazing. Is there something I can learn here?' ►



This young humpback whale appeared like a ghostly apparition in the deep blue water – I saw the whiteness before I saw the whale. Closer and closer it came, surfacing next to me and passing so close that I could have touched the tip of its long pectoral flipper. Vava'u, Kingdom of Tonga. Canon F-1 with 20mm f2.8 lens in housing. © Kim Westerskov

The answer was obvious: to take my cameras into places where cameras shouldn't go – as far as their safety is concerned. So for many years, I took my cameras onto wild remote islands or to rugged dive sites, poked them into crevasses in Antarctica, into storms or into minus 50°C air or along wave-battered coastlines. If the rest of the ship's crew was inside, I'd be tucked away somewhere outside with my camera. The force 10/11 storm in the Ross Sea was great. I'd been hoping for a storm, and it lived up to expectations. I stayed up all night (in Antarctica in summer it's light all night) out on the quarterdeck of the icebreaker, photographing the big wind-ripped swells as they thundered past – sometimes higher than where I was standing. When the captain finally ordered everybody inside, I spent the rest of the storm on the bridge, photographing the sea and bow of the icebreaker as it plunged into big swells. 'Why do you all duck when a big wave comes?' I asked the watch on the bridge, 'that's reinforced glass in front of us, and we're 55 feet above waterline.' 'On a recent trip a big wave came in through the reinforced glass. We had a guy killed on the bridge too – the ship has no keel (a keel is no good for icebreaking) and so it rolls badly...' was the reply.

f11: What's in your bag today, the main working kit? Or perhaps you have 2 kits – one for above water and the other for below?

KW: Above water: the Canon EOS 5D MkII, five lenses, all Canon, mostly pro 'L' lenses: 15mm fisheye (not an 'L' lens, but I love what it can do), 16-35mm, 24-105mm, 70-200mm, 300mm, and a 1.4x extender. I have a 2x extender too, but almost never use it. Gitzo Mountaineer tripod. Lots of bits and pieces. Flash – but almost never use it unless I really have to. I'm a natural light boy.

Underwater: Nikonos 5 camera bodies, 15mm lenses from Nikon and Sea & Sea, Sea & Sea strobes. I have got an Ikelite housing and dome port for the Canon EOS 5D MkII with 15mm fisheye, but have not yet got it going.

f11: What's on the shopping list right now, anything you're lusting after gear wise?

KW: Photographers all have wish lists, don't they? It's part of being a photographer. I've always made do with less than many other professionals – there was always so much gear I couldn't afford – so I make do with whatever I have. I've never had a big 500-800mm telephoto lens like every real wildlife photographer has. I could never afford one, so I'd use a good quality Canon 300mm lens with extenders, and just get closer. I love wide angle, the wider the better, so I'd love a Canon 14mm or the Canon fisheye zoom. I did have a 14mm Canon lens once, but it was stolen from my van. And the insurance company just said 'Sorry. Your problem'. I never had enough money that wasn't already committed elsewhere to replace it.

f11: Do you remember the last roll of film you exposed? What was on it?

KW: It was a roll of Fujichrome Provia in my Nikonos, with photos of fur seals I was swimming with at Mayor Island. Good photos too. ▶

▶ *Sculpted by sunlight and wind, this piece of broken sea ice rests on the sea's frozen surface in the Ross Sea. By summer it will be gone. Wind shapes everything in Antarctica: the snow, ice, rocks (rocks shaped by wind-blown sand and gravel are called ventifacts), and the lives of the people there. McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. Canon F-1N with 28mm f2 lens.*
© Kim Westerskov

▶▶ *Following double page spread: Giant kelp [Macrocystis pyrifera] washed up on boulder beach, Carnley Harbour, Auckland Islands. Two limpets. Another drizzly overcast day in the subantarctic. I call this photo 'Aroha'. Canon F-1N, with 28-85mm f4 lens.*
© Kim Westerskov





f11: Do you miss anything about silver halide photography?

KW: Not really, other than the knowledge in hindsight that I was part of a much smaller, more exclusive club of photographers. Now everyone is a photographer, which makes many aspects of being a professional much harder, though it also means there's the opportunity to teach and share my knowledge and passion with other keen photographers. But do I miss film? Nope. Much of my photography has been in less than ideal light – storms, heavily overcast, murky dark water, or of fast moving subjects, or from fast moving boats, planes or helicopters. Or a combination of some of the above. Digital handles these situations so much better than film. I'm still delighted at how 'clean' my digital captures look.

f11: What was your first experience with a digital camera like?

KW: In exchange for \$50 the late Brian Curtis spent a couple of hours showing me how to get started. The best \$50 I've ever spent. That was in 2006. Underwater, I kept shooting film, but above water I only ever took one – yes, one – more shot on film. There's an awful lot of Fujichrome Velvia and Provia film in my freezer, 35mm, 120, 220. Well out of date now, but probably still good. I can't bring myself to get rid of it.

f11: What's your digital workflow, and what's a typical post production process for you?

KW: For Peter Jackson there is no post production. Even after the actors have gone home and the sets have been dismantled, his work to get the film completed goes on. It's all part of production. I work like that too. The bit where I'm holding the camera is just the middle bit of the process, and often the shortest bit. Before I'm even holding the camera I'm typically researching, or thinking, or dreaming about photographic possibilities. Then I organise the shoot – be it far afield, close to home or maybe even in my studio – and do the camera bit. After I've downloaded

the files onto my computer, the production rolls on, typically for a lot longer than the camera bit. Some photographers get home, download their photos and then ruthlessly throw away all the rejects before even seeing what magic Photoshop might be able to achieve. I can't work like that. That RAW file on my computer is just a starting point. Even if I shot JPEGs, that JPEG would be just the starting point. From there on, magic can happen – and often does, but it's not quick magic or one-size-fits-all magic or Preset #27 magic. Rather, it's 'What magic can I create from this file?' Each file is a new adventure.

I have calculated that the number of possible variations on a single photo in Photoshop, or Lightroom in the Develop Module, using just the basic tools, is greater than the total number of atoms in the known universe. So if you're ever lost or confused in Photoshop or Lightroom – that's one possible reason. Now most of those variations will not be any good, but several trillion probably are. And millions will be great. As well as one single photo sometimes having many possible equally-good final versions, there are also different ways of getting more or less the same end result. So I swim happily inside Photoshop to see what I can create. I'm typically heading towards one of two end points. My career as a professional nature photographer has been built upon real photos – documentary photos – real places or animals or people or situations. Here I'm trying to be truthful but ►

For a short magical time on cloudless days, sunlight pours into Swallow's Cave, Kapa Island, Vava'u group, Tonga. It took several attempts (spread over four visits to Tonga) to get this photo. A cloudless day was needed, as well as a boat and willing dive partners. And a torch! Canon F-1 with 15mm f2.8 fisheye lens in housing. © Kim Westerskov



I also want people looking at my photos to go ‘Wow!’ So there’s a line in the sand that I generally don’t cross. I want my documentary photos to have integrity, to be real (although ‘real’ can be a slippery term for many reasons) but I also want them to have maximum impact within the boundaries of integrity.

However, part of me is also an artist, always has been. I call this second strand to my photography visual poetry or photo impressionism. These photos – created both in camera and Photoshop – are more about feelings and emotions and ideas and colour and movement than the normal or real photos we’re used to. All but one (the image on page 17) of the photos here in *f11* are my real ones – the visual poetry will have to wait until another time.

***f11*: You have a massive library, how many of the film images have you digitised and how are you backing everything up?**

KW: I’ve lost count. All of my hero images and many thousands of my quite good photos have now been scanned and reside in digital form in my computer system. The main computer for photos is in my studio – the same place I run my workshops from. When all is running as it should – which happens often but not always – everything on the main computer backs up automatically at 3.00am every Monday to a DROBO (an external storage device, typically with several hard drives in it) in the same room. Then at 3.00am every Wednesday, everything backs up automatically to another DROBO in the house we live in, and at 3.00am on Friday everything backs up to a third DROBO down in another office in a third building. And finally, every now and then, everything is backed up manually to a fourth DROBO which is taken away and stored elsewhere in town.

***f11*: Let’s talk about mentors and influences. Who did you look up to when you were starting out, and whose work do you admire today?**

KW: I never really felt I had any photographic mentors or obvious influences. I mostly just

made it up as I went along. The mentors I did have were not photographers, but people who helped me get through university in one piece (like Dr John Jillett at Otago University) or found me meaningful employment as a real photographer (like Dr Bill Ballantine at the Leigh Marine Laboratory) or supported my photography by getting me out to sea again and again and again – like my good friend – and boat owner – Graeme Butler. Also, as with many other nature photographers, I never received any formal training in photography. I was passionate about it, so I read about it, experimented and just did it.

Interestingly, the five first prizes in the BBC/ Natural History Museum ‘*Wildlife Photographer of the Year*’ Competition – and four trips to London to accept the prizes (I was in Antarctica during the fifth awards ceremony) – allowed me to meet many of the very best nature photographers in the world at the time. Looking at the backgrounds of four of the most successful I noticed two slightly unusual things. What did these four have in common, other than the obvious things like passion and knowledge of their equipment and photography? All four had university degrees in biology, so they knew their subjects, and all four also had a Fine Arts background – some were practicing artists as well as photographers, or at least had studied art at tertiary level. ▶

Portrait of a Southern Buller’s Albatross (Mollymawk) on its nest on Solander Island, south of Fiordland and west of Stewart Island, New Zealand. What the photo doesn’t show is how steep the slope we were on was. More of a cliff than a slope really. Canon EOS 5D with 300mm f4 L IS lens. © Kim Westerskov



Whose work do I admire today? Any photographer who gets, or creates, great photos. The ones that make me go ‘Wow!’, or that make me choke up. The ones who remind me what a precious gift life is, who reinforce what a strange species we humans are (so much good and so much not good), and who remind me what really matters in life. And photography, good photography, can do these things better than most other forms of communication.

f11: Amongst the 100,000 images in your library, which 2 or 3 are your true favourites, the best of the best in your opinion? And why?

KW: I usually finish my talks with either the photo of three Orca spyhopping (it always gets a good reception) or the Blue Whale with Mount Maunganui in the background. The Orca photo has a long story that goes with it, and the photo itself is probably genuinely unique. There are many photos of Orca spyhopping, but I’ve never seen another photo where there are three Orca all at exactly the same height. Spyhopping is their way of seeing what’s up on the ice. The Blue Whale is the largest animal ever to have lived on earth as far as we know, heavier than any known dinosaur, so to have seen one feeding so close to where I live is a real privilege.

f11: If you had to choose just one image from your memory banks, someone else’s image, what do you think is the single most important still photograph captured in your lifetime?

KW: I’ve given some public talks recently on the importance of photography, so I’ve had time to ponder that question. The ones that affect me emotionally are mostly people photos: an 8-year old boy holding back tears as he’s presented with the flag from his father’s coffin (his father was killed while serving in Iraq), a widowed wife leaning distraught against the grave of her soldier husband, and many more heart-breaking images. But maybe the most significant photo of all is Steve McCurry’s Afghan Girl. Her haunting and haunted eyes confront us, asking many uncomfortable questions. It has become such

a well known photo that National Geographic ran it twice on its cover, once in 1985, and again recently.

f11: Diving demands discipline and concentration. What happens when you add photography equipment and a mission objective to that mix of priorities?

KW: For me it’s always been about getting the photo. That has always mattered more than most other considerations. Much of my diving has been in cold water, but I was never cold until I ran out of film. Then all of a sudden I was freezing, and just wanted to be somewhere warm. I’m definitely guilty of putting the image ahead of safety considerations. Generally I didn’t do really silly stuff – though that depends on how you define really silly stuff I guess – but I have pushed the envelope, pushed the safety margins, used up that last bit of air in my tank for the last photo rather than keeping it for some later possible emergency as I should have done. But I was always so scared of getting the bends that I usually gave myself good safety margins.

f11: You also dive in some very technically-challenging environments, tell us about some of the complications involved?

KW: Diving under the Antarctic sea ice was technically the most challenging. If you fast forward to the question about my scariest dive moment further on in the article – that lists some of the challenges. Two of the most ►

*White-capped albatrosses nesting on the tussocky slopes at South West Cape, Auckland Island. In the background are Carnley Harbour and Victoria Passage separating Adams Island at right with the main Auckland Island at left. With a wide or semi-wide angle lens it is often possible to tell a whole story in a single photo. Canon F-1N with 28-85mm f4 lens.
© Kim Westerskov*





Beacon Valley, one of the unique and hauntingly beautiful ice-free valleys in Antarctica's Transantarctic Mountains. If I was allowed to revisit just one of the many wonderful places I've been to, I'd choose these valleys. I can't really explain why. There is a deep silence here, almost sacredness. A light dusting of snow highlights the form of these rock glaciers at the head of the valley. Rock glaciers are ice-poor glaciers, similar to alpine glaciers but composed mostly of rock with some ice holding the rock together. They move very slowly. The layered, light-coloured rocks are Beacon Supergroup sandstones. The dark rocks are Ferrar Dolerite sills, where basalt magma was forced sideways between layers of Beacon sandstone as thick horizontal sheets. Linhof Technorama 617 camera. © Kim Westerskov

'If you only react to what has happened, then you're going to miss a lot. If you're ready, you'll sometimes get some very special moments. My best photos, the ones which won competitions, were often such special moments. Fleeting. Easily missed.'

obvious challenges about diving under Antarctic fast ice are the cold – it’s minus 1.8°C all the time, the freezing point of seawater, and the fact that the only way of getting back to the surface was through the small hole I entered by. If I couldn’t get back to that hole, I was in big trouble.

Sometimes when diving, it felt that getting any photo at all was a real achievement, let alone a good photo. Challenges included the limited time underwater (a tank of air typically lasts less than an hour – except for shallow dives), only 36 photos on a roll of film (so I often took down two cameras), impaired thinking at depth, the cold, the poor visibility, the flash bouncing off particles in the water, the darkness, the currents (dragging me away from where I wanted to be), the difficulty of staying in exactly the one spot long enough to get all the technical stuff right for a good photo, the safety considerations (making sure I got back to the surface without the bends or an air embolism or whatever), or simply getting back to the boat or shore. Let alone getting to these places in the first place.

Yes, sometimes the dive boat wasn’t there any more, or the current had pulled us out away from the cliffs so we couldn’t get back to our entry point, but that’s another series of stories, a rather long list. All true, and I’m glad I survived. Then again like most young males, I was bulletproof. I felt bulletproof, so I was. Which is roughly how it works for young males. That’s why many do such crazy stuff. And achieve good things as well as getting into trouble. For the record, I’m not bulletproof any more. I’m very careful now. I have to be. I have a family I have to come home to every time.

f11: Have underwater housings and specialist dive cameras improved dramatically over the years or are these still fraught with difficulty?

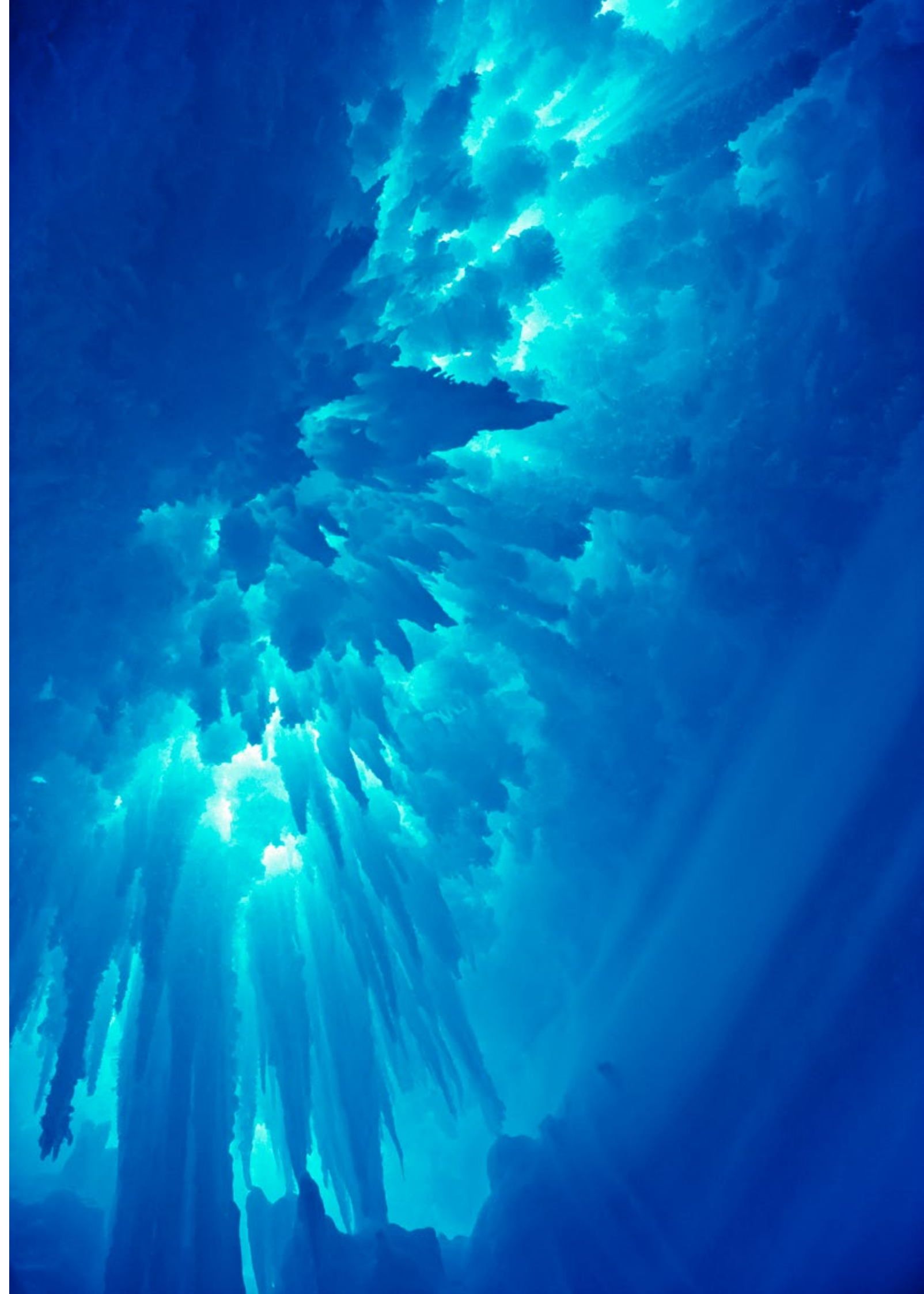
KW: Everything to do with photography has improved dramatically, and keeps improving. What used to be technically difficult and

expensive can now be done easily and cheaply. A little Go Pro can do amazing stuff. So the overall standard of underwater photography – as with above-water photography – continues to rise and rise and rise. So, technically it’s much easier now. But a great composition is still a great composition and a great moment is still a great moment. These probably require as much skill as ever – though with lots of room on a digital memory card, it’s easy for many photographers to just blast away and hope they get something good.

f11: What was your scariest dive photography moment?

KW: There have been many exciting moments – involving sharks, whales, Orca, currents, dive boats that had disappeared during the dive, being stuck inside shipwrecks, and so on – but most didn’t seem scary at the time. Except for one. On my first dive under the Antarctic sea ice I had a potentially dangerous situation. Our dive team had arranged for a metre-wide hole to be drilled through the two-metre thick fast ice (the sea ice anchored to the shoreline) by some friendly Americans from nearby McMurdo Station. This hole was our entry point into the dark clear water underneath. We were diving next to the Erebus Glacier Tongue, a floating extension of the Erebus Glacier. Visibility under the sea ice in early summer was essentially limitless but the snow covering the ice made it dark. It was deep too – the bottom was somewhere below well out of diving range. As far as we were concerned it was bottomless. Diving regulations at the time said we had to ►

Ice stalactites hanging from ceiling of ice cave in the Erebus Glacier Tongue, McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. Sunlight filtering down through glacier ice floods ice cave in the Erebus Glacier Tongue, the seaward extension of the Erebus Glacier that floats out into McMurdo Sound. Cold, still, blue, special. Olympus OM-1 with Zuiko 35mm f2.8 lens. © Kim Westerskov



be tethered by a rope to someone up on the sea ice. The theory went that if we got into trouble, we'd give the rope a few yanks and we'd be pulled in. Fine in theory, but highly impractical, so our support person just let out much more rope than we needed. The rope hung in a big loop from us, down into the depths, then back up and out again through the hole to our support person.

I sank through the hole and into the almost-black freezing water. The seawater under the ice is a constant minus 1.8°C. And I sank, and sank. In normal diving back in New Zealand we usually wear a buoyancy compensator (BCD) which we let air into, or expel air from, to control our buoyancy. In Antarctica we dived in dry suits which acted as both insulation and buoyancy control. If I was a bit heavy and was sinking, I would press the valve on the front of my drysuit and air from the tank would flow in, making me more buoyant. But at minus 1.8°C, there are sometimes problems. My problem that day was that the vital valve froze and I couldn't get any more air into my dry suit. I was sinking. As I sank deeper and deeper the water pressure compressed the air in my suit, so I was effectively heavier. So I sank faster. I looked at my safety line. From my waist it hung down into the darkness, forming such a big loop that I could hardly see the bottom of the loop and where it started its ascent to the surface and the life-giving hole in the ice, already a long way away. I couldn't swim across to the ascending part of the safety line in time, and I knew that if the safety line ever became taut I'd be so deep that I'd be in real trouble. Or worse.

What to do? The same as a mother does if a car runs over her toddler. She lifts the car off the toddler. Then wonders later 'How could I possibly have lifted a car?' When we really, really, need to, we sometimes find extra strength or resources that we don't normally have. Swimming as hard as I could upwards in normal swimming mode I was still sinking. I couldn't

swim fast enough. However in 'let's go into lift car off my toddler mode' I found the extra strength needed to swim back to the surface. Except there wasn't a surface. There was just the underside of the sea ice, and the entry/exit hole. If I went up through the hole, that would probably be the end of that dive. So I just floated there under the ice, gathering my wits, relaxing, getting my breathing back to normal. And then got back to the business of diving – photographing the underside of the sea ice, the vertical underwater cliff of frozen glacier tongue, and occasional Weddell seals. Whew!

f11: And your hairiest above water photography moment?

KW: Hairiest? Scariest? Hundreds of 'whew, glad that worked out well' moments, but nothing that frightened me at the time – only when I think about them now. Drifting out to sea in the direction of Chile, dangling off cliffs or being accidentally dragged off cliffs by rogue waves or chased by roaring sealions just seemed to be part of the job, part of the adventure. Even finding – twice – that the harness attaching me to the helicopter I was photographing from, while leaning out of the open door, had accidentally disengaged.

f11: Now to the workshops and seminars you run in Tauranga, what sort of people are you attracting and what are their expectations of you?

KW: Some of the people I teach, or mentor, are already professional, or semi-professional, photographers, others are just starting out – and there is every colour of ability in-between. ►

US Coastguard icebreaker Polar Sea opening a channel through the fast ice (sea ice still anchored to the shore) for the annual resupply of the Italian Antarctic research station at Terra Nova Bay, Ross Sea, Antarctica. I shot this from the icebreaker's helicopter. Canon F-1N with 28-85mm f4 lens. © Kim Westerskov



All are equally welcome. As far as expectations go, every person is different, and this is the challenge. If there are six photographers coming to a workshop, all six will have different equipment, different levels of technical or creative abilities, and different expectations. I prepare for this by sending out detailed questionnaires before every workshop, and fine-tune each workshop according to the replies, as well as fine-tuning each workshop as it goes. If any photographer has more questions, I encourage them to keep in touch – and many do.

f11: Do you personally gain anything from these seminars, creatively?

KW: Every photographer I meet brings something to the table, and I feel I get as much from the teaching as they do. It's a two-way thing, even when I do much of the talking. Some of the photographers I've taught are very skilled or creative in certain areas, and this can't help but rub off. Sometimes they let me borrow a special lens for a while. I'm finding a surprising amount of satisfaction from seeing 'my' photographers doing well, enjoying their photography and getting better and better every day. One of them recently held an exhibition and sold 11 framed photos – I was as pleased and excited about it as she was.

f11: What are some of the photography locations that have eluded you so far?

KW: Too many to list. What I've always done is make the best of whatever opportunities I've had, rather than worrying too much about places I couldn't get to. I did get to the places that I most wanted to get to – the subantarctic islands ►



Dusky dolphins swim in synchrony in clear blue sea off the Kaikoura coastline of the South Island, New Zealand. I had a month-long contract with the Department of Conservation to photograph the whales, dolphins and other wildlife of the Kaikoura coastline. The dusky dolphins there are often found near the shore in normally murky coastal waters – great for dolphin swim ecotourism operators but not good for underwater photography. So we spent a day well offshore in clear blue waters looking for, and eventually photographing, the dolphins. Nikonos 5 with Nikonos 15mm f2.8 lens.

© Kim Westerskov

and Antarctica itself. I never made it to South Georgia or Alaska, or lots of other places, but that's fine. I'm happy.

f11: What professional goals still exist for you?

KW: I'd really, really love my best photos, from Antarctica to the tropics, to be showcased in a single big book. 'Southern Ocean Wilderness' it's called – in my head. Plus some other books. Since the age of four I've wanted to write books, and now have – 18 to date – plus contributing to many others. I'd like to develop the teaching further, both face-to-face with real people and maybe through my website. It's often suggested that I turn my workshop handouts and/or the many adventures I've had into eBooks so I'd like to get that going too. It's also time to make available a few of my very best photos as Limited Edition prints too. I'm currently looking into that.

f11: If life as a photographer had eluded you, do you think that marine biology would have been your 'day job'?

KW: No, not as a scientist. I'm maybe a naturalist in the old-school sense of loving nature and getting to know a fair bit about it, but mostly by observation and simply by being there rather than by counting and measuring and poking. It took me a long time to figure out that although I loved nature and the sea especially, that I wasn't really cut out to be a scientist. What I've done instead, photography and writing about nature and the sea, is a much better fit for me.

f11: Thanks Kim, it's a pleasure.

KW: Thanks for the opportunity Tim.
Much appreciated. ■

TS

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A magic moment in Antarctica. I'm standing at the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf in McMurdo Sound in late summer. For the previous 14 hours I've been taking aerial photos in the Transantarctic Mountains. After a long and tiring day, the helicopter pilot (Rob McPhail) and I were heading back from the Antarctic continent towards McMurdo Station on Ross Island. We saw Orca swimming along the ice edge. Rob dropped me off and then hovered – the ice was too rough to land. I waited and waited, keeping my 80-200mm lens manually focussed on where I felt the Orca might surface next. Fortune favours those who are ready. I was ready. Three Orca rose in perfect unison in the viewfinder. Click. No motor drive, no auto wind on. Canon F-1N with 80-200mm f4 L lens. © Kim Westerskov



Lone Adelie penguin in a field of jumbled ice, ‘push ice’ (ice floes driven ashore and piled upon each other during storms). It’s midsummer and the adult Adelies are all running a shuttle service from the sea to shore, bringing food for their rapidly-growing chicks ashore. Linhof Technorama 617 camera © Kim Westerskov

‘If somebody significant overseas says, ‘you’re good’ – whatever field you’re in – then all of a sudden you have credibility in New Zealand.’

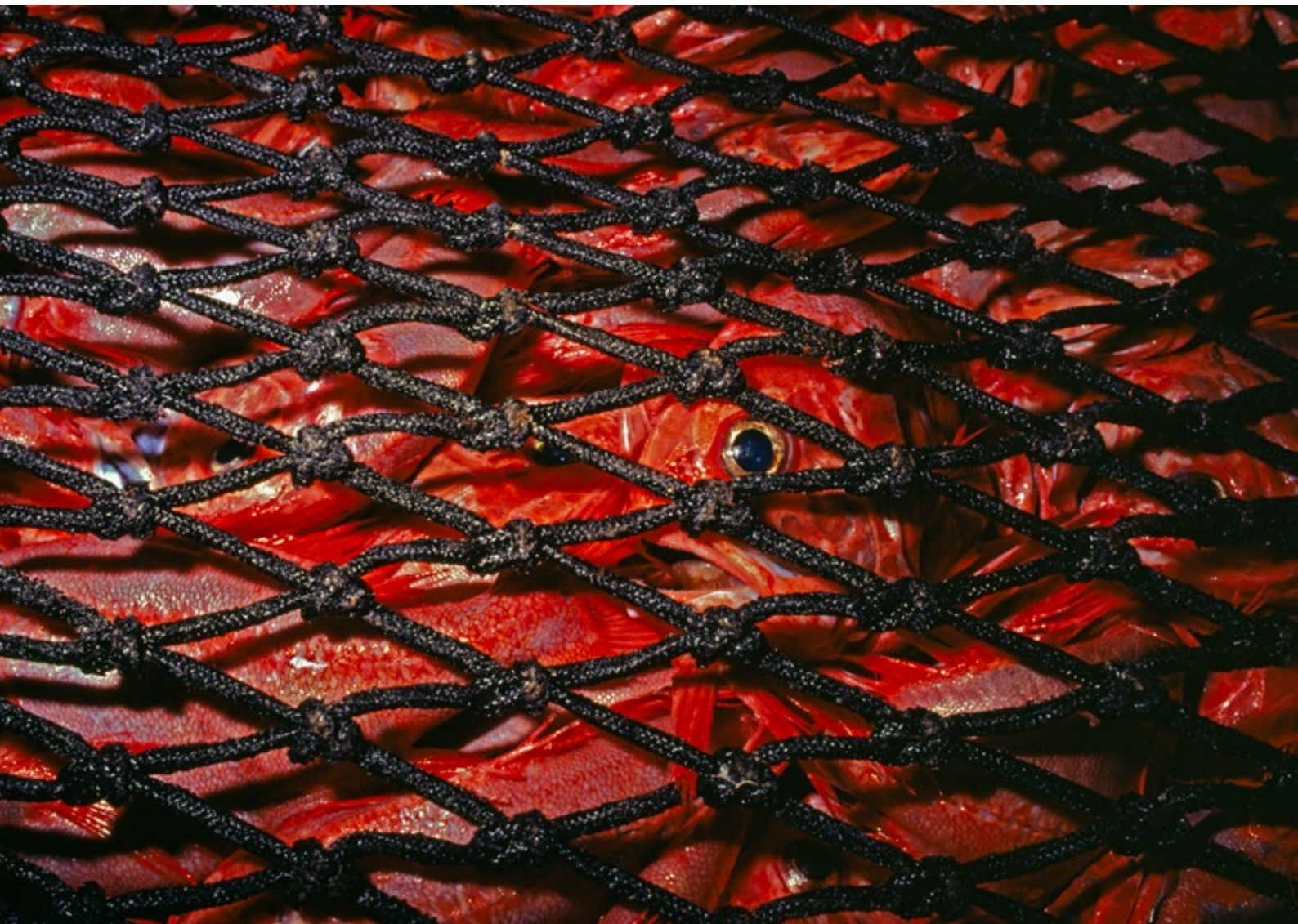
►► *Following double page spread: Silhouetted by low sunlight, a lone Adelie penguin heads towards its colony at Cape Royds, the world’s southernmost Adelie penguin colony. Close to the shoreline, the sea ice here is both warped and cracked, with a frozen melt pools in hollows. Adelie penguins do a lot of walking. In early spring they journey from the pack ice towards their colonies, navigating by the sun. The last stage of the journey is over the fast ice still clinging to the land. Often this means a walk of 50-100 kilometres, occasionally more. Canon F-1N with 80-200mm f4 L lens. © Kim Westerskov*





*Sperm whale diving at dusk with the Kaikoura Ranges in the background. This photo isn't cropped. This is the full frame.
Canon F-1N with 80-200mm f4 L lens. © Kim Westerskov*





Orange Roughy in net. A full net of 30 tonnes of Orange Roughy had been pulled up on the deck of the trawler. It was the middle of the night halfway between the Chatham Islands and the South Island of New Zealand. The wet deck rolled from side to side. I was on assignment for New Zealand Geographic, literally on deck every time the net was pulled in. Of the many photos I took on that trip, this is the most evocative. Canon F-1N with 28mm f2 lens, and Metz 45 CT-5 strobe. © Kim Westerskov

◀◀ *Previous double page spread: White-capped albatross soars over rough seas pounding the exposed west coast of subantarctic Auckland Island. Many ships perished against these cliffs during the age of sail, including the General Grant, but albatrosses are in their element here. The rougher the weather the more obvious their mastery of the air. It's hard not to smile. Canon F-1N with 80-200mm f4 L lens. © Kim Westerskov*



Close up of crinoid or feather star. These filter-feeding echinoderms have graced the seas for at least 450 million years. This was taken in the middle of night from Tobi's yacht in a sheltered bay in Vava'u, Tonga, at a depth of about 30-40 feet. It's not easy to photograph underwater at night. As well as all the usual things to think about, you can't see anything, other than whatever is in the beam of your torch. Nikonos 5 with 28mm lens with extension tubes plus Sea and Sea strobe. © Kim Westerskov

'The answer was obvious: to take my cameras into places where cameras shouldn't go – as far as their safety is concerned. So for many years, I took my cameras onto wild remote islands or to rugged dive sites, poked them into crevasses in Antarctica, into storms or into minus 50°C air or along wave-battered coastlines.'



Flukes of sperm whale underwater at Kaikoura. The sperm whales there were a real challenge to photograph underwater. They are big animals and the surface of coastal waters is normally murky, so even the few times I could get close to them, I could only see part of the whale, never the whole animal. Even after a lot of effort, the best I could do was one short lucky sequence of an approaching whale and some photos of the flukes as the whale swam on. Canon F-1 with 15mm fisheye lens in housing. © Kim Westerskov

‘It took me a long time to figure out that although I loved nature and the sea especially, that I wasn’t really cut out to be a scientist. What I’ve done instead – photography and writing about nature and the sea – is a much better fit for me.’



A blue shark swims gracefully through the wonderfully clear deep waters surrounding the Vava’u group of islands in the Kingdom of Tonga. Shafts of sunlight dance and flicker in the rich cobalt blueness. This shark swam straight at me, bounced off the dome port of my camera housing, swam around me once, and then went on its way. Canon F-1 with 20mm f2.8 lens in housing. © Kim Westerskov

►► *Following double page spread: Campbell Island albatross (Campbell black-browed mollymawk) waking from a sleep on its nest at the Bull Rock colony on Campbell Island, southernmost of New Zealand’s five subantarctic island groups. Canon F-1N with 28-85mm f4 lens. © Kim Westerskov*



New Zealand sea lion in a tall underwater forest of giant kelp. Enderby Island, subantarctic Auckland Islands. These sea lions are great, well at least the females are – they shuffled off the beach just to come and play with me, zooming and weaving and playing games. The males play rougher – one came from above and held my head tight in its huge jaws. There are still four holes right through the hood of my wetsuit where four teeth held me tight. It was just playing but I hoped its idea of play didn't start overlapping with my idea of pain. It hung on and hung on finally another diver jumped into the water off the boat and the sea lion let go of me to go to check out its new playmate/victim. It was raining the whole time, but I got in three dives with the sea lions, one after the other, the boat being anchored nearby. Nikonos 5, with Nikonos 15mm f2.8 lens, and Sea and Sea strobe. © Kim Westerskov



‘Much of my diving has been in cold water, but I was never cold until I ran out of film. Then all of a sudden I was freezing, and just wanted to be somewhere warm.’