



# Manatee Models

They may not be the most difficult underwater photography subject, but there's more to shooting manatees than just going to Florida

By Todd Essick

I HAVE BEEN travelling to Three Sisters Springs in Crystal River, Florida, for over 30 years. I feel blessed that I have had the opportunity to swim with these magnificent animals so many times here. In fact, I didn't start photographing them for a very long time as I truly enjoyed seeing them in their natural environment and just enjoyed connecting with them so closely. Three Sisters is one of the premier locations to photograph Florida manatees, with two rather powerful and warm freshwater springs that provide a home to the manatee during winter's chill. This unusual scenario also provides crystal clear water and a perfect setting for underwater photographers.

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### A Winters Day

I arrive at the entrance to Three Sisters spring as the sky is turning from black to cobalt blue, and thankfully, the sun is starting to come up. It is January and the temperature the past two nights has been below freezing. The air now is 29 degrees Fahrenheit (-1.6 Celsius) and rising quickly. Thankfully, the water stays a constant 70-72 degrees (21-22 Celsius). I have managed to arrive early, before anyone, having made special arrangements to have my rental boat available before they opened in the morning so I could leave to be at the spring at this time. It's still very dark and I am taking great care in gearing up.

Though my gear is minimal – a wetsuit, mask, fins and a snorkel, and of course a camera – it is easy to make a simple mistake like dropping something which will create noise or worse break something. The noise can awaken and alert the manatees. I slip into the water making sure no manatees are underneath me.


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I am not making any noise. I kick as silent as possible, keeping my fins in the water and only expending enough force to get me going. As I head toward the opening to the spring, on my left is a sanctuary area where I can see many manatees packed tightly together. From mid-November until about mid-March, manatees find a refuge here. As I silently glide by, some manatees automatically rise to the surface and take a breath. Still asleep, they take no notice of me.

I make my way up a small passage that leads to the springs. As I'm heading up, manatees start to file out. The rising sun signals their retreat, as they know more people are coming soon. I feel like I'm on a one-way street with cars coming at me in the dark, with their headlights off. I yield to the side.

Finally I make my way up into the spring after being passed by five or six manatees. I head to my favourite spot and see 15



**KNOW YOUR PHOTO SUBJECT**

**Manatees & Dugongs**

- ▶ - There are four living species categorised in two families collectively known as Sirenians, sometimes called sea cows.
- ▶ - Sirenians are large mammals that can weigh up to 1150 kg, spending their entire lives in water.
- ▶ - Elephants are among their closest living relatives.
- ▶ - Sirenians are vegetarians, dining on marine algae and plants such as seagrasses.
- ▶ - Manatees and dugongs are social animals, occurring in large aggregations and interacting frequently with one another.
- ▶ - A fifth species, called Steller's sea cows, is now extinct. Steller's sea cows were enormous, likely exceeding 6000 kg, roughly the size of African elephants. They were discovered in the Bering Sea in 1741, and were exterminated by sailors about 30 years later.
- ▶ - Today, manatees and dugongs are vulnerable to extinction, threatened by habitat degradation, hunting and collisions with boats.

to 20 manatees asleep, while a few others are waking and just starting their daily routines. But the light is still very low, and the conditions are not yet perfect for photography. A mother and calf come swimming by me, heading toward the other side of the spring. The mother pauses briefly, unsure of me, and her calf nuzzles up close and begins to nurse. Feeling unthreatened, she lets her baby have some breakfast though I am inches away. It would make a wonderful picture, but I take a moment. This is truly an inspiring scene – one of those rare times that you can experience nature up-close, honoured simply to be in the presence of a mother and baby. I take great delight in just enjoying the connection I feel.

### Waiting for the Light

I watch and leave my camera by my side for a while. Besides, I would have to shoot at an ISO setting above 800 on my Nikon D3 (in a Subal housing) to get any semblance of an image. I try not to shoot higher than 800 ISO to avoid excessive "noise" in the digital



**EQUIPMENT & EXPOSURE**

→ **Gear**  
Nikon D3, 17-35mm F2.8, Subal housing, no strobes.

→ **Camera Settings**  
In the shade at dawn, don't be afraid to use slow shutter speeds with wide open apertures and high ISOs. My best shots were at ISO 320 at f/5 at 1/40 with a 16mm lens.

→ **Lighting**  
I prefer using natural light

without strobes. Manatees eat the grass off the bottom, and by January they have created a natural "white sand reflector."

→ **Timing**  
Dawn is usually the best, but all factors should be considered, including tides, temperature and wind. The afternoon is sometimes even better.

file, which gives the image an excessively grainy look. The three of us just float there together. As five or six minutes pass, the mother starts to swim slowly away on her original course, with baby in tow. I follow at her side keeping eye contact with her, just waiting for the light to get a little stronger, for the sun to break through the tree line.

We get to the other side of the spring, where she seems to drop off her baby at the edge of a precipice that leads down to the spring's opening. As a photographer, it is in these situations when I have to decide whether or not to remain with the pair I have found, or head off in search of others. Whereas an average snorkeler might grow bored of watching these two, it is to the photographer's benefit to remain, carefully observing their subtle behaviours, which might be lost to a casual observer. The more time I spend with this pair, the more I feel that I can understand their movements, and can even start to predict when a great moment is about to take place. I decide to stay, and at that moment, the sun finally breaks through the treeline.

**Getting Technical**

To suggest the appropriate camera settings for this kind of shoot is difficult as you are chasing the light. Since the springs are surrounded by trees, it almost takes until midmorning to get some direct sun. It is really a judgment call when it comes to best settings, knowing your equipment and how and far you can push the ISO without taking away from the quality of the digital file. In addition, photographers should judge the movement of the animals in a particular picture. Are they slow moving or stopped? Or are they chasing each other or trying to get away from swimmers? You can't be afraid to use a slow shutter speed and shooting almost wide open if that's what the conditions call for. My best shot ever in the springs is an image I call "Manatee Parade," which won several contests, and was hanging in the Smithsonian Institution for an entire summer. The image was shot at ISO 320 at f/5 at 1/40 with a 16 millimetre lens.

The right time of year is critical. As a photographer I recommend the first hard freeze that comes through northern Florida. This means at least two days of sub-freezing weather overnight. This will give you the best chance of having multitudes of manatees up in the springs. Historically the first or second



week of January is when I go. Besides the time of year, tides and winds also play a factor in getting the perfect conditions. Getting to the springs early is only part of the equation. Not only do you need cold weather but you also need a high tide near the time you want to go, as this will maximise their numbers. If the tide is high just prior to your arrival, there is a better chance that any visibility problems caused by people will clear quickly, as the flow heads out of the springs. All this works well, as long as there is no wind, which can sometimes push the river water back toward the spring. When the springs get stirred up they will stay that way. As most people have a limited amount of time to work with, late afternoons are also worth checking out, provided again that the conditions are in your favour.

**Shutter Happy**

The mother manatee turns to swim away from her young for a moment, and in doing so, she accidentally slaps the baby with her tail. It's another magical and somewhat comical moment for me, though not sure if the baby would agree! Regardless, the moment makes a nice picture, and I am thrilled to finally be shooting.

Mama then swims over the opening to the spring and hovers gently, before making her way back to reassure herself and her baby that everything is all right. I am poised now behind my camera, waiting for the right combination of form, function and light.

Arching over her calf her calf now, the

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mother watches as her baby swims under her for protection – more beautiful, yet subtle and tender moments for me to enjoy and photograph in the serenity that is Three Sisters Spring. I am very careful not to disturb the sand as I stand up in the shallow water to review my shots, I am very happy. But my good mood soon changes. I hear in the distance, like rolling thunder, the first tour boats of the day pulling up to the springs with their throngs of guests. The manatees hear it too, and the time is now to get some more pictures, because as soon as the first group bangs, splashes and kicks their way into the spring, the conditions and visibility will change quickly. Some of the manatees will start to exit the springs, but even those who remain will be hard to photograph. The bottom will be stirred up and may not clear for the rest of the day depending on tides and winds and the number of people coming in. My time alone with the manatee today was short, about 25 minutes, but worth every second, and every picture. [SDAA](#)

**EXPEDITION NOTES**

- **BEST SEASON** Usually January and February. The first string of freezing weather over two days is perfect. Long-range forecasts can be very helpful.
- **TIDES** Enter the water just after high tide for optimal conditions, but of course you have time on either side. A high tide in the afternoon can be good, if it's been cold all day with favorable winds. Check tides for Kings Bay, Florida.
- **DIVE GEAR** Mask, snorkel, short fins (no free diving fins), 5-7mm wetsuit, or even a drysuit if you get cold easily. You might be in the water a couple of hours.
- **ACCESS** Crystal River is on the northwest coast of Florida. From Tampa, take Florida 589 Toll Road North of Tampa. Total trip will take 1 hour 27 min at a distance of 78.4 miles. From Orlando, the drive will take about 1 hour 38 min at a distance of 86.7 miles. Take Florida's Turnpike/Ronald Reagan Turnpike and FL-44 west of Orlando.
- **CONTACTS** Birds Underwater Inc ([birdsunderwater.com](http://birdsunderwater.com)), American Pro Diving Center ([americanprodiving.com](http://americanprodiving.com)), Crystal River Manatee Tour & Dive ([manateetoursusa.com](http://manateetoursusa.com)).

\* For more pictures of manatees check out [Todd Essick's app](#) for iPhone and iPad. Search "Essick manatee" in the iTunes store, and see the ad on page ???.

