

Text and photos by Cal Kothrade

Like many other Midwest divers, I consider myself fortunate to live on one of the Great Lakes. The world's largest collective body of fresh water, the 'Big Five' is best known for world class wreck diving thanks to the cold fresh water. From a historical standpoint, the wrecks are second to none, extremely well preserved time capsules from a much simpler century. Virtually nowhere on land can the average layman walk in and browse nearly untouched archaeological sites like divers do on a shipwreck. I enjoy the historical aspect of wreck diving, but for me, it's all about underwater photography, the challenge of imaging these forgotten ghosts, sitting on the lake bottom like kings holding court for the thousands of divers who visit them each year.

Bitten hard by the wreck photography bug five years ago, I quickly grew tired of shooting the same subjects off the shores of my native Milwaukee, despite the vast selection we have to choose from. Once you nail the perfect bow and stern shots, what else is there, right? My burgeoning appetite for new shipwrecks was becoming undeniable. It seemed that I would have to start traveling to the other Lakes to see what kind of ghost-ship smorgasbord they could offer up to my 10mm wide angle lens. Driving and diving has become a yearly event that I and some of my best dive buddies look forward to all through the off season. Every summer I put together a week long invitational trip to a new destination that will satiate the army of cameras that my



photographer friends and I attack with. Except for one, we all have cameras glued to our dry gloves every time we go down. It has become a friendly rivalry to see who can get the best bow shot, or the most impressive prop shot.

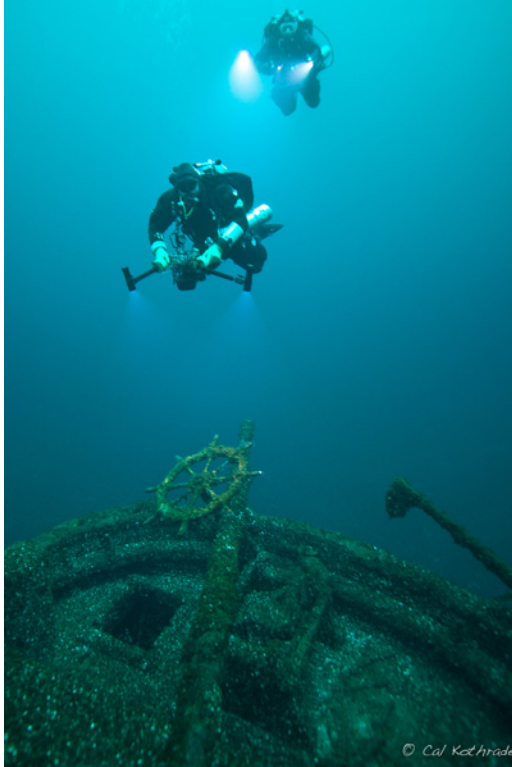
The battle grounds for 2013's trip had been chosen well ahead of time, as it is every year. If six divers are going to commandeer a dive boat for a week, they best make reservations pretty far in advance, as most of the boats on the Great Lakes are six packs. This year we chose to assault the incredible wrecks of Lake Huron, specifically the stretch of coast from Alpena, MI north to the Straits of Mackinac. Our chariot was MN-Blackdog Diving's 36' Uniflite, owned and skippered by the very capable Brian Anderson. The plan for the week was to drive from Milwaukee, WI to our starting point Alpena, then work our way up the coast to the Straits by the end of the week. Brian and the *Blackdog* would follow. Alpena, is on Lake Huron's western shore, and smack dab in the middle of the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary. The underwater preserve is a veritable museum of maritime history. A lasting tribute to the thousands of sail and propeller driven vessels that plied the Great Lakes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these ships once moved goods and people on the liquid interstate of America's 'Third Coast'. Collisions with ice and more often, other boats, were a common killer of ship and sailor alike. Along this stretch of water, upbound and downbound ship traffic was squeezed together into a bottleneck, while trying to shave precious miles and hours off already long journeys between Lakes Michigan, Superior and Erie. Throw blankets of fog thick as pea soup into the mix, and you have a recipe for disaster. Local geography can serve up inclement weather with little to no warning, and profit driven captains and furious storms don't mix well. The result is known as the 'Graveyard of the Great Lakes'.



Our six day diving itinerary was jumpstarted by a morning visit to NOAA's Shipwreck Museum in Alpena. This facility is a must see destination, giving one a chance to get familiar with the wrecks they'll be diving. With a plethora of gorgeous scale models, and insightful displays garnished with historical photographs, the museum will captivate any and all maritime buffs for hours. We were now officially fired up to get wet, and put our cameras on some fabulous wrecks.

We chose to stay in Alpena for three days, doing two dives each day, due to the sheer number of wrecks here. First up, the wooden schooner *E. B. Allen*. A nice starter dive with the wreck sitting upright and intact in 100 feet on a sandy bottom. She wrecked in 1871 from a collision with the bark *Newsboy*, which produced a large hole in her port side. All lives were saved, and divers can now swim throughout the empty hold from bow to the transomless stern. Dive two was the steel bulk freighter *Grecian*, wrecked in 1906, also at a depth of 100'. The stern and bow remain intact, with the midsection having collapsed to the lake bottom, providing easy access to the multi-leveled stern's interior. A swim around the outside will provide photogenic views of the large prop and rudder on this nearly 300' long wreck.

Day two presented us with an opportunity to dive a wreck that's tough to get on, the *Monrovia*. Due to its distance from shore, currents and weather conditions, this wreck can be hit or miss. It lies outside of the Preserve, so it is not buoyed, and must be hooked. The 448' liberian registered ocean freighter is a more modern tragedy, the victim of a ramming in heavy fog in 1959, see a pattern developing here? The *Monrovia* sits mostly intact, in 140 feet of water, and presents to those who are trained, many penetration opportunities. This is the kind of wreck you wish you could just park over for days. Wreck photographers should be sure to image the immense prop and rudder, preferably with a diver for size reference.



Day three we devoured a pair of shallow, wooden wrecks that were both used to haul forest products such as lumber, railroad ties, logs and shingles. The 236' *Montana* caught fire, burning to the waterline in 1914, sinking in 63 feet. Her enormous boiler, and engine are highlights of this relaxing dive, the massive steam engine towering more than 25 feet over its patch of Lake Huron real estate. The *W.P. Thew*, a 132' wooden steamer was typical of about 700 nineteenth century ships. Victim of a 1909 hit and run collision by the 545' freighter *William Livingston*, which did not bother to stop, she quickly went down in 84 feet of water, thankfully without loss of life. The wreck is fairly flat now, with the decks having 'peeled' off and settled on the bottom in what seems like every direction but straight down, making for an interesting exercise in debris identification.

After packing up our two trucks with our own travel debris, we drove to Presque Isle, MI, where we settled into our motel for the night, and set our sights on the next day's quarry. It would be the deepest dive, and the best preserved wreck of the trip, the three masted wooden schooner *Cornelia B. Windiate*. We would ride into battle armed with our DSLR's and their spider like arms, throwing thousands of lumens into the midnight blue water. Like six guns at our sides hung our deco bottles charged with O₂. We knew the wreck well enough to plan the shots we wanted, having been thoroughly educated by NOAA's shipwreck museum in Alpena only a few days earlier. The three, two man teams plotted strategy the night before... "you go here and shine your lights on this area, and I'll shoot from over there" Discussions of bottom times, deco gasses, and gradient factors filled the room late into the night. With the mayflies swarming, our heads swimming, and the midnight oil burned up, we retired to our

respective rooms and dreamt of what morning would bring. She went missing late in 1875, last seen in a fall gale on Lake Michigan, and for more than a century, was thought lost there, having not been seen passing through the Straits. In 1987 however, the *Windiate* was found sitting 180 feet below Lake Huron near Presque Isle, in near perfect condition, upright, intact, with all three of her masts still standing. In fact, the topsail yardarm, unique to 19th century lake schooners, is attached to the foremast yet today. Showing no signs of collision damage, opinions on how she went down vary, with many experts pointing fingers at ice. Whether she was trapped by it, slowly succumbing to it's crushing effects and the invading water, until she slipped quietly out of sight, allowing her crew to walk off into history, never to be seen again, or the slow and persistent buildup of it above the water line weighed her down enough to put her hull ever so gently on the bottom, we'll probably never know. But the condition of this maritime gem is remarkable, like a feast laid out before your dome port, your camera's CCD won't know what dish to devour first. The stern, particularly rich in photo ops, boasts spiral stairs leading down into the uncommonly attached aft cabin, an ornate ship's wheel dislodged but still on the aft deck, and the schooner's small yawl boat sitting just forward of the hard turned rudder off the starboard side, unaware that it's day has come and gone, as it waits patiently to deliver it's owners from certain death. Her bow sprit has fallen, but both anchors are still attached on her forward deck. The *Windiate*, and Presque Isle's other notable wrecks are deeper than most other oft visited sites along this coast, with bottom depths of 180 to more than 200 feet of water, making them more suited to divers with entry-level tri-mix or higher certification levels.

The final two days of our six day odyssey were spent in the Straits of Mackinac. Yet another pinch point for lake traffic, and a place of wicked currents and volatile weather, it's perfect for wreck divers with cameras and wide angle lenses. Like so many great diving banquets, there are more shipwreck dishes here than can be consumed in just two days, so we chose our targets carefully, based on forecasted weather conditions. A freshening west wind was to begin pushing waves our way, soon making anything on the Lake Michigan side of the 8 mile long Mackinaw Bridge too rough to dive within the next 24 hours. Our decision was unanimous, do two dives on the wooden steamer *Eber Ward*, first thing, before Mother Nature and the dive Gods taketh away. With rogue four footers rolling in, we secured the obligatory bow tie to the State provided buoy. Michigan buoys many of it's wrecks every spring so that dive boats can safely moor without damaging the submerged cultural resources below, then pulls them out again at the end of the season before the ice returns. Once at the sub-surface float, out of the chop, we performed our bubble checks, and descended through the upper level murk until we hit the good vis we were hoping for below 90 feet or so. As is common with this narrow stretch of water, we had to deal with a respectable current, not so much you couldn't swim against it, but enough to be ever present in our minds as we jockeyed for the perfect position from which to capture the winning bow shot. After all, nobody wanted to be the one who had to blow his lift bag because he didn't make it back to the upline. Her still proud bow displays two deck mounted anchors, and her unusual mushroom anchor, choked up tight to the hawsehole on the port side. The holes in both sides of her white oak bow near the bottom, bear witness to the

destructive power that ice has over man's creations asea. The 135 foot vessel went down in a matter of minutes in the fall of 1909, taking five of her thirteen crew to the frigid bottom along with her load of corn. Needing a short respite from the ceaseless current, I took hold of the ascent line, which was fastened to the very impressive capstan near the prow, allowing me time to ponder the vast deck as it receded aft into the outer limits of my visibility. After the requisite surface interval, and a new tie off to the stern buoy, the second dive proved to be just as awe inspiring as the pointy end. With her capable rudder still hanging in front of the immense prop, I hover in the current as my buddy (and dive model), obediently swims over the top of the prop, just as we had discussed. With the onus now squarely on my shoulders, I vow to not let his efforts go unrewarded. Snapping several shots, I know I need to catch the right moment, a tiny window of opportunity when he is behind the rudder, but still recognizable, showing the true scale of this old girl. A quick glance at my camera back confirms it, mission accomplished!



Our final day was spent on an old schooner East of the 'Mighty Mac' the *Martin Stalker*. With a split bow from the 1886 impact with the towed barge *Muskoka*, that put her on the bottom in 90 feet, a great cargo hold swim through, and deadeyes still on the deck, this little wreck is well worth the tank of air.

I chose to cap off my 'boot camp' like drive and dive tour of Huron's Northwest shores, in an uncharacteristic way. I declined my camera rig when Captain Brian offered it to me after my giant stride off *BlackDog's* beefy swim platform. Nope, I was actually going to look at this final wreck of the trip with my own eyes, not through the viewfinder of my trusty Canon. I would take this opportunity to explore the bow of the overturned steel freighter *Cedarville*, undistracted by thoughts of composition and best angles. It would also give me time to reflect on all the tragedy and suffering of long forgotten sailors, which ironically had resulted in so much enjoyment for my friends and I over the past week. As it turned out, my peculiar decision to dive sans camera was vindicated when the vis neglected to improve past about 14 feet or so. "Not good enough to capture any magazine covers today" I thought to myself as I revelled in the

bright green glow of another unforgettable dive trip. After eleven dives on 9 wrecks in 3 cities over six days, I learned that, like looking at floating ice, I had only seen the tiny portion of the bigger whole, and I must return to Huron's Western shores again.



Epilogue

Driving and diving is a great way to get to know the shore communities and their residents. We stayed in wonderfully friendly and clean little motels, and helped stimulate the local economies in our own small way by going to restaurants, bars museums and other small businesses. I chose to charter one boat for the entire week so we would have a chance to build a higher level of familiarity with the vessel and it's captain, which always makes for absurdly fun diving. Thank you to Brian Anderson of MN-Blackdog Diving, for following us up the coast as we worked our way to the Straits, providing professional and friendly service the entire way. Courteous and comfortable accommodations were provided by the following: Bay Motel in Alpena, Grand Lake Motel in Presque Isle, and the Rainbow Motel in Mackinaw City.

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About the author:

Cal Kothrade is an award winning maritime artist, underwater photographer, and published dive travel author, specializing in wreck mosaic photography, digital renderings, and fine art paintings. Cal is the founder, and producer of the *Milwaukee Amateur Underwater Film Festival*, Founder of the *Great Lakes Shipwreck Photo Contest (new in 2013)*, Curator of the *Our World Underwater Art Flows like Water Art Exhibition*, as well as a member of *Wisconsin Marine Historical Society*, and *Wisconsin Underwater Archaeology Association*.

Additionally, he is the founder of *Milwaukee Dive Apparel*, a designer/retailer of unique apparel for Great Lakes divers, as well as providing custom apparel for clubs, resorts, and dive boats around the world. Learn more about his maritime artwork and photography at: www.calsworld.net or www.MilwaukeeDiveApparel.com

