

Autumn
2024

OCTOPRESS

Wellington Underwater Club Newsletter

Topics

- Autumn 2024
- Another side to it – Sidemount diving is a gateway drug
- Eaglehawk Neck Diving Tasmania
- Wellington dive spot – Breaker Bay
- Photo competition
- PLUS photos galore; WUC members have been busy

Octopress needs YOU!

Please email photos/stories/underwater updates/ planned trips/memorable dive sites to judyormandy@hotmail.com or alison-grant@xtra.co.nz for us to share in the club newsletter.

Upcoming Trips & Events

Monthly WUC Dives

Watch your emails and Facebook for our monthly club dives and register your interest. And let us know if there's a spot you really want to explore!

April 2024

Boat dives on Duckling are available on the following dates.

- 13 & 14 April
- 20 & 21 April

All dives are recreational. To book a place or find out more, contact Gerald and Elizabeth on duckling@technicalhorizons.co.nz

King's B'day Liveaboard to Mercury Islands (and Cuvier, weather depending)

Depart Whitianga 5pm Friday 31 May, back 5pm Monday 3 June on M.V. Whai (<https://www.marineadventures.co.nz/>)

- Up to 10 dives, fishing is also possible
- \$750 including air fills and food onboard based on 9 divers
- Contact sophie.mormede@gmail.com or @Sophie Dives on FB Messenger

July 2024 Anemone spawning Liveaboard trip with Northland Dive

Sunday 21 July - Wed 24 July, this is going to be an awesome one.

- 4 day liveaboard on Sunspy, 2 days at the Poor Knights then 2 days diving the Canterbury (when the anemone porn is happening)
- \$1440 for the liveaboard, \$100 for nitrox if you want it (you probably do!)
- Option to stay at Northland Dive Lodge Saturday night
- Fly to Auckland or Whangarei and hire a rental car or drive up from Wellington. Likely options for ride-sharing
- Up to 4 dives/ day, 3 on the final day. Opportunity for night dive on the Canterbury
- Contact judyormandy@hotmail.com or @JudyFrances on FB Messenger



A rare calm day in 2024 for our January WUC Dive Crew



Join WUC for a trip to the HMNZS Canterbury anemone spawning July 2024

Autumn 2024

Welcome to the Autumn edition of Octopress; many of us are probably hoping for calmer conditions ahead, as the summer wasn't particularly kind to Wellington divers with persistent southerly swells making for less than summery conditions in our beloved Taputeranga Marine Reserve. Despite conditions in general, our **monthly WUC dives** have been lucky, all proceeding at the expected times and locations until April. It's been lovely to meet people at those dives and we'll be continuing to run them through autumn and winter. Our April dive is running in the second weekend of the month, so check the Facebook page and email for details.

It's a mark of the health of the reserve that whales and dolphins have been extremely frequent visitors through the summer, both in the reserve and in the harbour. It also seemed like every time we checked Facebook someone had spotted another nudibranch not often seen on the south coast. So while we mightn't have dived as much as we'd like, there was plenty to see, and you'll see many recent photos from our members in these pages. On that note, it's past time for another **photo competition**. Check the back page for details!

Finally we're a little lacking in current members! Many of you haven't yet paid your \$20 for this financial year. But it's a great time! Given the legal necessity of a new constitution we are planning to align our membership year with the financial year, which means by joining now for 2023-24 you'll actually get what will be a short 2024-2025 year for free. You'll need to have current paid-up membership to feed back on the proposed constitution before this year's AGM. Joining is really easy and completely online at www.wuc.org.nz/index.php/join

Another side to it:

Wherein Alison learns sidemount diving is her gateway drug



Alison getting to grips with sidemount at Poor Knights in September 2024 - Camilla Catona

I hadn't even made it to the first sidemount theory session when I found myself in the living room at 9pm on a Friday with a completely deconstructed sidemount rig and a series of photos optimistically intended to ensure I could put it all back together. My trusting friend's gear strewn across the rug, I mused and googled and mused again how to make it fit my stocky middle-aged body without any irreversible changes to that precious gear. I'd never investigated my dive gear like that, and when my adjustments seemed to work, and met the approval of the instructor a few days later, I suspected that sidemount could become my gateway drug to a whole new level of dive obsession. The videos about sidemount hose routing quickly gave way to videos of sidemount skills, and then of skills *in situ* in wrecks and caves. As suspected, it was only a matter of weeks before whole new paths in diving were unrolling in front of me.

Websites all over the internet will tell you there are five, seven, maybe (at a pinch) ten reasons why you must try sidemount. It's going to save your back, cure all your buoyancy and trim woes, make you float like a manta, look like an astronaut, and never have to worry about air consumption again. Some of them optimistically tell you that it's going to be so much easier to carry your gear for shore dives. Stray from those introductory lists and you'll find that many sidemount divers have very loud opinions about exactly how one should set up one's rig, and it can rapidly become as daunting as it is enticing.

I think of myself as an air hog. It's not actually true anymore. The nerves that beset me in the early days have been calmed by a crowd of supportive buddies and mentors; these days my air consumption is no more likely to end the dive than my buddies' thermoregulation or bladder capacity. But I felt a stigma attached to being an air hog, and my concern about being "that diver" was why I first looked wistfully at sidemount. The cost seemed prohibitive though, and having set myself up over three years with mostly second-hand backmount gear, investing in an entirely new setup on the off-chance I liked sidemount as well seemed unreasonable. I had put it off for some distant future, but with excellent luck in timing, the option of borrowing a full set of sidemount gear from a buddy coincided with a local course with a keen sidemount instructor, and I couldn't resist the chance.

The five/seven/ten items in sidemount listicles certainly don't come instantly when you first start sidemount. The people who think it's easier to carry two sidemount tanks to and from the entry point are not 164cm tall and dragging them through soft sand into Houghton Bay. I now generally do two trips to and from the water when my buddies do it once. I will never look cool in dive gear, because I am not cool. It took me weeks of tweaking the position of my weights to undo lumbar pain I'd never felt diving before, and although my trim improved greatly, I still look enviously at many of my buddies in both back and sidemount. Even the reduced air anxiety is somewhat mythical; either your dives get longer, or you try to ensure you have adequate air for multiple dives, so air consumption still needs monitoring, and more than ever as you manage gas-switching between two tanks.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that it was therefore fortunate I'd borrowed a friend's gear and not invested thousands, but no; I am a convert. After discovering my love for it, my sidemount rig was the first dive gear I invested in new, rather than picking up whatever was going for a good price from friends and TradeMe. 80 percent of my dives since June have been in sidemount configuration, and I now consider myself first and foremost a sidemount diver. So why? What would push a person to whom diving did not come easily in the first place, to switch configurations just as she's developing reliable buoyancy and trim, and finally (finally) starting to feel something like a real hover?



John Dorys made themselves at home on the South Coast over summer - Camilla Caton



White Striped Anemone colony at Mahanga Bay - Sarah Milichich

In my early days of diving, the whole process seemed magical and largely out of my control. In this new world where different laws of physics apply, it all seemed so counterintuitive and I was reliant on equipment I didn't fully understand. I knew I could make sense of it with effort; there's just not a lot of incentive when you have the kit you have, and it's not adaptable in any substantive way. Sidemount configuration immediately opened up the option of tweaking; a centimetre up or down, a couple of degrees of tilt to the tanks, shorten that attachment or choose a smaller bolt snap, and your trim can change significantly. The versatility, adaptability, the incentivisation to tweak a sidemount setup is so considerable; the upshot is that the "why" and "how" of diving suddenly became much more transparent for me, and that sense of control is addictive.

Sidemount training has fundamentally altered my relationship to diving, in the same way that rescue training did two years into my dive journey. Prior to rescue training, I felt like I was at the mercy of my buddies, and completing that course reframed the buddy relationship. Now sidemount is reframing my relationship to my gear in the same way, and my diving skills have strengthened hugely since making the switch. So here they are; the reasons sidemounting is making me a better diver, (which may or may not be relevant to you and *certainly* don't warrant me telling you that you *must* try it.)

1) The adjustability of sidemount provides me with a much stronger "feedback loop". Both while I'm underwater and following a dive, the seemingly infinite adjustments I can make to my kit enable much finer tuning. My ability to perceive the effects of ever-smaller adjustments is resulting in my sense of body position and propulsion through the water becoming much more finely honed. Even when I do switch to backmount for one reason or another, my progress there has accelerated because of the greater underwater proprioceptive skills I've developed through sidemount. It's all far from perfect still, but the changes get more and more minute as time goes on.

2) I'm calmer. Having a totally redundant air supply has a marked effect on my anxiety underwater. There is more air, yes, and that can be reassuring at times, but simply having completely independent setups gives me confidence that I can better handle most equipment problems I might encounter in diving, and certainly any air-related issues my buddies might have. I am so much more familiar with the intricacies of my setup now, that making adjustments and troubleshooting underwater is vastly easier than it was. Because I've had to think about my own setup so much, I pay much more attention to others' rigs and am better at troubleshooting them too. All of which results in me actually using less gas, even as I have more to use, because I'm less stressed, and troubleshooting comes easier.

3) I'm more playful and adventurous underwater, because I have more mental and physical capacity for it. Sidemount has taught me a lot more about the buoyancy characteristics of all my gear so I can adjust it in the moment and be freed from the awful feeling of "fighting it" through a dive.

4) My kitting up process is now my own, not PADI's. There are multiple ways to don and doff sidemount gear depending on the dive, and practicing all of those is really tightening up the process for me. When you have four different donning processes depending on context, it's all the more important to be consistent about how and when you fit critical aspects into the process, so now I'm much more methodical about how I go about it.

5) I have a new-found appreciation for the importance of a good buddy check and briefing, because no one will have a setup just exactly the same as mine, and I'm much more likely to push for it in the face of a buddy who thinks it unnecessary.

6) I'm now diving with a setup that can take me forward into very different types of diving as I feel ready for them. Where tec diving previously felt like a world away from what I was doing, sidemount configuration feels like an incremental step along the way. I *like* incremental steps. They're cheaper, and there's plenty of scope for a change of plans along the way. Whether I end up in tec, doing long shallow or deep open water dives, or extend my overhead capabilities into advanced wreck or cave, sidemount can take me there.

7) I now understand at the core of my being that the universe can be held together with bungee cord and bolt snaps, and I can do that at a moment's notice, even at 9pm on a Friday.

I understand the viewpoint that sidemount is a tool, and that there are times when backmount is the more appropriate tool, but there aren't many situations where backmount is my preference anymore. Being both calmer, and more playful, really takes my diving experience to a whole new level that didn't come easily to me, being habitually neither calm nor playful. I'm sure sidemount can be a tool for squeezing through tight spaces, relieving the pain of an injured back, or carrying sufficient air for an extra long dive. For me though, it has been the tool that taught me to be a better happier diver, and one who now always has some bungee cord within reach.



Eaglehawk Neck Scuba Diving

Tasmania



Judy Ormandy, Regan McGillicuddy, Steve Sanderson, Emily Keane, Robert Airlie

Five adventure seeking muppets reconvened in the Auckland Airport Koru lounge, bound for tantalising Tasmania. Steve took a break from his busy retirement schedule, Rob the Plumber left the plumbing to his underlings, Emily avoided the grind of exam study, Judy absconded from hospital drudgery and Regan accompanied us for entertainment value and as chef in residence. Air New Zealand obliged with direct flights to Hobart and we were off in the wakarererangi.

For reasons known only to Regan, Regan decided to interrogate the Hobart biosecurity official regarding his policies... who would have guessed that this would lead to Regan being the last to clear customs! The next challenge arose when it became apparent that one rental car was at the airport and the other in central Hobart... a car – retrieval mission was mounted then five of us plus rather a lot of luggage headed for the Sorrell supermarket where the intricacies of Regan's carefully concocted meal plan became apparent. Two overflowing supermarket trollies worth of food and beverages were added to the already jam-packed cars.

Karen & Mick welcomed us to Eaglehawk Dive Centre with a hot cuppa as we completed our paperwork in preparation for a week of awesome diving.

Trip highlights included:

- Interactions with curious fur seals who frolicked and pirouetted, seemingly mocking our incoordination as they dive bombed us.
- 20m plus visibility
- Waterfall Bay, home to the largest sea-cave system in Australia. The caves, caverns and passage-ways were perfect for a diving tiki – tour. The light reflections and refraction and colourful anemone and nudibranch covered walls were ideal for photography. Steve gained a newly found appreciation of and enthusiasm for wet rock.
- Deep Glen Bay with its resident weedy sea dragons. The Tasmanian sea dragons have a more reddish hue than their Victorian counterparts and patiently bobbed in the seaweed posing for photos.

- Sisters dive site with its magnificent sponge gardens, anemone encrusted sea whips and clouds of butterfly perch.
- The Spotted Handfish, *Brachionichthys hirsutus*, is critically endangered and found in the Derwent Estuary in Tasmania. It has highly adapted pectoral fins (hands!) that allow it to 'walk' on the sea floor. We found and photographed four of the bizarre but oddly cute creatures, with their grumpy face and splayed 'hands'.
- Steve's admiration for the rental car, which increased daily.
- Regan's domestic godliness knew no bounds as he served up legendary meals including home made chicken Lhaksa, pulled pork tacos and gourmet pizzas.
- The Dive Centre's resident cat stealing Steve's sock.
- Judy's super duper newly fixed drysuit that became wetter as the week progressed, culminating in its conversion to a puddle by Thursday. It was suggested Judy sit out dive two due to her sopping state, but to skipper Mick's incredulity, Judy was not to be denied her macro dive at Fok Rock and headed into the depths in search of sea spiders and nudibranchs. The drysuit was condemned as pakaru and Judy regressed to a wetsuit for the final two days of diving.
- Emily's lips turning blue after diving in her wetsuit. She assures us she wasn't profoundly hypothermic or hypoxic (fortunately it wasn't COVID this time either.)
- Spectacular sunrises viewed from our beachfront accommodation. The sparkling pastel hues reflecting in the calm sea with trees silhouetting in the foreground were a photographer's dream.
- Rob & Regan's expedition to MONA (a modern art museum for those not in the know) in search of culture and subsequent retellings of their cultured experiences.

A wonderful holiday was had by all. Any further tales are limited by the adage 'what happens on dive trips stays on dive trips'.



L-R: Regan, Emily, Robert, Judy The Pink, and Steve



Steve Sanderson exploring Waterfall Bay caves – Judy Ormandy

Dive spots of Wellington

In the first of our series, WUC member Sophie Mormede tells us what her favourite Wellington dive site is and why. Please tell us yours! Maybe we'll be inspired to make a WUC monthly club dive out of it!

Dive site: Breaker Bay

One of my favourite Wellington sites, best done at high tide for easier access, also one of the last south coast sites to lose the swell and surge. It's outside of the marine reserve so has less fish than elsewhere on the south coast and meeting a spearo in the corridors can be unsettling. Also far less sea tulips than there used to be, yet the long corridor makes for amazing lights and colours, with walls covered in anemones, nudis... The deeper reef is more open and has more fish life as well as some remnant kelp forest.

[Ed note: I'd never made it to Breaker Bay in three years of diving in Wellington as it's a no go if swell is hitting Butterfish Rock, but it has been a favourite spot this summer. When the South Coast proper has been hit by big south-westerly swells while northerly winds stir up the harbour, Breaker Bay has often been in great form, and the less-than-convenient entry and decent swim to the swim-through mean it doesn't usually get too busy.]



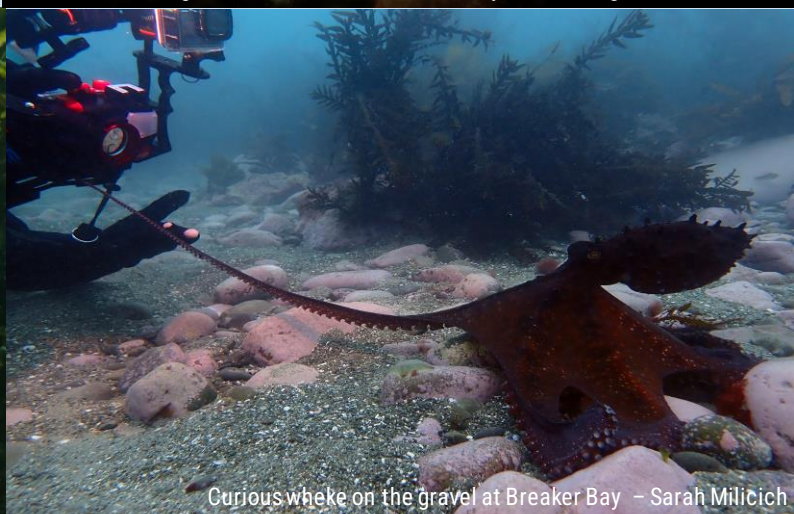
Camilla in the kelp forest of Breaker Bay – Sophie Mormede



Janolus ignis in one of several Breaker Bay swimthroughs – Alison Grant



Northern end of Butterfish Rock swimthrough, Breaker Bay – Alison Grant



Curious wheke on the gravel at Breaker Bay – Sarah Milichich



Eagle Ray at Hole in the Wall, Kapiti Island – Camilla Caton

Autumn Photo Competition

It's that time again!

We have loads of keen underwater photographers in the club at present, which is great when it comes to sharing what we've been doing, and keeping the newsletter pretty!

Our Autumn competition theme, chosen by Erin Hewetson, is Meet the Locals

As always, take the theme as literally or as broadly as you wish!

Send up to three entries to judyormandy@hotmail.com by May 31 for consideration by our guest judge (TBC), and your chance to win a free gas fill at the local dive shop of your choice, and the opportunity to set the theme for the winter competition.

Results will be announced in our next issue.