

An underwater photograph of a shipwreck in Lake Huron. The scene is dimly lit with a blue-green hue. A diver is visible in the middle ground, illuminated by a bright light. The shipwreck consists of large, rusted metal beams and structures, some of which are covered in algae or other marine growth. The background is dark and hazy, suggesting a deep underwater environment.

Shipwrecks of Presque Isle

Time Capsules in Lake Huron

Text and photos by Becky Kagan Schott

Shipwrecks abound at Presque Isle in Lake Huron, USA. Here a diver comes face-to-face with the three-masted schooner wreck, *Typo* (right), built in 1873.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver on bow of the two-masted schooner wreck, *Defiance*, built in 1848

The year is 1880, and you are working on a wooden schooner, one of the most dangerous jobs during the time. It is late November and it is the last run of the season. The ship is overloaded with coal and the seas start to pick up. It is now dark and the icy waves are crashing over the sides, and all you can do is work to keep the ship afloat. Ice is now forming on the rigging, and out of the fog, the bow of another ship suddenly appears. Before you can react, it collides with your bow. In minutes, the schooner and everyone onboard disappears below the cold, dark waves descending into the depths—a watery grave and a ship that will not be seen again for over a century.

In 2011, I was fortunate enough to work on a documentary film for the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and Sony,

called, *Project Shiphunt*. We spent a few weeks in the small town of Alpena Michigan searching for shipwrecks. The team found the schooner *M.F. Merrick* and steel freighter *Etura* in over 91m

(300ft) of water, and we were the first to lay eyes on the ships in over a century. I left Michigan a changed person, and a new obsession with diving the Great Lakes had manifested.

That year, I also visited Lake Superior, the wrecks of Isle Royale National Park, and recently Lake Michigan, but I kept finding myself wanting to go back to Lake Huron's Presque Isle. Drawn to

the perfectly preserved wooden wrecks in technical diving depths, just outside of recreational range, in the 50-55m (165-180ft) depths.

I spent a week diving the recreational wrecks in the NOAA

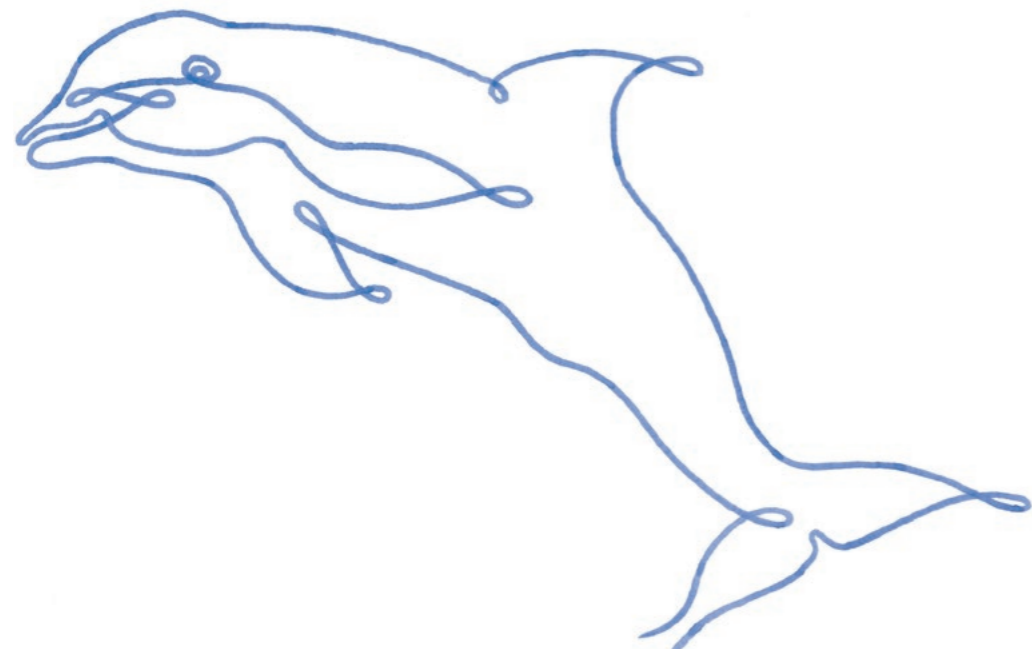
Thunder Bay Marine Sanctuary and another week just 30 minutes north of there, in Presque Isle. Both places differ from each other, but both offer excellent wreck diving and photography opportunities.

Presque Isle





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Diver at gauges and controls (above) on the SS Florida wreck; Diver illuminates name on the side of three-masted schooner wreck, *Cornelia B. Windiate* (right)

My goal was to photograph as many of the wrecks as I could in order to be able to share these extraordinary stories and histories with other divers and enthusiasts.

It is not easy to dive a new site and photograph it with out ever seeing it. I typically like to do a scouting dive first to familiarize myself with a site, then go back with the camera and a plan on how to shoot it. I did not have that luxury on this trip. Many of the wrecks I knew I would only get one dive on, so I had to make the most of it.

Preparation

I did as much research ahead of time as I could, looking up information about each shipwreck—its his-

tory, its depth, its features and its story—to form an idea of what I wanted to get image-wise on each dive.

I also planned to spend as much time as I could on each wreck.

I brought my closed circuit rebreather and trimix to be able to spend more time in the 50-55m (160-180ft) depth range.

I factored in the water temperatures to be 2-4°C (37-40°F) on the bottom, so I also decided to utilize



my Santi heated glove system, which has been one of my favorite pieces of gear in the Great Lakes. I have always used dry gloves, but my hands would be terribly cold gripping the camera handles for so long. The gloves really help take





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Presque Isle

Diver at bow of the wooden steamer wreck, *SS Florida*, built in 1889; Diver on wreck of the three-masted schooner *Typo*, built in 1873 (right)

the edge off, and now my hands are not the limiting factor, like on previous dives. I have really found that dressing properly in cold water has made the largest difference in the world and allowed me to stay underwater longer in order to capture the images I want.

The rebreather has also allowed me to expand as an underwater photographer. With only one opportunity to dive a site, it has been an invaluable tool to be able to spend time in a location to get the shot I want.

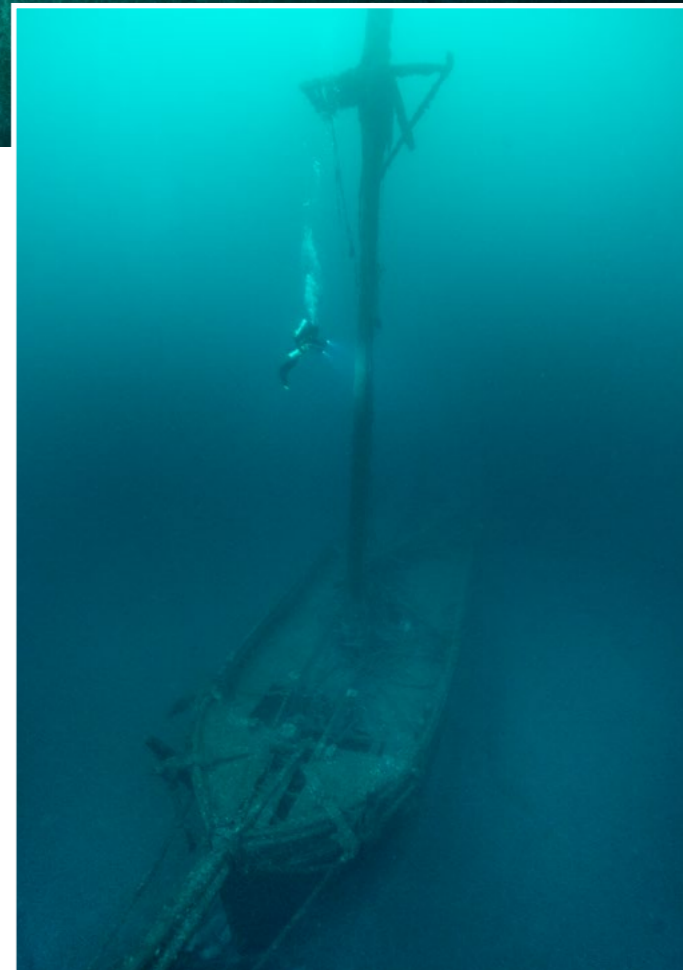
A good example that illustrates the point was a dive to one of the Great Lake wrecks in 27m (90ft) of water. My buddy and I had planned to shoot some cargo inside the wreck. When we entered, it accidentally silted out. We exited the wreck, to let the silt

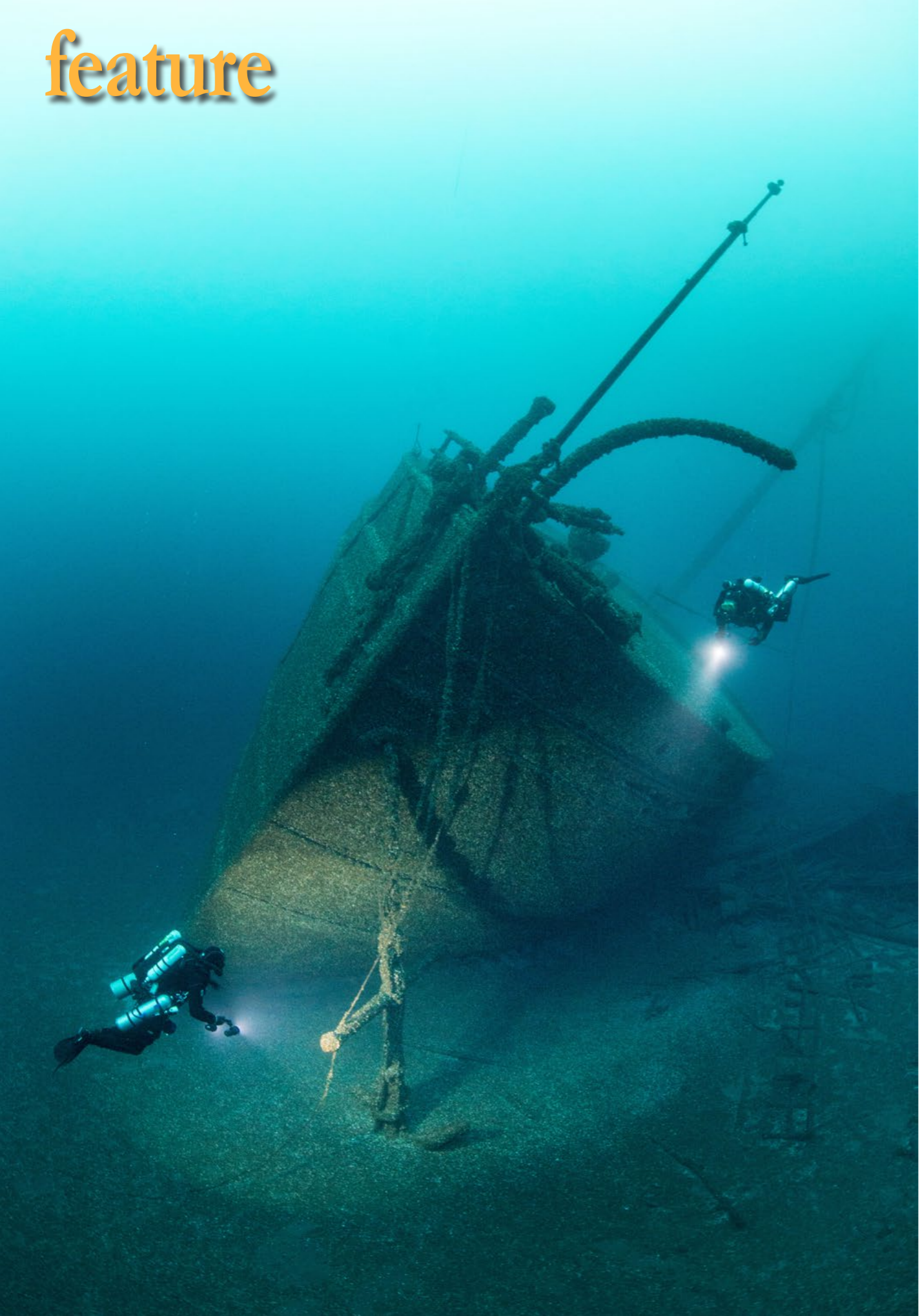
settle, and swam around shooting in other locations around the wreck. We came back to the cargo hold 30 minutes later and spent about 15 minutes getting the shot that I wanted. The bottom time was 70 minutes, plus decompression, and I went home with the shot I envisioned. I could not have done that in one dive if it was not for using a rebreather.

Diving the wrecks

Since we were diving the wrecks in Presque Isle in the 50-55m (160-180ft) range, most of our bottom times were around 40 minutes, which allowed me to shoot some

stills and mosaics around some of the wrecks.





Diver on the wreck of the *Cornelia B. Windiate* (above); Divers illuminate the anchor at the bow of the *Norman* wreck (left)

Cornelia B. Windiate. One of my most memorable dives, in particular, was the wreck of the *Cornelia B. Windiate*. The ship was lost in December 1875 in a storm. I had spent time looking at the model of the shipwreck at NOAA's Thunder Bay Sanctuary museum, to study its features and angles I might want to capture.

The day of the dive, I slowly descended down the line, tied off to the stern section. As the ghostly ship came into view, I could immediately see how intact everything was. It was sitting on the bottom, upright, looking like it was still sailing above the water.

All three masts were standing tall, its wheel bent backwards and rudder turned hard. It likely went down with a fight. The most touching image was the

yawl boat lying off to the starboard side, sadly reminding one that there were no survivors. To me this ship tells a story, and the fact that it disappeared and was thought to have sunk in Lake Michigan instead of Lake Huron, is also fascinating.

The cabin is also incredibly intact, and a spiral staircase can be seen. I swam around the wreck shooting stills and after making it to the bow, I decided to shoot some mosaics of the beautiful ship. I shot six to seven images that I later stitched together to show the true scale of the *Cornelia B. Windiate*. I swam about 21m (70ft) away from the ship, and used all natural light and slow shutter speeds to capture the images. Thankfully the day we shot, the sun did come out for a little while, which made a big difference.

DIVE the Great Lakes

Daniel J. Morell (CCR / trimix) - June 18-25th

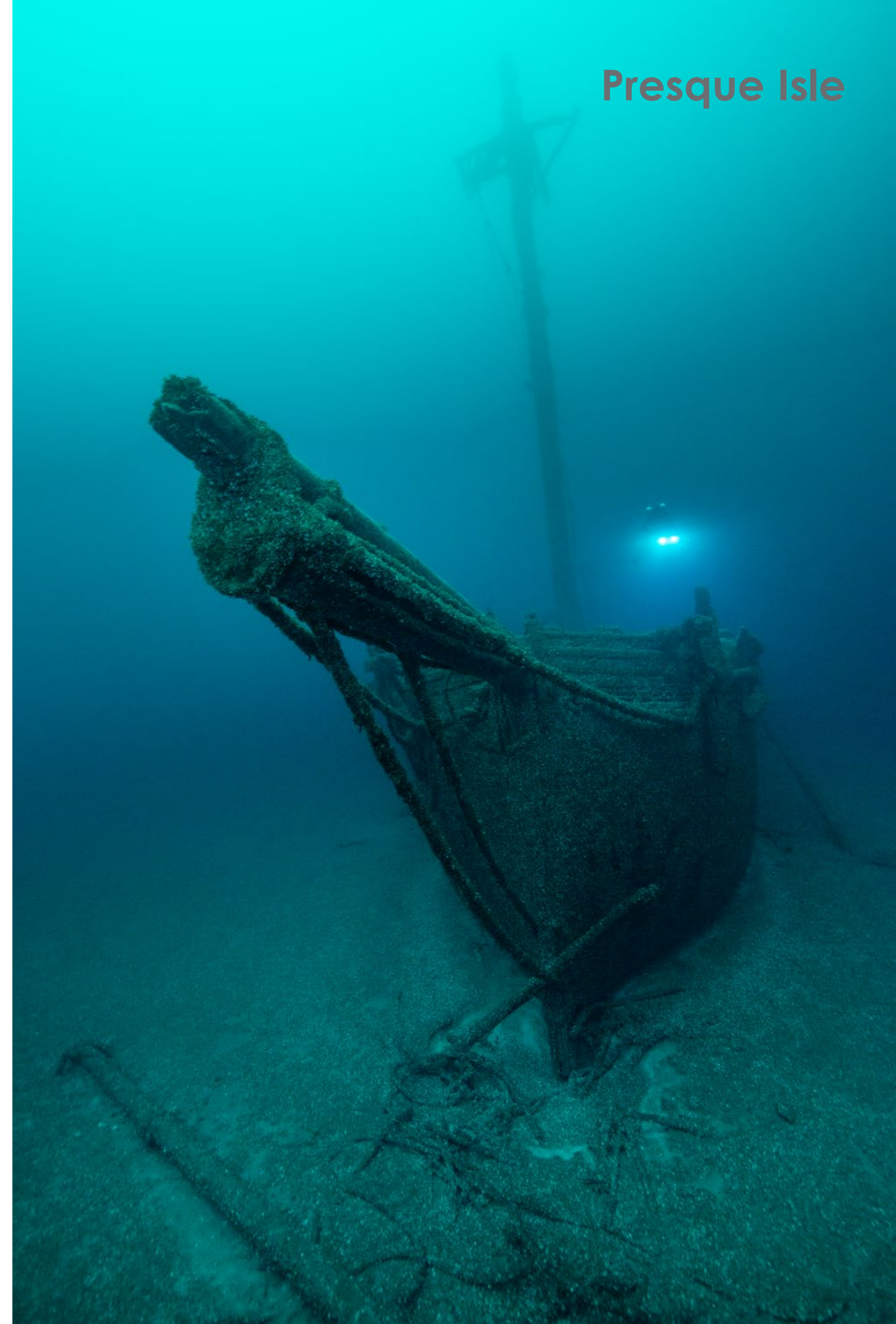
Presque Isle (CCR / trimix) - July 1-8th

Straits (recreational) - July 11-17th



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Divers on the steel steamer wreck, *Norman*, built in 1890 (above); Diver at bow and forward mast on three-masted schooner wreck, *Typo* (left)

Typo. Another wreck I really enjoyed photographing was the three-masted schooner *Typo*. The ship sank with all hands on deck in a collision on 14 October 1899. It is an incredible dive since the schooner sits upright with the bowsprit and all its rigging intact.

As I descended down the line towards the wreck around 90ft, the top of a very tall mast, coming up from the depths, appeared before me. As my eyes adjusted, I could just make out the silhouette of the shipwreck below. I moved from the line over to the tall mast and descended down towards the deck.

As I got closer, I thought I saw an unfamiliar object. I swam 3m (10ft) forward

and was face to face with the ship's bell. I do not see many of those on the shipwrecks that I am used to diving. As a photographer, it is an exciting sight to see and to photograph a shipwreck's bell.

The bow of *Typo* is also very elegant. As I descended into the sand to photograph my dive buddy, Blair Mott, on the bow, I could not help but put the camera down and stare at the ship with my own eyes. It almost looks like something out of a movie set, sitting so preserved on the lake bottom.

We worked our way down towards the stern, but unfortunately, it is not in as good a shape as the bow section. Coal litters the floor and one can actually

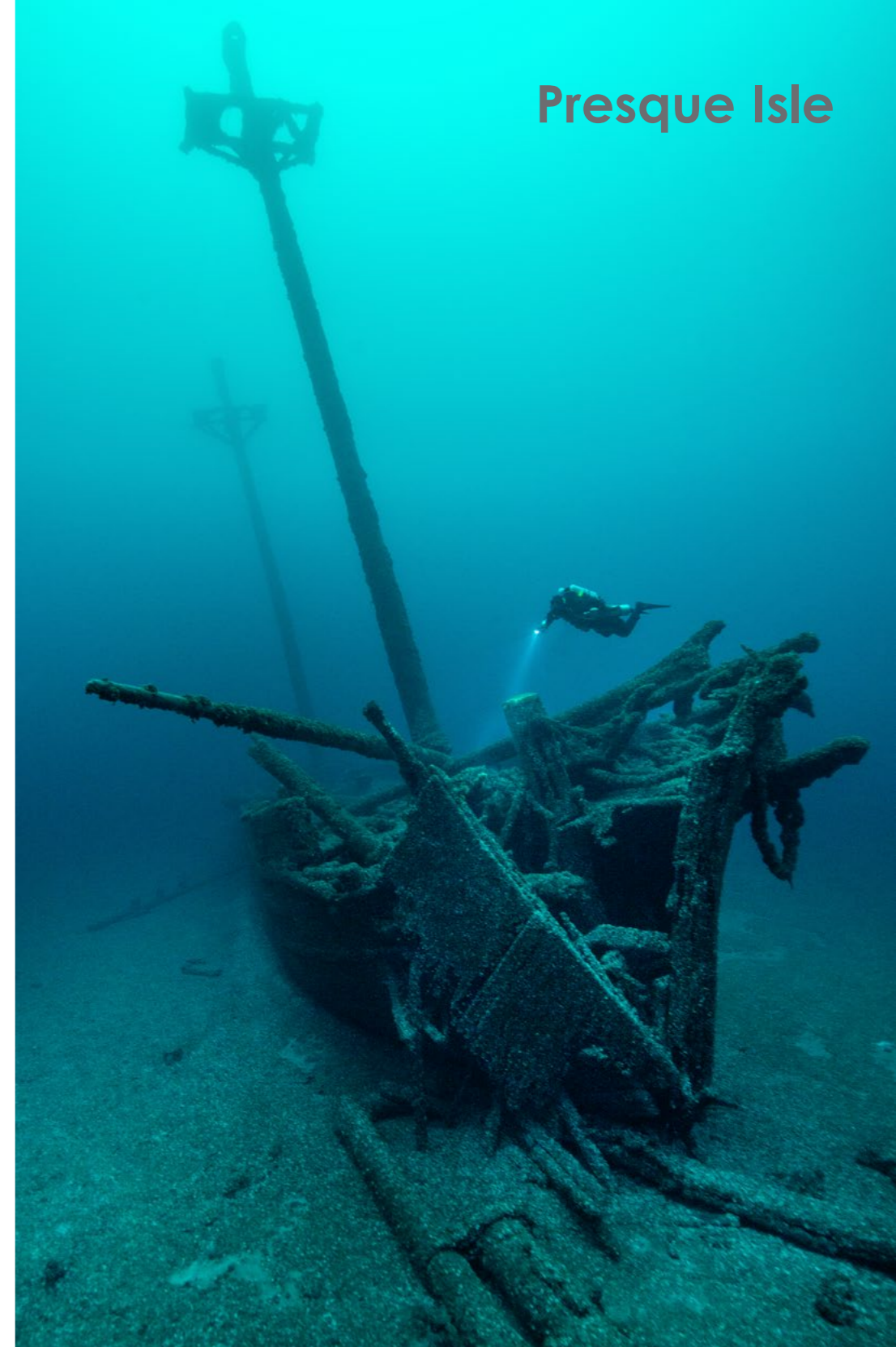
Diver on the wreck of the three-masted schooner *Typo*



Divers at bow of the *Norman* wreck (left) shed light on the wheelhouse at 61m (200ft); Diver on the wooden two-masted schooner wreck of the *Kyle Spangler*, built in 1856; (right); Stern of the wooden wreck of *SS Florida* (lower left)

buddy, Blair, to help show size and scale by modeling on the damaged bow and using his dive light to draw one's eye to the diver.

The ship is only 40.5m (133ft) long, so it is easy to swim around it and see most of the wreck, since the visibility is good at that depth. The name, *Kyle Spangler*, can still be seen etched into the wood on the port stern side.



part of the shipwreck. I will never forget looking down into that icy blue-gray-colored water and seeing the erie mast standing tall in the water column.

Other wrecks

The area also has other incredible sites like the wooden freighter *SS Florida*, the *Defiance*, and the *Kyle Spangler*. The *Kyle Spangler* was a two-masted schooner, which was carrying lumber. In 1860, it collided with another schooner, crushing its bow and sending it to the bottom in minutes.

The ship sits mostly intact, minus the crushed bow section. This was something I wanted to focus on in my shots. I used my dive

Afterthoughts

Each of the Great Lakes is unique and each holds so many shipwrecks, with both tragic and heroic stories. There are many hidden gems, both in recreational limits and in technical range, with new wrecks being discovered in each lake every year.

Every time I dive one of these wrecks, I cannot help but feel connected to each of their stories, and visiting them is like visiting a time capsule. While I was driving home after this last trip, I could not help but feel the obsession for these great shipwrecks growing. I thought by spending a few weeks diving them, it would be out of my system. Instead, I find that I cannot stop thinking about the next trip, and visiting more of the great wrecks in the Great Lakes. ■

swim through the cargo hold.

When it was time to leave the bottom, I ascended up the forward mast again and decided

to shoot some photos at different angles down the tall masts. I was excited to be able to start my deco stops and still be on a

Becky Kagan Schott is an Emmy award winning underwater director of photography, photographer and technical diving instructor based in Pennsylvania, USA, whose work can be seen on major networks including *National Geographic*, *Discovery Channel*, and *The Travel*

Channel. For more information, visit: Liquidproductions.com or MegDiver.com.

REFERENCES:

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