

The award-winning photography of **Angel Fitor** has brought the secrets of the underwater world to the attention of global audiences. Keith Wilson discovers how his obsession began, what took him to Lake Tanganyika, and why he often cries underwater...

All images: © Angel Fitor

# Angel Fitor



## Angel Fitor Profile

- Angel Fitor is a professional photographer, based in Alicante, Spain, specializing in marine and freshwater environments since the late 1980s.
- His photography has been featured in many international titles, including *National Geographic* and *The Guardian*, as well as online media platforms and books.
- Awards include prizes in the NHM Wildlife Photographer of the Year, GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year, National Geographic Photo Contest, World Press, and Sony World Photography Awards.
- Angel has contributed both as photographer, camera assistant, and natural history advisor to nature conservation NGOs and broadcasting outlets, including the BBC Natural History Unit.
- He has also contributed to *Our Planet*, the landmark Netflix series produced by world-acclaimed Silverback Films.

[www.seaframes.com](http://www.seaframes.com)  
[www.instagram.com/angelfitor](https://www.instagram.com/angelfitor)

**I**t is the week after the 57th Wildlife Photographer of the Year Awards, and I'm talking to Angel Fitor, this year's winner of the Portfolio Award, for a selection of

images documenting the life and behaviour of cichlid fish in Africa's Lake Tanganyika.

Most categories in the competition are judged on a single image, but the Portfolio Award requires entrants to submit 10, which the judges reduce to six before making their decision. Given the criteria, the Portfolio Award could be regarded as the hardest category in the competition, so I imagine he will be feeling like he's walking on water, following his success. Instead, the modest and quietly spoken Angel seems more pleased with the fact that last weekend he went diving for the first time in four months: "I snapped a tendon in my right bicep. That was a disaster, because I was unable to do anything. Now I'm much better, I'm recovering, and last weekend I started to dive again. It's a very long process to recover the muscle, the force and strength in your arm."

I imagine those four months moored on the land must have dragged for a pro diver, so I try enticing him to recall the happier moment, when he first heard that he'd won one of the biggest prizes in wildlife photography...

**How did it feel when you found out you'd won the award?**

Yes, I felt good, but 20 years ago I would have felt better! It's great, but I see these kinds of things as a promotion for my work, because it's so hard to make a living. The most rewarding part of this award is that the story started nearly 20 years ago. It's been one of the works of my life and there's been so much joy and so much pain involved with that work. And this is personally the most enriching thing about this award.

**How did you choose this story, and Lake Tanganyika, in the first place?**

**“It's your image, it's your identity, so you need to be very careful with what you publish to build your reputation**

*Previous page: A staff diver inspects a shoal of wild-caught bluefin tuna inside an offshore pen in the Mediterranean sea.*

*Below: A tiny cichlid in Lake Tanganyika is taught the vital skills of shell defence. For this species, shells are prized possessions, providing space to lay their eggs, raise their young and shelter safely. This image was one of six comprising Angel's winning portfolio in the 2021 Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition.*



© Angel Fitor/Wildlife Photographer of the Year

The story chose me! When I was three years old, in fact. The whole of my life has been circling around fish, and totally focused on the underwater environment. I don't know why, because nobody in my family has done anything related to the ocean, with the rivers or the lakes. It's something that simply happened when I was three years old – I fell in love with fish, and that's it! It's a super-simple story.

**Did you have an aquarium when you were growing up?**

Yes, I have lots of them. I've been a hobbyist all my life.

**So, is that how you first saw the cichlid, as an aquarium fish?**

Yes, but the fish that really impressed me, when I was three years old, was a yellow fish that I saw in a pet shop, when walking with my mother. I felt that was such a lovely creature. It was so beautiful, and then, many years later, I discovered that it was a Tanganyika cichlid – the beginning of that story is that old.

**Well, that's more than 40 years ago. When did you first get to Lake Tanganyika?**

I first travelled to Lake Tanganyika when I decided to launch my career as a full-time photographer, because in the previous years I had been a part-time photographer. It's the same old story: some 20 years ago I decided to leave everything. →

*Above: A courting female seemingly bows to her partner as part of the long-lasting, highly ritualized mating process of long-snouted seahorses.*

**\* LENS CHOICES**

**FOR HIS WINNING PORTFOLIO IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 57, ANGEL FITOR USED A VARIETY OF LENSES...**

Your portfolio includes a Sigma 150mm macro, which is unusual because most underwater images I've seen have been shot with wide-angles. It's one of my favourite lenses. For behaviour photography of small animals, it's my absolute top lens to use. It allows you to keep some distance so that you don't affect the behaviour, you're respecting your subject. Normally the technique in underwater macro photography is that you stop down your aperture as far as you can to have maximum depth of field, but for me that is totally useless. I prefer working at the middle apertures like f/8 or f/11, not only because I'm gaining a lot of photographic quality, because of the lens performance, but also because you are creating a blurred background, and so you can highlight the subject in the foreground. That is exactly the technique used for making the pictures in the winning portfolio.

I was working in a fish farm as a commercial diver, an offshore fish farm, and it was a rubbish job. I decided then, it's now or never, and that's how it all started seriously in the field of photography.

**When did you learn to dive?**

I was 16. I forged the signature of my parents, because I needed their permission. Thankfully I developed early, so I looked like an older guy; I made a false signature and got the money to pay for that first course by selling my guppies that I bred in my home aquarium!

**When you were diving at 16 and 17, were you thinking about taking a camera down to photograph what you were seeing?**

I was already interested in photography because I had a relative that was a photographer. He had a home lab and processed the rolls of film in the darkroom, so I had an incidental interest, not a big interest, but something was boiling inside of me about that. Then it was just about feeling comfortable underwater, which I did in a couple of years, and then I started taking pictures with borrowed cameras.

**Whose cameras?**

I was in a diving club and the owner of the club had a camera he didn't use, so he lent it to me and I was able to start taking shots underwater.

**You started in the days of film, so how difficult was it to limit yourself to 36 shots per dive?**

You need to think before shooting. You need to think carefully about what you are going to shoot and how you're going to shoot it. In the beginning, you simply spent rolls and rolls of film and most of the pictures go straight to the recycle bin. Today, it's pretty much the same. In my opinion, the size of your photographic talent is measured by the size of your recycle bin!

**What do you mean by that exactly?**

You need to ask yourself a lot and you don't have to be okay with everything you take, so in my case I'm especially self-disciplined and I'm not easily pleased with my pictures. I need to repeat and repeat, and when I have an idea I like to work on that idea for days, for weeks, for



**Above: This close-up portrait of the underside of a skate reveals a bizarre figure where the creature's 'eyes' are in fact the skate's nostrils.**

months, for years, until I really have what is in my mind. It's part a commercial strategy, because anything you publish, whether in print or online magazines, it's your image, it's your identity, so you need to be very careful with what you publish to build your reputation.

**That's a very good point!**

Because of that way of thinking, the size of my recycle bin is huge. Over the years the size is decreasing, because I have learned to take pictures after so many years, and now I don't spend too much time on things that are not really profitable.

**So, for you, it's about being ruthless with your choices and editing to maintain a high standard and not slip below that?**

Exactly, and it's becoming a problem. This year I have won the Portfolio category of Wildlife Photographer of the Year, but I have a very strange feeling this year. I'm 48 years old

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**I think my portfolio was successful this year because it was something totally unseen**

**Above right: An Atlantic white-spotted octopus verifies the edibility of the photographer's dome port during a night dive. This strictly nocturnal creature has tentacles up to a metre long on a body length of just 15cm. Despite the 'red devil' colour, it is a fragile and gentle creature.**

and, for the first time, I know that there has to be an end to a story. I have been growing and growing and growing for so many years, and now I am at that point in my life that perhaps I won't grow anymore, so it's a difficult situation for me this year, because it's going to be very difficult for me to do something better than what I have done this year.

**On the subject of competitions, you've won a few now and you've been on juries as well; how important are competitions to this field of photography?**

The only reason that I have been taking part in competitions in the past 20 years is because I wanted to be a *National Geographic* photographer. It's the same dream that most of us have. It's not that I have some kind of devotion for them, it is simply that they are the only media that really has the power to give you a relatively stable job, and this is something that I've been lacking for so many years. My plan was to reach *National Geographic*, that has been my priority, and I have designed not only my professional life for that purpose, but also my personal life, to the point that I haven't had children. For me, the only relevance of competitions has been for promoting my work, building a name and trying to be someone in the field of photography. →



**Right: A triggerfish bares his teeth as he tries to bite through the nets where he has been trapped in a Mediterranean fishery.**



### What's in your hands when you dive for photography?

All you need is a camera and a housing to protect the camera. That is the only difference concerning photo equipment, and most of the time you need artificial light as well. I work with strobes, sometimes with continuous light.

### The limitations you experience underwater requires a simple approach too?

Essentially, it's simple equipment. You cannot go underwater with several cameras, unless you have an assistant. You cannot change your lens, you cannot change your battery, you cannot use long lenses, because there is no shooting distance underwater. You need to stay close to your subject, so my

philosophy is just taking the simplest equipment you can have because you are underwater, sometimes you are risking your life, so if you have very bulky equipment or several cameras, and you're alone, that could be a problem in an emergency.

### Lens choices for underwater tend to be shorter focal lengths, which lens do you prefer?



**I have made the whole of my career with just one camera body and second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth-hand lenses!**

**Above: For this image, titled *Medusa ballet*, depicting jellyfish in the Spanish lagoon of Mar Menor, Angel was named European Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2021, by the German Society of Nature Photographers.**

I have a range of lenses, including short telephoto lenses. The longest lens I use underwater is the 150mm macro, and then to the other end there is the fisheye. I have just one camera body, I have made the whole of my career with just one camera body and second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth-hand lenses!

### Were all the images in your portfolio shot with the Sigma 150mm macro?

Not all. In that portfolio, there is only one picture shot with the Sigma, but there's a 90mm Tamron macro, there's a Sigma 35mm, there is a fisheye as well, but it is used with a teleconverter, so you are narrowing the field. It's a very popular combination for underwater wide-angle close-ups.

### How big are these fish? They must be absolutely tiny...

Yes, some are just four centimetres in length. And they are adults, at just four centimetres! The rest of them? Well, in Lake Tanganyika you can find the smallest cichlid on earth, which is one of those shell-dwelling species, and you can also find the largest cichlid on earth, which is nearly a metre in length. It's a magical place.

### Compared to other wildlife subjects, are fish overlooked too much by photographers?

When people think about fish they think about food, they don't think about fish as wildlife, but this whole fish assemblage in Lake Tanganyika is unique in the natural world, in the sense that these fish behave like

## \* HOUSING CHOICE

### A RELIABLE AND ERGONOMIC CAMERA HOUSING IS VITAL FOR UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY...

#### Which type of housing do you use?

I use a brand of housing that's not very popular in Europe or the United States, but it's very popular in Japan, and I love it because they are so small.

#### What's it called?

Nexus. They are made for Japanese hands, so they are very small, and they are not very ergonomic, in that you don't have straight access to all the buttons in a natural way, but they are small and light, and that's the reason I love that brand. I ended up choosing them after testing other popular brands. It's more about my philosophy of working; I need small equipment, just with the essential Manual mode, a couple of strobes and that's it.

humans or mammals. The degree of parental care that they have evolved in the last 10 million years is surprising. It's something you don't expect from a fish. Fish are the most prevalent group of vertebrates on earth. If you put all the mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians together, the number of all those species is still lower than the number of fish species in the world.

You would be amazed how big a field it is to photograph, and it's been totally undocumented. I think one of the reasons why my portfolio was successful this year is because it was something totally unseen. The only people who were aware of Lake Tanganyika's secrets were the aquarium trade, and ironically this is one of the threats to these fish.

#### Do you shoot video underwater?

Sometimes, but it's not my field. I worked for several TV series, like *Our Planet*; now I work for *The Mating Game*, the freshwater episode, on BBC1.

#### When you are shooting video do you use the same model of DSLR, or do you prefer a different one?

No, I just have one camera for everything. Right now, it's the D800.

#### So, you're in no hurry to upgrade?

No, I'm not really interested in cameras. The only time that I read about camera specs or read about

what camera is trending, is the time when I need to change the whole of my equipment, but that only happens every 10 years! There's not enough money to follow the market. Now, the professional has the lowest range of cameras, because the way of living as a pro is much harder; we don't have the money to buy the best cameras. Now, the best cameras are bought by lawyers and physicians.

#### Do you have a favourite marine species, or family of marine life?

Not really. I don't have any totem species. It's the animal behaviour, that I truly love, because behaviour photography requires you to totally understand and respect the rules of your subject. You have no control over your subject. When you're trying to photograph the natural behaviour of a species, it is your subject that is important and in charge. You are just there, and that creates a special feeling for me.

You know, some of those small, shell-dwelling cichlids are extraordinarily territorial and aggressive. They are living in a shell inside the middle of a sand plane, and when they feel that you are getting close, they come out of the shell, they come up and they bite you. A four-centimetre creature!

I cannot imagine a more humbling situation towards a 90-kilogram human. It's so humbling for me that I end up crying underwater all of the time! That's the fuel of my passion, those situations, because it's a kind of communication that establishes through the lens between your tiny subject and your soul, that goes straight to your soul. For me, it's a personal thing and it has engaged me in a way that is addictive. I think it's all about that.

**The 57th Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition is open at the Natural History Museum, London, until Sunday, 5 June, 2022. For admission hours and ticket prices: [www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions/wildlife-photographer-of-the-year](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit/exhibitions/wildlife-photographer-of-the-year)**

**Entries for the 58th Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition are now open and close at 11.30am GMT on Thursday, 9 December 2021. For entry details: [www.nhm.ac.uk/wpy/competition](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/wpy/competition)**

**Next Month**  
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