



The calf chasing Munns around as he tries to film it.

TONGA TANGO

What a job — filming giant humpback whales loaded with enough testosterone to fuel a small army!

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Humpback escort over the shallow reef.



Humpback calf spy-hopping



Crazy calf at play!

Half a dozen double-decker buses barreling down a highway, all jostling to get to the front, and you are trying to get in the middle of them to take a picture — that is the best way to describe the task of trying to film 40-tonne humpback whales chasing down a female during their “heat run”. As part of a project for the BBC, Scubazoo’s senior cameraman Roger Munns and I were to spend

three weeks in the kingdom of Tonga, capturing footage of these giants in their most intimate of moments for the world to see. The whales come to Tonga from the Antarctic after fattening up on krill. Tonga’s warm, calm and clear waters are perfect for birthing and nursing, since the calves lack the thick blubber insulation required to survive in the colder feeding grounds. Apart from that, young males will vie for the attention of females, fighting rivals as

they race. The battle itself consists of fin-slapping, head-lunging, blowing bubble curtains and breaching. It is the combination of these behaviours that is known as a “heat run”. This assignment was huge. We were given our own boat for three weeks, an expert guide and a separate film crew for aerial shots from a helicopter. My role for this assignment was to chronicle the project and watch Munns’ back as he filmed, to make sure he wasn’t knocked about ▶



Mother, escort and calf.

by the excited leviathans. Our base was in the village of Neiafu, which lies among the island group of Vava'u in the northern area of Tonga.

On the first day, Al Coldrick, our guide and production fixer, took us to the usual spots and we encountered a mother and calf. This was a great opportunity for Munns to test the camera housing and fiddle with its various settings. The next two days were no different as we spotted

only mothers and their calves with no signs of any heat runs. Then, the weather turned for the worse and we were confined to our base for a whole week, when all we could do was sit and wait.

On the eighth day, it was safe enough to go out onto the water again, and this time we spotted a baby whale shark! However, we stayed focused on our targets and continue our search. Spotting the whale shark was a good omen, though,

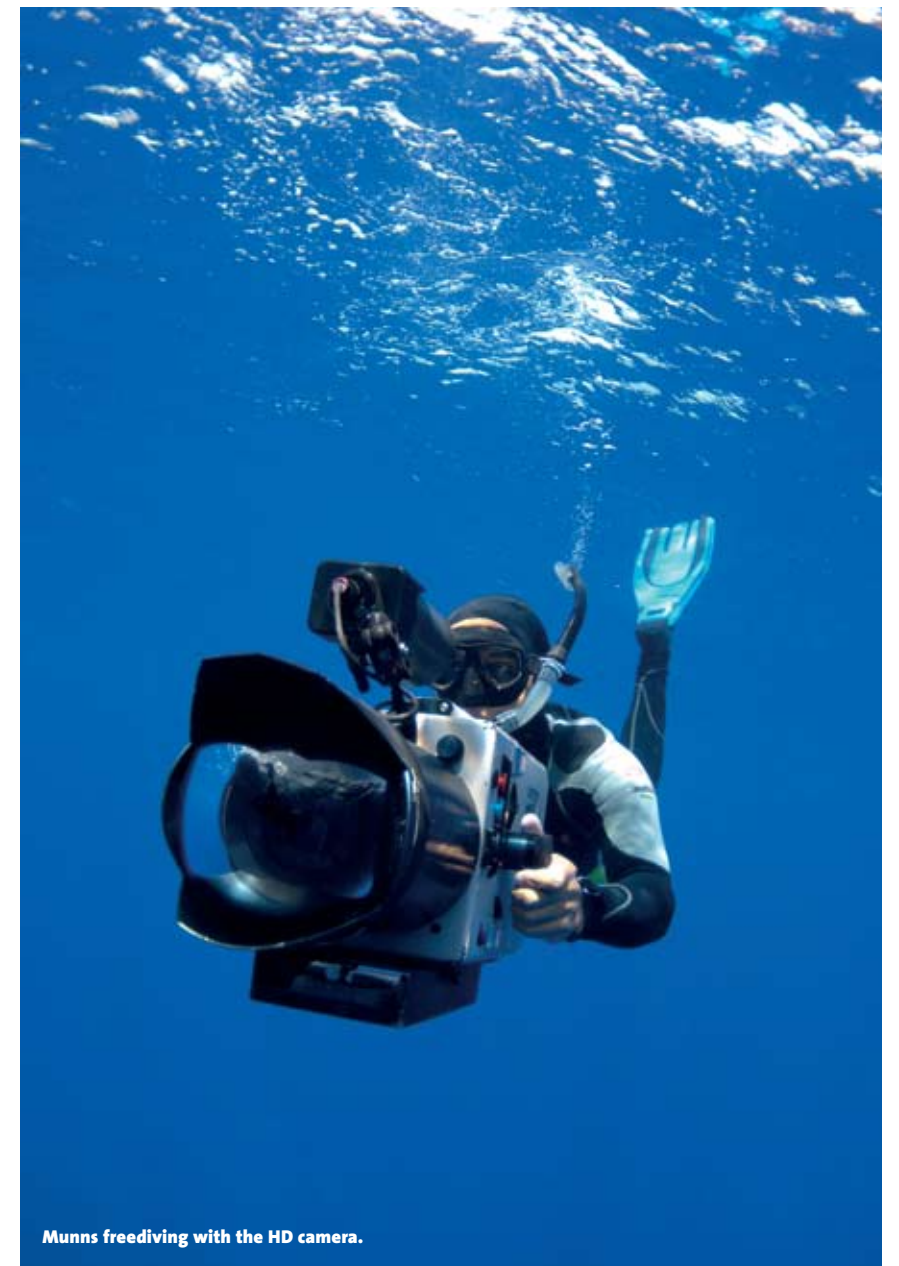
because shortly after, we received excited reports of humpback sightings over the radio. From the surface, we could see another mother and calf, but we couldn't ascertain an accurate number of males following them. Taking the cue from Coldrick, Munns and I slipped into the water and an amazing sight greeted us. We had dropped in over a shallow reef and, as the mother and calf passed us, we saw four males in hot pursuit of her. As we weren't allowed to use our scuba gear, Munns free-dived to the bottom to get the shot and then we quickly boarded the boat so we could follow the action.

Things heated up really quickly. I had to leave my camera behind so I could be of assistance to Munns in the eventuality that he became the filling of a humpback sandwich! We managed to film a few more passes before the action dispersed, and Munns was happy to finally have some "heat run" action on tape.

Over this second week, we also took the daily two-hour journey to Tofu island. This ate away at our searching and filming time, but this was where the largest number of whales congregated. On one particular day, we came across a mother and calf coasting close to the surface. There hadn't been many other sightings so we decided to enter the water and get some more footage.

I had heard about other people's experiences with crazy calves but was not prepared for this playful calf. As we approached, the mother was content to just sit back and let her offspring venture out to play with two strange beings.

The calf bounded towards us like a giant puppy. All this one-tonne juvenile mammal wanted to do was play tag. I couldn't help but laugh as the calf headed towards Munns at full speed, ▶



Munns freediving with the HD camera.



Crazy calf playing with Munns.

bumping into him. But as it turned and headed towards me with an extremely naughty glint in its eye, I suddenly realised just how big it actually was! Munns shot some great comedic moments of me, suddenly turning frantic, as I swam backwards, away from the calf. Well, my excuse was that I didn't want to ruin his shot and was trying to get out of it. The game continued for about an hour and I have to admit it was probably the most enjoyable hour I have ever spent in the water.

Towards the end of the second week, we had to be scouts for the aerial film crew. Soon, there were reports of a "heat run" and we counted up to 11 males tailing a female, our biggest horde yet. When the helicopter arrived, we got out of the water to let the aerial film crew shoot the action from above. Watching from the boat was spectacular — the males were head-lunging, fluke-slapping and breaching ahead of one another.

In our third week, the action seemed to have cooled off, although Munns managed to capture some interesting, close-up shots of interacting males. Overall, the shoot had been a huge success; the helicopter crew and the topside crew left at the end of the third week with enough footage to put the programme together. Munns and I remained for a few more days so we could stock up our own library. From all the crazy experiences with calves and close encounters with females and their male "harems", Tonga is, without a doubt, the place for humpback whales.

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Watch out for BBC's latest series, *Life*, which airs in 2009. **AD**



Humpback calf breaching.



Munns on the stern ready for another encounter.



Munns dives down to film mother, calf and escort as they pass by.