

Personality Plus

The Florida manatee combines girth, grace, and a goofy grin



Text & Photos by Glenn V. Ostle

There's an old joke about a horse that walks into a bar, and the bartender asks it, "Why the long face?" That question could also apply to the manatee, that sad sack of the sea with its homely yet lovable mug.

Manatees lack the sexiness of sharks or the bright colors of tropical fish, and they spend most of their time chomping on greenery or dozing on the bottom of

waterways, looking more like moss-covered rocks than the last remnants of an endangered species. But with their wrinkled faces, scarred bodies, and gentle demeanor, they quite simply exude personality.

One of the best places to photograph manatees is in Florida's Crystal River. Located about ninety miles north of the Tampa-St. Petersburg area, it is one of

the few places where humans and manatees can meet face-to-face under controlled conditions. Each day during the months when cool ocean temperatures cause the manatees to seek out the relative warmth of Florida's springs, hundreds of excited snorkelers slip into the water to commune with their marine cousins and take thousands of photos. But capturing a distinctive shot of this



The Florida manatee's docile manner and habit of bobbing just below the surface unfortunately increase its odds of being injured by a speeding boat.



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slow-moving and often-photographed animal can be a challenge.

In my experience photographing wildlife, I have found that very little separates a good animal photograph from a great one. In the latter, the photographer usually finds a way to portray his subject a little differently and in doing so captures the animal's personality. But that is easier said than done.

If you intend to take photos of manatees in the water, it is best to work with one of the licensed boat operators in Crystal River, such as our friends at Bird's Underwater who have been teaching people how to properly interact with manatees for almost twenty years. It's best to start early in the morning, as crowds of people can kick up silt throughout the day and scare away your

subjects. Work close to the animal with a wide-angle lens and begin with a high ISO in early morning light. In most cases, you won't need a strobe, as the best photos are normally taken close to the surface as sunlight dapples the back of the animals. Most important, respect your subjects. It's better to pass up the chance of a great photo than to run the risk of harassing or endangering any animal. 🐬



A few typical manatee “poses” include nibbling algae from a log (above left), resting “tail down” on the bottom (above right), and playfully rolling onto its side (below).



MANATEE ETIQUETTE

- Because manatees are endangered, there are strict rules for interacting with them. Violating those rules can result in prosecution, including fines up to \$25,000.
- Don't initiate contact; wait until a manatee approaches you.
- Only touch a manatee with one hand, and then gently scratch it under its front flipper or use your fingertips to scrape algae from its leathery skin.
- Never poke, prod, or stab a manatee with any object or your feet or hands.
- Your encounter must be on the surface—no diving down to get a photo from below. And bubbles from scuba gear frighten them.
- Don't ever block, trap, chase, or try to ride a manatee, and definitely never come between a mother and her calf.
- Don't feed a manatee or offer it water from a garden hose.
- Never pursue a manatee into its sanctuary area.

IF YOU GO

Bird's Underwater

320 N.W. Highway 19, Crystal River, Florida, 800-771-2763 or 352-563-2763, www.birdsunderwater.com



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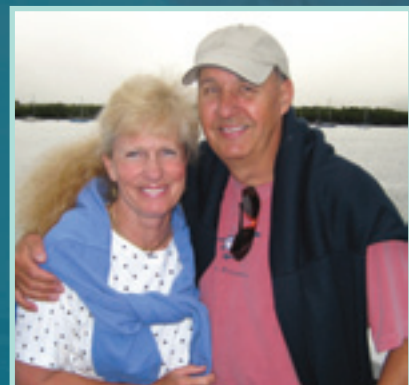
Two manatees nuzzle noses while taking turns chewing on a boat's anchor line (bottom).



When close to the surface on a sunny day, a manatee and its reflection make for an interesting picture (top); Ostle's partner, Pam, gently rubs algae from the head of a contented manatee (bottom).



ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER



In addition to serving as a freelance writer and department editor for *Times of the Islands* and the new *RSW Living*, Glenn V. Ostle is an accomplished wildlife photographer whose photos have graced the cover of *Times of the Islands* a number of times during the ten years that he has served as a contributor to the magazine.

Ostle's appreciation of photography began with his father, who taught him basic photographic principles as well as how to develop photos in a homemade darkroom. About a dozen years ago, he became interested in underwater and wildlife photography, and today his photos of marine life, birds, and other animals—taken in many locations around the world and with the help of his partner, Pam Hadfield—have won numerous awards in photo competitions and have appeared in magazines, on calendars, and in a variety of marketing pieces.

Ostle combines his photographic skills with a writing ability honed through more than thirty years in marketing and advertising. In addition to frequent appearances in *Times of the Islands* and *RSW Living*, his photos and articles have also been featured in such dive and travel magazines as *Sport Diver*, *Scuba Diving*, *Skin Diver*, *Shark Diver*, *Outdoor California*, *Caribbean Travel & Life*, and *Islands*, as well as in a number of trade publications.

To view more of his photos and articles, visit his Web site, www.featherandfins.com.