

Hanging by a moment

It's cold and dark, there are sharks somewhere out there and — if he's lucky — he won't be sent tumbling by a monster breaker as he attempts to capture an image of a perfect wave. This is the world of surf-photographer Mat Tildesley — at one with the ocean

WORDS TRACY RENKIN
MAIN IMAGE MAT TILDESLEY

The sky is as black as night when Mat Tildesley sets off to capture big waves crashing on the reef breaks along the Bicheno coastline off the East Coast of Tasmania. Some of the incredible flash photography he creates looks like he's somehow managed to stop time. The clarity of the swells are so clear it's as if he has the super power to freeze a three-metre high wave halfway through its curl. But of course he can't really do that, so whatever wave he's shooting invariably ends up breaking right over the top of him.

It comes crashing down in the darkness with such force that Tildesley has usually only just got his head above the freezing water again before the next wave breaks.

Capturing these fleeting moments of big barrels breaking along Bicheno reefs requires years of ocean knowledge and a whole heap of head space.

He knows there are sharks sharing the same waters and his legs are madly kicking in, but he is confident they are not the man-eating variety. Even so, it can be intimidating swimming around in the 11C darkness with thick, brown seaweed dancing around your flippers.

"When I'm swimming in the impact zone waiting for a set of waves there can be a plethora of thoughts and feelings running through my mind," Tildesley tells *TasWeekend*. "The water is black and it's hard to see. I'm always swimming and concentrating on being in the right spot."

His instincts kick in, he says, and his senses are amplified at night, much more than they are when he's swimming during the day. "I'm going on feel more than anything," he says.

"I'm feeling how the water's moving. The way the water draws off the reef leading up to a set can give me a premonition a big wave is coming. I'm constantly scanning the horizon for the waves. I'm thinking when should I press the button?"

"I've got to time it for when my assistant is in the prime position. So much has built up to this split second that I feel pressure to capture the image because I don't want to stuff it up."

He's a pioneer in this niche field of capturing the power and beauty of empty, unriden waves during the twilight hours. Big wave photography taken in the water poses so many challenges that it's not surprising Tildesley is the only one here prepared to put in the hard yards to pull it off. He needs certain weather conditions and tides and swells to all line up at the same time.

He has spent over a year in his home workshop designing and fabricating waterproofing camera gear that he taught himself how to make — it's not available anywhere to buy.

It sometimes takes weeks of thinking and careful planning and preparation to work in with nature and achieve the kind of shots he's out there shivering for. It's a waiting game, reliant on such epic mental endurance that sometimes after an in-ocean shooting session he can slump into an exhausted low — his own little cocoon — that can last for days, even weeks.

But if he's managed to click the shutter button at the perfect time to capture the wave just where he wants it, what he sees in the display screen is simply exhilarating.

"Firstly, there is excitement from the anticipation of what's to come," Tildesley says. "And then a kind of adrenalin rush



Picture: CLAIRE McMANUS

Clockwise from main: Coruscate, a wave crashing over a reef called Carpark on the Bicheno coastline in January 2019; Mat Tildesley and his partner Hannah Coates with their baby Eddy and dog Lulu at Bicheno; An image by Manabu Kondo of Mat Tildesley with his Nikon camera in its waterproof casing.

when the wave forms, and then a rush of happiness after it crashes. But if something goes wrong, like it did this morning, it can be like a kick in the nuts."

Given there is more than one wave to a set, these same feelings can happen over and over again in quick succession. "I suppose there is fascination, too, because no two waves are the same," he says. "It's all so intriguing because you never know how the results will come out. The light might be absorbed by the water or reflected and show the tiny details that are never really noticed during the daylight hours."

Tildesley describes taking out his dinghy for a 10-minute trip, anchoring it on a sand patch near a slabby wave called "Gum Boots". He swims out to where the waves are breaking, usually about 70m, and treads water — all the while holding his Nikon camera. His hope is that the 15-minute prime window of light that is perfect for the type of shots he creates will coincide with some impressive breaking barrels.

One of his mates — usually Geoff Swann or Seth Tonks or Sam Ross — swim out too, and end up about 15m away holding up a big, 600-watt strobe pointed straight at the wave to light up the

barrel. The wave breaks between the two and the result is often magical. "I love getting really close to the action and trying to get that perfect barrel shot," Tildesley says. "It's become quite an obsession."

Sometimes the waves are really big. He's been photographing in swells that are 8m high. He's been sucked into and spat out of the kind of monster waves most of us would perish in — the kind of waves that busted up this experienced surf-photographer's shoulder two years ago.

When those big ones smash down on him, and he's tumbling around in the wipeout, Tildesley makes use of his unusual ability to hold his breath for almost four minutes.

His partner, high school teacher Hannah Coates, says if he's had a close encounter with a dangerous wave, he doesn't usually share it with her — especially now that they have an eight-month-old son. She says since Eddy was born she tries not to think about the danger of it.

"I don't know anyone else who would go out in the dark, in the middle of a Tasmanian winter, to shoot a breaking wave," she says. "He's fearless in that ocean because he's grown up in it."

When Tildesley's mother, Nadia, was heavily pregnant with him in the summer of '89, she often waddled down the Waubs Bay beach path to the waters edge, dug herself a hole and rolled her bulging belly into the hollow to cool down. She says she believes that's where his fascination with the ocean began.

When he's not shooting waves, Tildesley is a skipper on an abalone dinghy or driving tourists around the 380 million-year-old granite at Freycinet. It doesn't matter what work it is, the ocean is predominantly involved.

"The ocean means everything to me," Tildesley admits. It's somewhere he can escape to, to get out of his own head. It's meditative too. He draws energy from being in the ocean.



"The ocean is just a part of who I am," he says. The saltwater is such a staple in his daily life that the thought of living away from breaking waves is laughable.

It's simply not an option for the Bicheno boy whose primary school oval backed onto the foreshore. His early school years were spent staring out of classroom windows looking out at the waves breaking on Trap Reef.

All those days looking out at the sea, he says, helped him to fall in love with it. Sometimes, during lunch break, he and a mate would sneak through the beach scrub and bound over the rocks, just to get a better look at the water.

They usually got sprung by a teacher but, he says, it was well worth the roasting.

He even recalls skipping school some days to go hang out with the ocean. He would spend hours sitting on rocks observing crashing waves, just to try and understand them better.

A friend recently told him that break from social normality was his first attempt at being creative. As a young adult, he travelled to some of the most famous surfing spots the world has to offer, only to realise that the best breaks for him were the ones he grew up body boarding and surfing on.

"It's an amazing feeling when you manage to get that photo you've been dreaming up for a long time," he says. "I love it. I'm pumped up."

"I'm out on the water with a mate and making memories that will last forever. It's a lifelong relationship, the ocean and I. I've definitely grown to love it even more as an adult — because I've been away and travelled enough to realise just how lucky we are here. We've got all this just outside our doorstep."

You can see an exhibit of Mat Tildesley's work at Waubs Bay Gallery in Bicheno, or on instagram @mat_tildesley. The wave photos are available to buy by contacting mathew@tildesley.net