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Dive right in

Written by Melinda Rice
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Eddie Monat, right, trains aspiring scuba diver Nicko Hadlock in the MDI YMCA pool. - MELINDA RICE PHOTO

BAR HARBOR — Stand back, Superman. There's a new set of superheroes in town.

Faster than a speeding starfish, able to leap (onto) lobster boats in a single bound, members of The League of Underwater Superheroes stand ready to explore the depths of Frenchman Bay, clean up the underwater landscape and have a whole lot of fun.

The "league" is actually a scuba diving club, the brainchild of Eddie "Diver Ed" Monat. Yes, that's scuba diving. In Maine.

"I joined Eddie's club because being a superhero comes naturally to me," says Ghetto Diver in his not-so-secret workaday identity as Bar Harbor resident Mike Staggs.

The nickname comes courtesy of friends, who call his motley assortment of banged-up secondhand gear his ghetto rig – equipment he says would put the fear of Neptune into Jacques Cousteau's interns from the 1950s.

"I will still need a slick logo, though," he says. "And a cape, of course. Although I will have to figure out how to put a cape over the tanks on my back."

Diver Ed, well known to residents of Mount Desert Island for the "dive-in theater" he operates in the summer with his partner Edna Martin, is a commercial and recreational diver, and a diving instructor. Most of the dozen or so inaugural league members are his students.

"It's just an excuse to pull people together who want to dive," he says. Unlike many

scuba clubs, there's no fee to join the league.

"I was looking for adventure and something that would be exciting and kind of on the edge to do," says The Flying Fish (also known as Trenton resident Jim Everly.)

Scuba diving, he says, fulfilled that wish "and then some."

As it turns out, there's a lot of cool stuff under the surface of Frenchman Bay.

"It's surprising," says Bar Harbor resident Jeff Miller. He doesn't have a superhero name yet, but if he did, he says he wouldn't reveal it.

"There's lobsters, crabs, scallops ... tons of different starfish. It's neat to see stuff walking along the bottom," he says. "This is their world and they're going about their daily lives."

Last fall Ghetto Diver was diving at about 50 feet off Egg Rock when he heard a loud rumbling. "Back on land I was told that we had another aftershock from the earthquakes. A day later, the Weston Observatory reported that the aftershock was centered right under where I had been diving," he says. "That was pretty cool."

Diver Ed has logged more hours underwater than all the other superheroes combined. Now 40, he got his first diving certification when he was 16. Once or twice a year he has an encounter with a playful gray seal that will latch on to one of his swim fins and tow him backward. He's caught a couple of monkfish by accident after they clamped down when he put his hand in their mouths by accident. Last year he found a "big meaty shrimp" of a species he has yet to be able to identify. He once was bumped by a mako shark.

But he says one of the coolest things he ever found in Frenchman Bay was a cast bronze bust of the "Proctor" from Proctor & Gamble near the ferry terminal.

The Flying Fish says there's all kinds of debris like that out there.

And this Sunday, April 22, the superheroes will spring into action and clean some of it up. They'll brave the frigid waters on Earth Day to scour the bottom in Bar Harbor's harbor.

Volunteer work is standard operating procedure for a member of the League of Underwater Superheroes. This summer they'll head to the Bahamas to count lionfish for the Reef Environmental Education Foundation.

The group takes trips for pure fun, too. Earlier this month league members spent a week diving on Salt Cay in the Caribbean. And last Sunday, on the last day of scallop season, they went diving for scallops.

"It's like a treasure hunt. You're just down there searching for your next scallop," says The Flying Fish, who loves scallop diving and plans to get a commercial license next

year.

For cold-water diving, league members use diving drysuits. The water was a chilly 34 degrees during the scallop outing. Diver Ed always dives in a drysuit. But by the time it gets into the mid-40s, some hardy club members use thick neoprene wetsuits. Unlike a drysuit, which keeps the water away from a diver's skin, a wetsuit allows a thin layer of water next to the skin. The diver's body heat warms the water and the wetsuit keeps the warmed water next to the diver's skin.

Mr. Miller did his checkout dive in one last year.

"I was dreading stepping off the back of that boat," he says. "But it wasn't bad at all. It's amazing how quickly your body warms that layer of water up."

Scuba diving can be an expensive, gear-intensive hobby. But the club tries to make sure it has extra gear on hand so anyone who wants to dive, can.

League members do have to be certified divers, but that's the only requirement.

"Most clubs have a fee to join, but we don't," says Diver Ed.

He offers a basic open water certification courses for future superheroes. Cost: \$400 with everything included, though he does encourage students to have their own masks, fins and snorkels. He also offers more advanced courses including drysuit diving, navigation, rescues, night diving, fish identification and dive master. He is even developing a course – tongue firmly in cheek – for underwater superhero certification.

"Eddie and Edna are super great people and always concerned about safety," says The Flying Fish.

So there you have it.

The league has a plan, a leader, cool nicknames, a training program and an almost-up-and-running Web site (underwatersuperhero.com).

Now all it needs is a nemesis – the evil Dr. Lobster, perhaps, who schemes to serve boiled scuba divers with a side of melted butter. Or a bitter Aquaman, maniacally jealous of league members and forever plotting their downfall.

Stay tuned.