This legally blind California man sees the world through his camera lens.

BRUCE HALL

HE FIRST TIME Bruce Hall peered through a telescope was when he was 9 years old. It was the first time he saw stars, too. Hall was born with an underdeveloped optic nerve, and among the many challenges the affliction presented were eyes that perpetually twitched, causing his vision to be blurred for objects greater than three or four inches away. Even corrective glasses didn’t help.

Insatiably curious, the boy returned to the telescope with his dad’s boxy Argus camera, rigged it to the lens, and snapped a few long exposures. “I actually got a few photos of stars that I could see,” remembers the now 58-year-old Hall, whose sight, at best, is 5 percent that of a person with perfect vision. “That’s when it dawned on me that I could use equipment like this to see things.”

Zoom lenses, oversized computer screens, and other optical devices later became extensions of his eyes. “Without this stuff, I don’t see any detail, so after I shoot something I go back and say, ‘Oh, that’s what it looks like.’”

A strong swimmer and lifelong fan of sea life, Hall learned to scuba dive in 1980. “I feel safer in the ocean than I do riding in a car on the freeway,” he says. Encasing a small disc camera in plastic and using a compass to keep his bearings, he soon began shooting close-ups of marine creatures off Laguna Beach and the Channel Islands of California. Since then, he has captured thousands of stunning underwater images, from octopuses and limpets to red sea stars and green anemones.

Hall once spent an entire summer trying to snare the perfect photograph of a giant kelp bulb. Patience paid off; the image appeared in a yearlong exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian Institute and won a National Geographic contest.

“It fascinates everybody, the idea of visually impaired people taking photographs,” says Hall. “Someone with a disability may have a challenge that seems impossible to overcome. But if you really focus, you can figure out a way to make it work.”—Nancy Henderson