

Roatan Report:

By Adam Wilson

Water LIFE Diving

With long summer nights, and predictable weather patterns, this is the time of year we love to run far offshore to hunt big fish. The latest 79,000 square mile NOAA fishing closure area due to the oil spill is a little over 100 miles west of our coast, for now. That still leaves plenty of prime underwater real estate for fishing and diving.

There have been some unusual sightings in the Gulf. I have heard of at least a dozen whale shark sightings from Clearwater down to Sarasota in the last month. We have also been seeing an increased number of sharks, even on spots where we typically never see them. Could we be starting to see a mass exodus of fish from the oil spill, or could it be related to the winter freeze? It would make sense that the larger fish would begin to show up first. The next few months could tell.

Bottom temperatures remain cold and that seems to have kept a lot of fish in close. Regardless of how deep you go there is a cold water layer 20 to 30 feet off the bottom that is still in the low 70s. If you are diving with just a bathing suit, that is cold!

We ran a trip out to the wreck of the Roatan Express, 75 miles southwest of Stump Pass and not far from the Gulf closure zone. The strong smell of oil covers the wreck site, not from the disaster in the Northern Gulf, but from the leaking fuel tanks in the wreck. Before leaving the port of Tampa the crew had taken on 150,000 gallons of diesel in preparation for a trip to Honduras and back. The Roatan sank in October of



1992 in less than stormy conditions. The exact cause of her fatal list to port and eventual sinking on a relatively calm night has never been discovered. Perfectly upright and intact, the best way to describe the wreck is it looks as if it's simply sailing south across the bottom, 190 feet below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico.

Internal investigation of the ship is becoming sketchy. Debris hangs from the ceilings and all the hallways and rooms are filled with flour like silt that seems to be stirred up just by looking at it. Although there were some big muton snappers over the sand around the wreck, we really didn't see any huge trophy fish usually spotted at this site.

Our next stop on the way in was a natural limestone ledge with a deep undercut in 170 feet. We were still south and due west of Fort Myers in an area that has been producing monstrous black grouper for a couple of years. Waiting for everyone to get ready I dropped down a few

feet to get a better look at the red snappers that had come up to see what was going on. Suddenly my

mask filled with water. One of the lenses popped out of the frame. Proper training teaches to always have a spare mask when planning a decompression dive. After replacing my mask with the spare from my thigh-pouch I continued my descent. Fifteen feet off the bottom and on the high side of the ledge, I let a shaft fly into a quality scamp grouper, thought by many to be the most delicious of all Gulf grouper.

The second I pulled the trigger I noticed a huge black grouper twenty feet in front of me and sitting on top of the ledge like the king of the ocean. Now focused on the black grouper, he leisurely rolled off the ledge and up into a deep cave. I reloaded and out of the corner of my eye watched as the scamp fled to a small hole without being able to disappear with 60 inches of steel through his head. I could come back for him.

Lying on top of the ledge I peeked over and into the cave, but the silt stirred up from the massive grouper reduced the visibility to zero. It was going to be a waiting game for the dust to settle. I knew he was there, but I just couldn't see him.

As I wait for the smoke to clear from the cave I am watching my computer closely. Every minute or so I check the cave with my 24 watt H.I.D. light. (think European sports-car headlight) My computer continues its calculations. I watch my 'time to surface' number grow longer and into double digits. I see my decompression stops begin to creep



I found a pretty nice rod and reel out in 90 feet last weekend. I would gladly return it to its rightful owner if they accurately describe the rod and reel and location they lost it.

Above: Hunting on the Roatan Express

Left: Adam Wilson with his "big-ass-black grouper" taken in June

deeper and deeper. I am rapidly approaching the now-or-never point.

One last desperate pass with the light and I can make out his tail, his head is facing the rear of the cave, ready to bolt deeper and out of sight forever.

Focusing and straining to see, I make out the tiny sweet spot right behind his eye. No time for error; no time for a wrestling match, no time period.

A good deep breath, steady aim and pull the trigger. No sand flying, no lodged shaft thrashing back and forth, he just turned white and rolled over. Still

10 feet back in the cave and out of reach; I string up a line shaft just to extract the giant from his home.

A quick yank and a lift bag goes through his mouth and out his gills, and I'm on my way to my first deco stop at 70 feet with no time to spare. I watch below me as one of my buddies grabs the scamp I shot and my shaft. My ascent was spent closely watching my pressure gauge, taking deep and controlled breaths and thinking of what the guys in the boat must be saying after grabbing my lift bag!

He was a loyal first mate...

Give him a proper send off.

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