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SOUTHERN DIVER

A MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO WARM WATER DIVING • SPRING 1998

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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE FROELICH

When divers think of the Palm Beaches, they typically think of being leisurely carried by the Gulf Stream over the many wrecks and lush coral reefs that have made the area famous. So much emphasis is placed on diving in the open ocean that, sometimes, the obvious is overlooked. In fact, enroute to the usual dive sites, most boats actually pass over what is considered by many the most unique dive site in the area. The Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge, in Riviera Beach, looks just like many other modern bridges that span the Intracoastal Waterway—until you take a look beneath it.



Blue Heron Boulevard



Flying Gurnards are often seen in the sand next to the Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge boating channel. They usually let divers get close, as shown by this 1:3 macro shot.

Bridge

RIVIERA
BEACH'S
FANTASTIC
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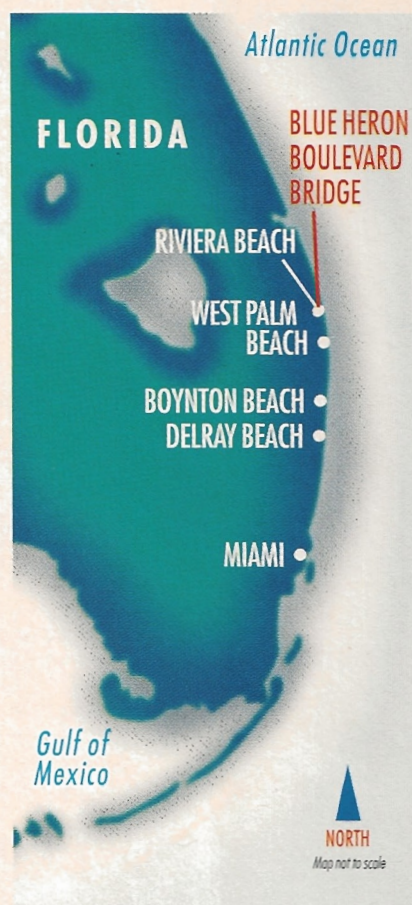
BLUE HERON BOULEVARD BRIDGE

The bridge spans were actually discovered as a dive site more than 25 years ago. Local dive shops (three now claim to be the first) were looking for a place to conduct open water training dives on the rare occasion the ocean was too rough. Today, several dive shops conduct training dives from open water through Instructor Development Courses in the area. Dixie Divers, of West Palm Beach, offers regularly scheduled night dives for anyone who wishes to participate.

The site is actually two bridges. In addition to the main bridge, which spans the entire waterway, the old bridge, about 50 feet to the north, functions as a fishing pier.

What a diver can expect to see around the columns is a rare occurrence of aquatic animals thriving in an area that has been strongly affected by humans. In addition to the bridges, there are many bottles, cans and other larger pieces of trash that have been adopted by many of the creatures residing here. For example, there is an octopus that has made a home out of a broken beer bottle. Also, West Indian Sea Eggs and other urchins decorate themselves with bottlecaps to complement the seashells they use for protection.

Only a mile and a half from the bridge, the Lake Worth Inlet is dredged to a depth of 50 to 60 feet in order to accommodate the huge freighters that utilize the port. This allows a tremendous amount of clean, clear ocean water to push its way into the Intracoastal



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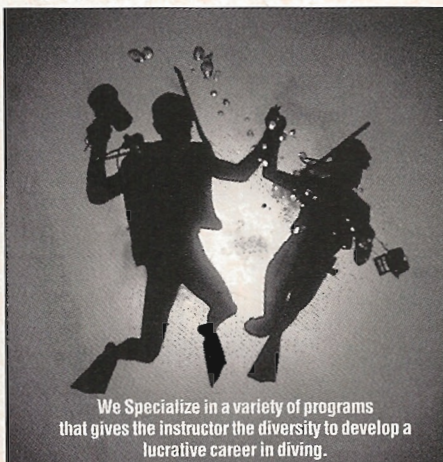
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The old bridge (at the lower left of this photo) serves as a fishing pier.

Waterway. The area just inside the inlet, Lake Worth Lagoon, is blessed with this influx of ocean water. In fact, many locals have their own lobster "honey" holes in the lagoon. This usually blue water, loaded with plankton and marine larvae, pushes its way well beyond the numerous concrete pilings and debris of Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge twice a day. This provides the bridge's residents with dinner and divers with average visibility of 30 feet, although it can be as good as 50 to 60.

The best time to dive is the two hour window encompassing high tide. Owing to the amount of water that makes its way through the inlet, the current can get quite strong and, when the tide recedes, visibility decreases as the area is invaded by the murkier, nutrient-rich inshore waters. Because the maximum depth is only 22 feet, some divers are able to stay under for the entire two hours.

The main attraction of diving the Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge is the number and uniqueness of its residents. The list of

odd shaped bottom dwellers reads like a checklist from a Paul Humann *ReefFish ID* book. Every time I dive here, I see something I've never seen before. With the abundance of bizarre looking and rare fish and critter life, the macro photography opportunities are limitless.

Exploring the sand just to the south of the bridges, divers will find huge Cushion and rare Nine Armed Starfish. Around an old beach chair reside a pair of seahorses and a Pipefish. Looking into holes in the sand often yields sightings of scaly-tailed Mantis Shrimp and an octopus lair.

The area between the two bridges seems to have the most action. This is where anglers from the pier above keep feeding the fish. Along the bottom, an observant diver can find a Stargazer. Although almost always found partially buried in the sand, it is easily distinguished by white spots on a dark brown forehead, and an exaggerated underbite a bulldog would be proud of. A diver encountering a Stargazer should not touch it, as it is capable of delivering a nasty shock.

Another regular seen here is the Polka-dot Batfish and its cousin, the Short-nosed Batfish. They can be found perched on their modified fins, resembling a frog sitting on a lily pad. They, too, will allow divers to get extremely

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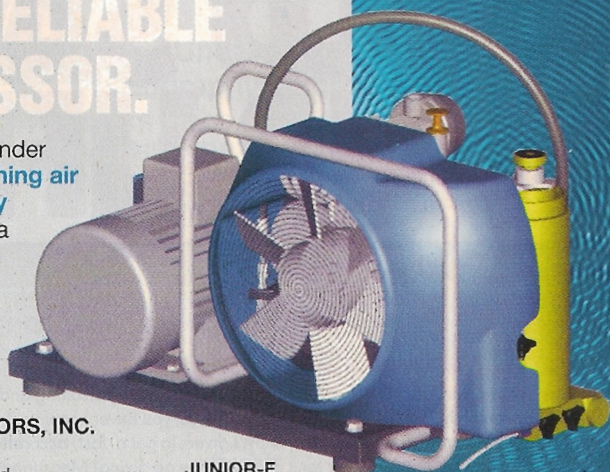
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BLUE HERON BOULEVARD BRIDGE

close before they scamper off, using those fins and giving more of an appearance of running than swimming.

A large Barracuda looms underneath the bridge, waiting to snag an unfortunate grunt hooked by one of the anglers above. Observant divers can find scorpionfish and Barbfish in the sand, as well as on a debris pile just north of the old bridge. These fish, relying on camouflage, patiently wait for unsuspecting prey to swim by. I've seen photos of frogfish found at the debris pile but to date haven't seen one myself.

Flying Gurnards are usually seen in the sand next to the boating channel. Sometimes seen in groups of five or more, they usually allow divers to get extremely close before they scurry along the bottom with their "wings" displaying beautiful fluorescent blue markings along the outer fringes. This is intended to give predators the impression the Gurnard is larger than it is. Gray Angelfish also find the structure just inside the boat channel agreeable.

Although it can be a fantastic day dive, the magic of the bridges happens at night. Both Caribbean Spiny and Spotted Spiny Lobsters emerge from their daytime hiding places to join the Arrowcrabs and Banded Coral Shrimp walking up and down the vertical support columns of the bridge. Most divers would be excited to see one or two octopi on a dive. Here, it is normal to see eight to ten on a single dive. Most are used to divers and some will interact without

"I've taken many friends to the Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge...they will see things they have never seen before...no one has left the park disappointed."

much enticement. On a recent dive, my buddy told me he saw so many that he quit pointing them out. A Spotted Eagle Ray, normally spooked away by a divers' bubbles, is attracted to the lights and often comes in for a close inspection.

I've taken many friends to the Blue Heron Boulevard Bridge, with the understanding they will see things they have never seen before. To date, no one has left the park disappointed. Come join us. You won't be disappointed, either. ★

Dive Notes

ADVENTURE GUIDE TO THE FLORIDA KEYS AND EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK:

This second edition of Joyce and Jon Huber's comprehensive guide is a must for those planning a vacation to the Florida Keys and the Everglades. It is filled with helpful information, detailed maps, interesting eco-tips and necessary addresses and phone numbers.

This book will take the guesswork out of planning your vacation. It includes useful information such as when to go, how to get there, what to bring, where to eat and where to stay.

Once you have worked out the particulars, it's onto the fun stuff. How will you spend your days in the fresh air and Florida sunshine? There are aerial, boat, canoe and kayak tours; cycling trails, nature hikes and walks; fishing, scuba diving, snorkeling; and more. All of these exciting adventures are described in full, with special tips, illustrations and photographs to capture your imagination.

The Hubers have also included two chapters that will help you become a more informed traveler. The first covers the environments of the Everglades and Keys, introducing the habitats and sanctuaries you will be exploring. The other gives a brief overview of the history of the area, including indigenous populations, the activities of pirates and much more.

Straightforward and accessible, *Adventure Guide to The Florida Keys and Everglades National Park* will lead you through the splendors of South Florida's wildly beautiful ecological wonders.

The soft cover, 8½ by 5½ inch book is \$12.95. For more information, write to Hunter Publishing, 300 Raritan Center Parkway, Edison, NJ 08818; or call (908) 225-1900, fax (908) 417-0482. ★

QUEST FOR SHIPWRECKS: Almost weekly, lost shipwrecks are being discovered around the world. Marine Geographic has recently published *Quest for Shipwrecks* (second edition) by Jim McNutt, noted salvage diver. The 242 page non-fiction book describes ship design, construction, lost shipwrecks, research, new technologies for search and salvage, organizing projects, marine archaeology and recent shipwreck discoveries. The true nature of wreck hunting is described with more than 100 unique charts and stunning photographs. There is a special section on Cuba and unfound shipwrecks of the Caribbean.

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