

# The Bahamian Lionfish

by Stephen Sica

Last fall Donna suggested that we travel to a warm weather climate for our upcoming wedding anniversary rather than drive to colonial Williamsburg, Virginia as we usually do. I enthusiastically agreed since we had just driven to Williamsburg in September. “Can we go diving?” I asked. “Sure. Three or four days,” she answered. “Let’s do three and chill out the last day,” I responded.

Donna made the arrangements, and the morning of December 7, 2007 found us in a fast boat, heading for a wall dive on the southwest side of New Providence Island. It was the first time we actually went diving on our anniversary day. I mentioned this to the dive master, who acted impressed, although Donna thought it was not “need-to-know” information.

“Be alert and you may see a lionfish,” Chang, our Australian dive master, said during our pre-dive briefing. When we dove with the same outfit in May 2006 no one mentioned lionfish. I questioned Chang and he said that nobody knew their local origin, but the theory was that someone may have dumped pet fish in the water, where they began to breed prolifically. I offered that I had read that lionfish were sighted off the northeast coast of the United States during the past two summers. It was believed that they arrived on the Gulfstream and perished as the ocean cooled. Chang said that this theory was not widespread for Bahamian lionfish. He said that they had only appeared in the Bahamas within the last twelve months.

We were doing six dives during three consecutive mornings. I was very eager to see a lionfish. I had my digital camera in a waterproof case, so I was hoping to photograph an actual “Bahamian lionfish.” Chang said that the water temperature was seventy-nine degrees, which we thought was very good for this time of year. In Key Largo last October a warm summer season kept the water temperature at an enjoyable eighty-two degrees. When we actually hit the Atlantic Ocean in the Bahamas, both our bodies and our instruments gave a more accurate reading of seventy-six to seventy-seven degrees, which was chilly, but warm enough in our three millimeter wetsuits. Donna wore a three mil shorty over a three mil full suit so she was toasty warm but somewhat restricted in movement. In spite of my body fat, my three/two mil wetsuit was a little chilly. When the water is “cold,” that is, below eighty degrees, the body gets chilled from the first dive. The second dive is downright cold most of the time, even when wearing a wetsuit. Luckily, there were wrecks, reefs, many fish, and even a few sharks to occupy our time underwater.

But I was keen to see and photograph a lionfish, and just about everything else both under and above the ocean for that matter!

On our very first dive we saw a lionfish. Upon conclusion of our three days of diving we had seen four lionfish. I photographed three of them. My camera’s battery expired during a second dive and I missed one. The first fish was fairly small, hovering facedown in front of a basket sponge that was split in



half, and offered a small concave hollow that appeared to be home to the lionfish. It did not provide much protection, if any at all, but I guess that lionfish do not need a hiding place. The next two lionfish were medium in size, and on our third day Donna spotted a full size one about fifteen inches in length. There were lots of particles swirling about the ocean that day, so it was not possible to take a clear photograph. Nevertheless, I snapped a few photos of this prize specimen. I always dream that someday I’ll purchase one of those very expensive editing programs that can remove imperfections. Probably it can even make me look good – perhaps move some facial hair to my head!

I edited the best photos on my computer and included three for this article. The fish were all of the same species, *Pterois volitans*, and their color was apparently black and white, although I perused them from all angles up close within a foot or two from my face to see if any of their bands had brown, gold, or reddish tints. From published photos, lionfish appear to have brown or reddish bands. All of the fish that I saw were black and white. It is possible that the depth of the water filtered out some color, but the camera’s flash did not enhance the color either.

After we had returned home and I was attempting to catch up on reading, I spotted a letter

published in the July 2007 Tropical Fish Hobbyist magazine wherein the writer's diver friend sighted lionfish off the North Carolina coast. The letter was acknowledged with the opinion that these fish are now all along the East Coast, and the personal belief that larvae were transported by ship ballast. I perused two unrelated articles on scorpionfishes in Tropical Fish Hobbyist. One author had seen lionfish in the Bahamas.



Finally, after I completed this brief article, I received the March 2008 issue of Scuba Diving magazine, which I believe has the definitive statement to date on Bahamian lionfish. Per the article, "Born in the Wrong Sea," by Ned DeLoach, lionfish have no natural enemies. They have a voracious appetite for juvenile and other small fishes, most of which are fairly exotic. Stomach contents have included fairy basslets, dwarf and arrow blennies, yellowhead jawfish, and seahorses. A survey of more than five hundred dissections in the Bahamas found that lionfish eat seventy percent fish and thirty percent crustaceans. A group of scientists, with the aid of the local dive community, have been netting dozens of lionfish for scientific study. Two out of three captured fish are destroyed, while the third is tagged and released.

This article explained that isolated sightings have been reported off Florida's southeastern coast for fifteen years. Biologists speculate that the fish were released when they outgrew home aquariums until a breeding population formed. In 2002, lionfish took hold along North Carolina's coast where they inhabit many offshore dive wrecks. Two juveniles were sighted off Long Island in the summer of 2001. In the same year another was discovered in a tide pool in Bermuda. Cold winter waters probably killed the northern-most fish, but the species is thriving in Bermuda. In the Bahamas sporadic sightings began in 2004, and by 2006 the number of sightings increased significantly. A coral head the size of a small automobile was inhabited by eleven lionfish. The capture and study of lionfish has been strenuous work, with researchers and divers being stung on occasion.

My personal opinion is that it is only a matter of time before lionfish wreak havoc on native fish populations in the Caribbean, the Atlantic Ocean off the East Coast of the United States, and Bermuda. A lionfish will eat every living sea creature that will fit into its mouth!

Every summer in Florida there is a two day open season for catching lobster via skin and scuba diving. Someday, I would not be surprised to see a lionfish hunt; but are they too dangerous to catch? Would they be channeled into the aquarium trade, or ground up into meal? Would their poisonous spines make them too dangerous to handle whether alive, dead, fertilizer, or meal? I'm not a hunter. Would I kill a lionfish if given permission and the opportunity? Who knows? I do know that I would not shoot at a deer or other animal.



Hopefully, someday lionfish populations can be controlled, so that they do not pose a threat to other sea life. It seems that lionfish swim and adapt wherever the ocean is warm enough. I thought that it was only a matter of time until lionfish inhabited the Atlantic Ocean, but they have already arrived. Anyway, the next time we head south for some diving, I'll be looking excitedly and carefully for a lionfish!

