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LIONFISH INVADE CAYMAN ISLANDS

by Stephen Sica

On May 1, 2009 at approximately 9:30 AM Central time, a divemaster named Sunshine discovered a juvenile lionfish, *Pterois volitans*, about two inches in length plus fins and spines, hovering next to a concave piece of dead coral on a dive site called Marilyn's Cut, just offshore of Little Cayman Island. The fish was living on a coral reef in about thirty feet of water, atop the six thousand feet deep Cayman Trench. I was swimming just behind Sunny when she found the fish and signaled her discovery to me. I did not see what she was so excited about until the fish swam under the coral that appeared to be either the fish's home or hiding place. The coral was about fourteen inches long, and probably weighed about six or seven pounds. Since I did not immediately see the elusive fish, I did not have an opportunity to photograph it.

Sunny used a thin metal rod about eighteen inches long to work the coral and the fish into a large, clear, heavy duty plastic bag, and then she used the rod to push the coral out of the bag, which she immediately took to the surface while Donna and I continued our dive.



Later, on the boat, Sunny said that the first Cayman Islands' lionfish was discovered and caught in February of 2008 off Little Cayman. No more were found until December of that same year. The fish that Sunny captured was approximately

the thirty-fifth lionfish captured in the Cayman Islands (the group consists of only three islands). Sunny stated that all fish are captured alive and studied (including DNA testing) by the local marine biology laboratory. Afterwards, most of the fish are euthanized and dissected. Since lionfish have very few predators, and propagate easily in the wild, the general policy of the local scientific community has been to destroy them, though a small number of fish are tagged and released for follow-up study. Sunny claimed that one dissected full-sized Cayman lionfish had more than twenty-five grunt fry in its stomach.



The fish that Sunny captured was placed in a plastic pail where Donna and I inspected it. I never thought to photograph it in the pail until later, when I was formulating this brief article in my mind. Of course by then it was too late! Anyway, I did take a few photos of Sunny capturing the fish. Some of these photos accompany this article. If you look carefully, you can see the fish in the plastic bag.

