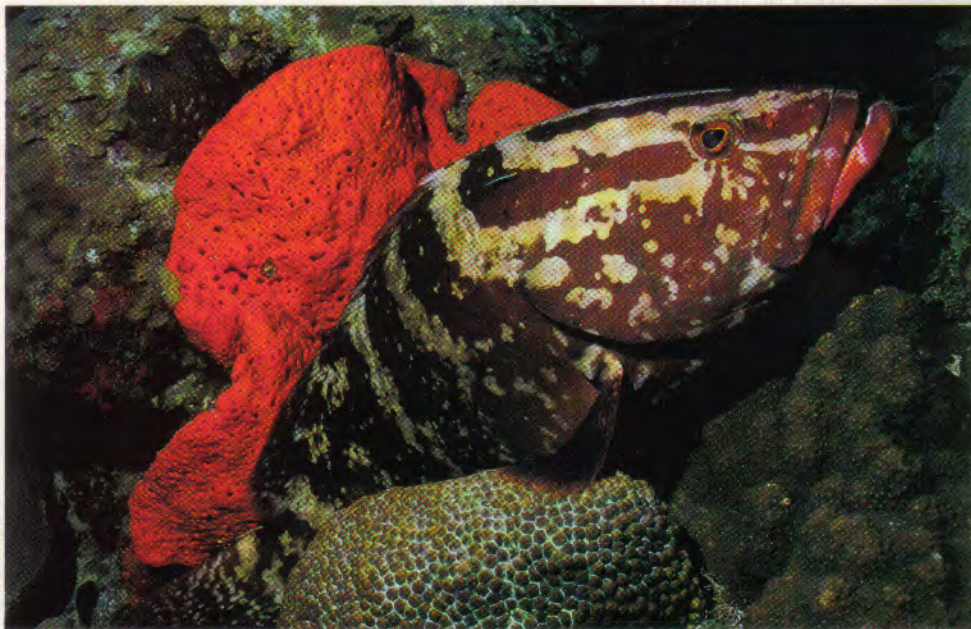


MIKE KNEPPER



GRAEME TEAGUE

You'll seldom find a Bahamian wreck without a good population of resident grouper. The red grouper at top and the Nassau grouper above won't be shy to take your offering, but you need to work hard to stop that first run back into the wreck.

swarms of game fish certain to be hanging around the wreck. The more obvious your presence, the more likely that fish will disappear into the protective core.

Before anchoring, determine how to position your boat based on wind and current, and proceed directly away from the center of the wreck. Drop the hook and drift back close enough for chum to work effectively for bottom fishing, free-lining baits or even fly fishing.

When casting or trolling a wreck with a jig or lure, Laffler prefers to tip the hook with a bonito strip because it holds up well after a hit and excites fish to strike again. On deeper wrecks, he trolls for grouper, cubera and larger mutton snapper with 8-inch bulletheads, tuna clones, soft-heads and similar lures tipped with ballyhoo or bonito strips. To avoid losing the fish in structure, Laffler trolls at 5 to 6 knots using 60- to 90-pound-test wire or 50- to 60-pound Dacron with mono-shock leaders, dragging the baits 150 to 200 feet behind the boat in 20 to 40 feet of water,

respectively. "Increase the boat speed when you get a hit to move the fish away from the structure," says Laffler.

Having visited remote wrecks many times over the years, the variety of species still amazes me. I present big baits first, especially live baits such as crabs for permit and cobia, or even tarpon. If the big boys aren't home, I switch to jigs and plastic baits for snapper, margates and porgies. And usually cudas and jacks are present, which love to slam tube lures and surface baits such as chuggers.

Cut bait, with minimal or no weight, can also produce some interesting results at times with mutton snapper. But fishing dead bait also means to be ready for marauding sharks. You'll encounter monster sharks on and around Bahamian wrecks, such as tigers, hammerheads, bulls and reefs, which make for exciting action. Bull sharks, reef and sand sharks are present year-round, while others seem to be more seasonal.

All wreck anglers should remember they're fishing on a finite ecosystem: Too much pressure will cause it to collapse. So, fish a wreck respectfully by taking what you can eat and release the rest, and then move on and make new discoveries. Just don't forget to add the numbers to your logbook so you can find it again on a future trip.

Below the Boat

Calm seas and clear water go a long way toward locating wrecks or overnighing near them, so it's usually safest to plan a wreck trek between June and October. Planning is important if you overnigh in remote areas because you can be many miles from a protected harbor. Constantly monitoring weather conditions is imperative, and you must have backups for all safety equipment, including EPIRBs, radios, life vests with strobes, inflatable boat, first-aid kits, fire extinguishers, flare kits, etc. Newcomers to wreck finding would be well advised to buddy up with another boat and stay together.

Before you pull away from a wreck, why not don some snorkeling gear and check it out? You'll be amazed at how much more you can see underwater, which will increase your knowledge and appreciation of what to look for when searching for a wreck.

Once you've found your first virgin wreck, you'll be proud of the accomplishment. Soon you'll find yourself on a constant vigil, with eyes tuned to the slightest hint of an uncommon color or shape. Never knowing when you'll come upon a truly exciting find adds to the fun, especially when you quickly discover it's loaded with game fish.

Dale Sanders resides in Odessa, Florida, where he writes articles and takes photos for publications specializing in diving, fishing, marine science and eco-tourism. He's currently working on a book about how to locate wrecks.