

5th to 7th November 2010

Kalinda Trip Report

After much anticipation and a whole lot of weather watching, a group of adventurous divers made it out to the wreck of the SS Yongala and Wheeler Reef!

On Friday evening we met Dave the skipper of the Kalinda, his crew for the week end, and all the participants. On board, we had Mike, Simon, Joanne, David, April, Jennifer, Alain, Dan, Anusha, Graeme, Bob Taylor, Peter, Rosanne, Steve G, Bob and Bev, and Tony.

After our safety brief, Dave plotted a course for the site of the Yongala, as Saturday's forecast was calmer than Sunday's forecast. The next morning we had the dive site to ourselves, with reasonable surface conditions, although Dave reported a strong current on the wreck, due to the recent large tides.

Considering the current, the visibility on the first dive was still ok, but most divers elected to hang off the diver access point attached to the bow bollard, and watch the amazing fish life. The usual collections of fish were present,

including an impressive school of Chevron Barracuda, fully grown Giant Trevally, Coral Trout, Olive Sea Snakes, Potato Cod and QLD Grouper.



Eagle Ray over the Yongala

The current had eased a little for our second dive, allowing divers to see most of the deck side of the wreck. On this dive, people reported seeing Eagle Rays, turtles, Black Kingfish (Cobia), and a couple of medium sized QLD Grouper.

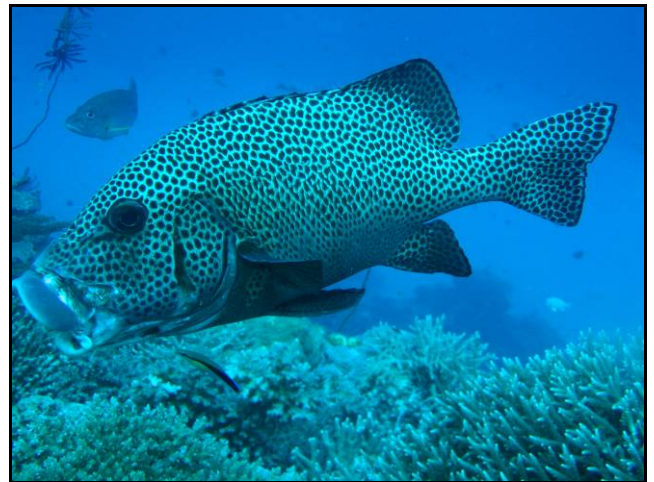


Olive Sea Snake at Yongala sea floor

By early Saturday afternoon, we had arrived at the second dive site, the Wheeler Reef public mooring. Surface conditions here were calm in comparison to the Yongala, but the recent heavy winds had deposited sand from the cay exposed at low tide, over the surrounding reef, which reduced visibility to 10m to 12m.

For the first dive on Wheeler Reef, most divers elected to check out 'Split Rock' at the start of their dive, then move down to 'Shark Alley', and finish up in the shallows of the reef edge in front of the mooring. Some interesting fish were seen by divers in my group, such as Flutemouth and Trumpetfish, and Mike's group reported seeing a large school of mature Bumphead Parrotfish and a school of tiny Razorfish trying to disguise themselves among Staghorn Coral.

The last dive on Saturday was a night dive. Those divers keen enough to don a cold wetsuit were rewarded with an easy and relaxing dive with very little current. Joanne and I found the school of Bumphead Parrotfish seen earlier that day, a lone Barracuda that followed us around, and a couple of friendly Rainbow Runners. We had no shortage of glow-sticks, so Mike and I created a version of Hansel and Gretel's trail, which we retrieved the next day.



Many-spotted Sweetlip having a 'clean and scale'



Bumphead Parrotfish looking for some coral to 'munch'

Surface conditions for our last day had improved, and we were no longer beam-on to the prevailing swell. Joanne and I started our first dive on Sunday by looking over 'Split Rock' and admiring how fat the resident Coral Trout are, presumably due to their easy access to the thick cloud of small fish that swarm around the rock.

Most divers decided to head to 'Shark Alley', but we found the current to be quite strong at the bottom of the sand 'ramp', so we made a right turn and circled around the shallower section of the bombies in this area. We found a group of garden eels living in a patch of sand between 'Shark Alley' and the reef edge.



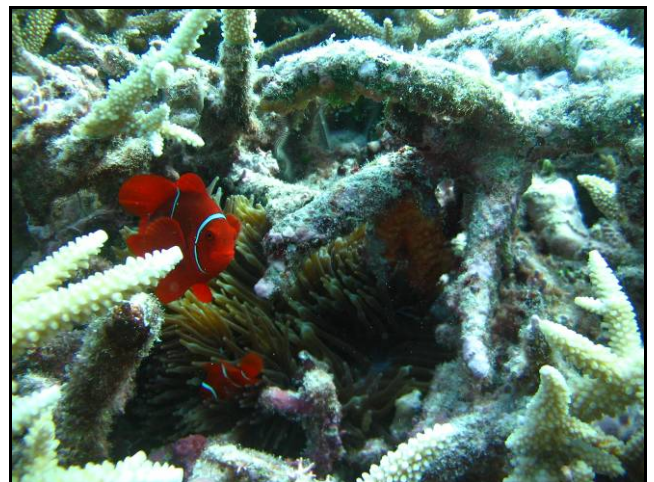
Wheeler Lagoon swim-through

We spent the second half of this dive moving east along the reef edge, where we found the school of Bumphead Parrotfish, dozens of Grassy Sweetlips, a few more Rainbow Runners, and a lone Crown of Thorns Starfish attached to a piece of Staghorn Coral.

Back on the boat, Jennifer and Alain were very pleased to report finding a Manta Ray during their dive, at around 2.5m to 3m across the wing tips!

For the final dive, most groups decided to head right up to the reef edge, to get in among some of the impressive swim-throughs, gutters, and caves that lead into the Wheeler Lagoon.

About half way along the reef edge, we found the remains of a boat, partially buried in the sand hard up against the reef wall. Some large flat sections of metal can be seen, along with threaded stainless steel rod, and small timber beams covered with corroded metal sheeting. I was left wondering if this wreckage is the remains of the sunken charter boat that is the subject of one of Ken Garnett's famous tales.



Spinecheek Anemonefish among Staghorn Coral

We covered a lot of ground and we turned around on the corner of the reef, where the sand bottom has a definite ripple contour, and a thin film of dark sediment.

A couple of years ago, we had found a massive cleaning station in this area, where Moray Eels were swimming right out of their holes to be cleaned.

The cleaning station wasn't operating this time; but, it was really good to spend a long dive in the shallows, where the light penetration showcases the true brilliance of all the colours.

We left the mooring around lunchtime and had a comfortable run back to Townsville.

Our dives over the weekend were a mixture of somewhat challenging dives in strong current, and pleasant dives in shallow reef sections among fantastic coral.

The visibility over the weekend wasn't the usual 20m plus that has become the norm at Wheeler, but we were still able to complete some memorable dives among excellent structure, pristine coral, and a mass of fish life.

Thankyou very much to all the participants, as without your support we would not have been able to put this trip together.

I also need to thank April Boaden for shooting and supplying all the excellent photos which appear in this report.

Keep blowing bubbles, and I hope to be able to dive with you again, sometime in the New Year.

Simon Penprase.