

# AQUANEWS

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## SECRETARY

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## TREASURER

PAUL GALEAZZI JR.

## DIRECTORS

ALLAN BLOCK

MARSHA FREEDMAN

PAUL GALEAZZI JR.

STEVE IMPROTE

LES PARKER

## DIVE COORDINATOR

MIKE HATALA

## PUBLICITY

JEFFREY HOROWITZ

## The Most Dangerous Fish

Forget sharks, these are the teeth to be cautious around

It was November 2000 on a Palau liveaboard. The weather was not good, but *Undercurrent* reader Charles Edson (Washington, D.C) descended 60 feet to a sandy bottom. He was equalizing when, wham! Something hit his ear. "It felt like a smack from a rubber mallet. Behind me, I saw a fish dash into the rocks. I swam to my wife with my hand on my left ear. When I moved my hand away, a green cloud drifted from a wound. Her eyes got as big as saucers. She and the divemaster thought I had burst an eardrum and accompanied me to the surface. Later, I learned that the same fish had attacked two other divers. One had a chunk bitten out of his wetsuit, and the other nearly had her mask knocked off."

Fortunately, one of Edson's diving partners was an ER doctor. "He had sutures and some antibiotics, so he sewed up my ear lobe. The fish's teeth had cut completely through my ear. In a day or two, my ear was bright red and had bloomed nearly twice its size, so the dive operation took me and my doctor friend to Koror. The hospital gave us enough drugs to keep me dosed with antibiotics during the rest of the dive trip, but I missed the last three days of diving. I was on IV drugs for a week-and-a-half as we were traveling in Bali before going on to Wakatobi. I resumed diving there, but bought a neoprene hood to protect my ear."

Apparently Edson's dive trip happened during breeding time for Titan triggerfish. While the chances of a shark attacking you while diving are very rare, the odds are better regarding the feisty Titan triggerfish. This seemingly harmless reef species packs a mean bite, and is more often the reason for divers and snorkelers sporting bruises and bites. When we asked *Undercurrent* readers if they ever had any run-ins, we got plenty of replies.

While on a Raja Ampat dive, Dick Troop (Los Angeles, CA) was hovering over a reef 10 feet below and noticed a Titan lying flat on its side "As I studied it, wondering if it was sick or dead, it popped upright, looked directly at my wife, Cindy, and accelerated at ram speed toward her. She looked up a second before the fish crashed into her mask, knocking her head back. Stunned itself, the Titan fluttered toward the bottom. While at first shocked, Cindy wasn't hurt, and started to laugh. I swam towards her, trying to get her out of the fish's cone of protection. When we got to the liveaboard, I looked up the fish in a book, which said that, when nesting, the Titan triggerfish is the most dangerous fish in the ocean."

### They Bite Fins, Cameras and, Yes, People

Scientifically known as *Balistoides Viridescens*, the Titan is the largest of the triggerfish species, and can grow to 30 inches in length. Native to the Indo-Pacific region, it can be found in the coral reefs of Australia, Fiji, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, the Maldives, even the Red Sea.

While only known to be aggressive and territorial during the reproduction season and when guarding its nest, the Titan triggerfish has an infamous reputation that can increase a diver's anxiety. Their teeth easily leave fins in tatters, as Davis Pearson (St. Petersburg, FL) found out while diving in Sipadan. "I ran into a mated pair of Titans, the female building a rock nest to lay eggs in, and the male keeping watch. When I approached, the male swam around me at close quarters. While I tried to stay facing him by spinning around, he would swim rapidly, look for my blind side, dart in and attack. When I retreated to his 'safe

(Continued on page 2)

## AQUANEWS

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### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

PETER BEIN  
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MELISSA BOGEN  
MAX ESTROFF  
PAUL GALEAZZI, JR  
STEVE IMPROTE  
LES PARKER  
LADA SIMEK

### NEWSLETTER COORDINATOR

PAUL A. GALEAZZI

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INFO@ROCKLANDAQUANAUTS.ORG

distance', he would stop the attack. But he had bitten through my fin twice, leaving a hole that looked like someone had used a beer can 'church key' to open it."

They even bite cameras, as Jim Virgil (Spring Branch, TX) found out while filming one in Palau. "He made a beeline to me and actually bit the camera lens. Scared the hell out of me" In the Red Sea, Ben Kendall (Wynnewood, PA) approached a Titan, hovering over its nest, with a Nikonos in his right hand and the strobe, connected by a cable, in his left. "The fish charged at me, took the cable in its mouth and swam away with my camera and strobe. My wife came to my aid and retrieved the unit. It was unharmed, which is more than I can say for my ego."

But other not-so-lucky divers have received bad bites. Donna Teach (Columbus, OH) remembers a dive at Yap to see mantas at cleaning stations, when a nesting Titan triggerfish went after her husband. "He had three encounters, often with the trigger chasing him yards beyond the nesting territory. At one point, the fish got at eye level and appeared to be going for his face. A mini boxing match began, with the Titan winning and taking a bite out of his forearm. This seemed to satisfy the fish, who finally left him alone."

Karen Dunn (Massillon, OH) was muck diving in New Guinea, taking a photo of a blue ribbon eel when she was bitten on the thigh by a Titan. "It was quite painful; however, I had a dive skin on. The divemaster turned around when I yelled, and saw the Titan near a nest. The fish grabbed the divemaster's fin and would not let it go. When we got back to the boat, my thigh had teeth imprints and there was a large bruise."

### Avoid the "Danger Zone"

Many of our readers' triggerfish run-ins happened when they were in Palau. Curtis Kates (Los Angeles, CA) pinpoints Ulong Channel as a spot where divers are certain to find Titans. "After divers pass through the main part of the channel, one ends up in a sandy area where Titans make their nests in the sand. If a diver passes too close, the Titans will charge at full speed. On my last visit in May, several took a swipe at my fins. It's a lot of fun on a safety stop to watch startled divers retreat from agitated, aggressive Titans."

This may have been where Randy Preissig (San Antonio, TX) had a Titan experience. "During a rapid drift dive through a shallow pass, we saw dozens of nests and Titan triggerfish ahead - - and we had no place to go. After three minutes of attacks, I can assure you I'll never dive without a wetsuit and camera. No one was bitten, but we all gained respect for these 'harmless' fish."

Titan triggerfish have a slightly elongated body, usually green to dark gray in color, and have yellow or green fins with black tips and a purple lower jaw. What stands out most is its eyes. Titans have independently rotating eye sockets, and look like they are

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giving you the evil eye just before they charge. They are workers and can be seen busily turning over rocks, stirring up the sand and biting off pieces of branching coral, which is why smaller fish tag after them and feed off the leftovers. They're solitary creatures, and like most reef fish, are active during the day and at night tuck themselves into the reef to sleep. It's when they are nesting that they get feisty, and will rigorously protect these nests. Max Benjamin, Walindi Plantation Resort owner, says May and late October through November seem to be the times they're protecting eggs in his part of the world. "Without a doubt, those big bastards are the most dangerous animal in Papua New Guinea. The two that give us trouble are the Titan and Yellowmargin triggerfish. They like to develop nests on white sandy bottoms, digging large nests that look like bomb craters. While diving during nesting periods, I give these areas a wide berth, I never go closer than 30 feet toward a nest." The 'Danger Zone' you want to avoid is a cone shape extending from their nest, usually in the sand adjacent to or within the coral. A prominent sign of trouble is when the fish rolls onto its side to get a better look at you. Sometimes you'll see its black fin tips rise in warning of the attack.

If you see a nest, swim away horizontally, as the zone they're protecting is an upward cone. Ascending is not going to stop the Titan from defending its turf, as Debra Gookin (San Diego, CA) learned during a dive at Fiji's Viti Levu. "I was 20 feet away when two Titans noticed me gliding toward them. One charged straight toward me. I pulled away, but the fish just kept coming, so I gave it a solid kick. It bounced off and flipped over, but it just reoriented itself and got ready to charge again. I swam quickly back toward the divemaster while keeping an eye on my attacker. The fish followed for a few yards. After the dive, the divemaster said I was fortunate to have fled by swimming away at the same depth, because the triggerfish defends a cone-shaped column that extends to the surface. If I had headed to the surface, the triggerfish would have continued to attack me all the way up."

If they come close, try to get your fins or a hard object like a camera, dive slate or other scuba gear between you and the fish. Chuck Wilson (Lincoln, NE ) used his camera as protection while on a Palau dive. "As I passed over a patch of sand, a large Titan launched an all-out assault. Zooming at alarming speed, the Titan's dive-bombing runs came within a foot of my head. The only protection I had was my Nikonos, which I tried to keep between my head and the fish. On the last pass, the Titan hit the camera and left a small dent on the metal rim around the lens. Better than my head."

Fred Turoff (Philadelphia, PA) was on a Sipadan dive when his group passed a nesting Titan too closely. "The fish bit the fellow next to me on the shin - - went through his wetsuit and drew blood - - then came at me. I was carrying my Nikonos V rig and hit the oncoming fish with it. That stopped the attack and we left the area quickly."

Mike Krampf (Houston, TX) recommends bringing a flashlight along for protection. "A Filipino divemaster in Malapascua told me that Titan triggerfish hate light, day or night. If you shine your flashlight at a triggerfish, even while it's guarding its nest, it will swim away. I witnessed it firsthand when the divemaster shined its light at the triggerfish, which quickly retreated. We were able to swim up and check out its nest while keeping the triggerfish away with the flashlight."

Krampf also brings up a good point: Why don't divemasters let you know ahead of time about nesting Titans if you're diving during breeding season? "It was my first dive off Sipadan. Unbeknownst to me or the other divers was that Yellowmargin and Titan triggerfish were nesting. I learned the hard way - - taking pictures of amazing macro critters when all of a sudden it felt like someone hit me in the head with a baseball bat. I immediately knew what it was. After the dive, I showed the divemaster the cut on my head. I was amazed at his reaction: 'You were lucky. Last week, a girl got bitten in the cheek and it took out quite a chunk.' Needless to say, I was amazed that nesting triggerfish were not mentioned in our dive briefing."

### **Medical Advice for Bite Victims**

If you are a victim of a triggerfish bite, don't panic, says Doc Vikingo, a frequent *Undercurrent* contributor. "They are not venomous, nor do they carry any unusual marine pathogens. That's not to say you can ignore their bites. Viral, bacterial and fungal illness can be, and are, contracted by breaks in the skin exposed to water. Bacteria of particular concern with such a bite include *Mycobacterium marinum* and a number of *Vibrio* species. Treatment is largely common-sense first aid. Flush the wound with copious amounts of fresh, clean, warm water. If a syringe or the like is available, it can provide high-pressure irrigation. Then gently scrub the wound with soap and water to remove foreign material. Remove dead tissue with sterile scissors. Follow by cleansing with hydrogen peroxide (only really effective with a fresh bottle) or isopropyl alcohol. Apply a thin layer of Bacitracin ointment or similar three times a day for three to five days. Keep the wound dry, clean and covered, but not completely cut off from the air."

And to keep it infection-free, Nick Bird, CEO and chief medical officer of Divers Alert Network, recommends hanging up your fins for the rest of the dive trip. "In the water, bites are way more prone to get infected and be more virulent." He also recommends a post-bite tetanus booster if it has been more than five years since your last one. Watch for signs of

infection such as redness, inflammation, tenderness and warmth. "If you get bitten on a finger or hand, it merits medical attention because the consequences of infection are worse than if the bite is on the middle of your arm," says Bird. "Ditto if a joint is involved."

If signs of infection appear, prescription oral antibiotics may be necessary. Get a professional evaluation, even if you're in a foreign venue where you can purchase antibiotics without a prescription, as you almost certainly won't know which one to take. In cases where the bite requires suturing, the medical folks attending may prescribe an oral antibiotic prophylactically.

That said, it's important to remember that Titan triggerfish are only defending against what they believe are intruders in their territory. We shouldn't harm or behave aggressively towards them in any way, as this will only make them more wary of divers. Defend yourself by dealing with this feisty fish in a non-aggressive manner.

- - *Vanessa Richardson*



## Jim Abernethy Catches a Few Teeth

from *Undercurrent*

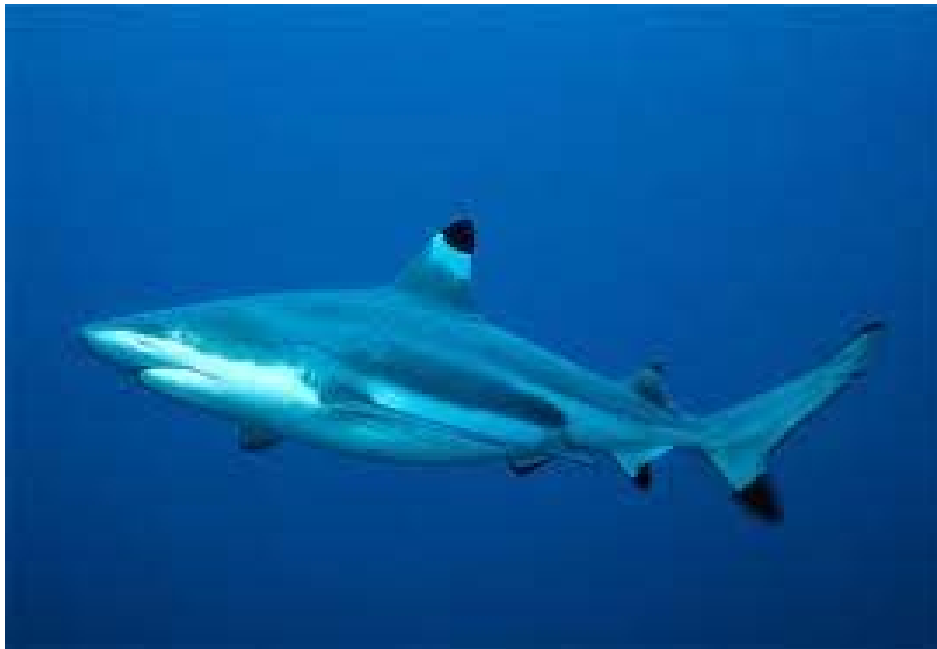
Since feeding sharks is illegal in South Florida waters, Jim Abernethy runs shark tours from Palm Beach to the Grand Bahamas. Plenty of top drawer photographers wanting shots of hammerheads and tiger sharks are his loyal customers. They all say Abernethy knows his sharks.

But on Jan 25, Abernethy was attacked by a reef shark in one of those busy shark moments, leading to a ride on Coast Guard helicopter to St. Mary's Medical Center with a healthy bite to his arm. The attack happened about 18 miles north of West End where Abernethy was leading a week-long shark excursion. According to witnesses, when Abernethy got back on the boat, he was bleeding profusely. He needed stitches, but is expected to recover.

Abernethy, himself, is not his first victim. In 2008, an Austrian tourist died when he was mauled by a shark during an excursion sponsored by Abernethy's company.

Abernethy's trips are controversial. Many in South Florida say he should not be feeding sharks, as they have become much more dangerous due to humans feeding them. "They're not highly intelligent animals to begin with," Jason Doty told TV station WSVN, "so you're down there diving, and if you're feeding them, they think divers are food. When we're out spearfishing they're super aggressive with us, but they used to not be."

Abernethy released a statement saying: "Thank you for your concerns and well-wishes, I'm going to be fine. I've spent the last two decades of my life in the Bahamas with the sharks that I love. Today's minor incident will not deter me. I plan to be back out to sea in a few days."



## Curbing the Lionfish Invasion: A Futile Fight

Divers and dive resorts are well-intentioned when it comes to spearing lionfish in the Atlantic and Caribbean, but their efforts to eradicate them is equivalent to trying to eradicate the world's population of ants. Consider any Caribbean island. Miles and miles and miles of coastline and at best, a few dozen dive sites scattered hither and yon, usually only on the lee side. Good luck. Tragically, lionfish are causing big problems for plenty of other fish, including food fish like groupers and snappers.

A new University of Florida study finds that lionfish reproduce too quickly to be wiped out by short-term harvesting, said Andrew Barbour, the study's lead author. So lionfish will likely continue gobbling up juvenile grouper, snapper and other economically important species, he said, unless better control strategies are found. Derbies have resulted in up to 1,400 lionfish being harvested in a day, but a single lionfish can produce as many as 200,000 eggs per month, easily replenishing the population's numbers.

The researchers used mathematical modeling programs to show that 35 to 65 percent of the lionfish would have to be taken from an area every year to keep them in check. And that's not likely to happen, said Mike Allen, a UF professor of fisheries ecology and one of the study's authors.

Lionfish populations are able to rebound easily from harvesting efforts because they reach maturity quickly, have eggs and larvae that can be spread over large geographical areas by ocean currents, and thus far, have no natural predators to help keep them in check, said Tom Frazer, a UF professor of aquatic ecology and another author of the study. The UF scientists said it might be possible for those looking to dent the lionfish numbers to do so with intensive spearfishing in small geographic areas - such as coral reefs frequented by scuba diving tourists, Barbour said. But those efforts will have to be sustained. "You'd have to fish them hard, and over a long period of time," Frazer said.

There are several theories about what caused lionfish to become established in the Western Hemisphere, Frazer said. Some blame irresponsible aquarium enthusiasts for simply releasing the fish into the wild. Others suggest wind and waves from Hurricane Andrew could have freed the fish from South Florida aquariums and swept them into the Atlantic Ocean. Another theory holds that the fish were accidentally transported in seawater used as ship ballast.



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