

# “RUFUS KING”, Whales and Shag Rock

Jun 03

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As we pulled off our life jackets after crossing a fairly innocuous South Passage bar at North Stradbroke we realised that it was almost high tide and not too rough. The “RUFUS KING” lay somewhere just to the north of us on the edge of the breakers in what appeared to be clear water. This was not the planned dive but opportunity called.

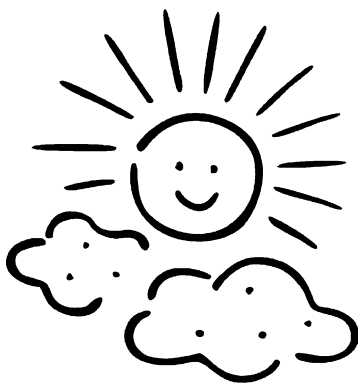


I had no realistic expectations of this American wreck that had broken her back on the bar 61 years ago and thought it would be a few pieces of rusted metal sticking out of the sand with a few lonely fish. With adequate help from the GPS, and after a short look, we spotted a couple of bits of rusted steel barely breaking the choppy surface.

We held the boat off the wreck and swam across on the surface and dived. The deception hit me immediately. There is a lot of ship under the water. We dived where the ship was broken in two. The forward half had been towed away for a workshop shortly after the disaster. The huge side of the ship seemed massive, especially compared to my expectations, and I looked along its length until it disappeared into distant water.

There was little deck left and, as we swam into the hull, there were some vertical structures that looked like prison bars. A club member had told me only a week before that he had been hit by a sudden surge in this wreck and had been sucked through the bars in a sandy swirl and had his face mask and regulator ripped out. He struggled to regain his equipment and composure and orientation in the sandy mass. This near death experience went through my mind as I was also pushed through the bars from a much more friendly, but unexpected, surge.

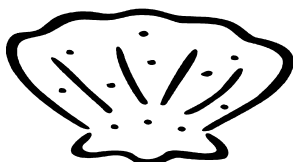
A couple of large schools of fish hung in the void alert to our presence but not wanting to move from their comfortable formation and protection. A school of “saw tails”, a reasonably large dark-coloured surgeon fish, held a vertical position in a corner of the hull until approached by divers from different directions and confusion set in. In their panic they scattered in all directions and seemed to have difficulty shooting between the internal ribs. The visibility was good but there was sand in the water from the surge. However, this sand was back lit by the rays of the rising sun shining from above through the internal ribs and this gave the void a most picturesque, almost religious aura. We could have been in a cathedral.



We swam out of the hull and south on the sand. A large school of 40 or more of the slab-like common batfish cruised by coming over to investigate us at close range and then moving off. Other good sized fish, some in small schools, flashed about in the distant sandy water.

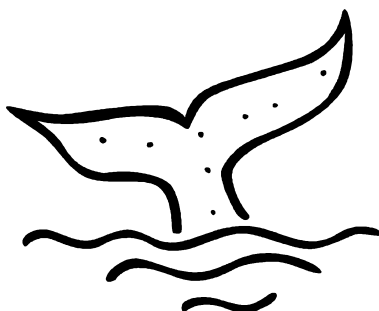
We returned to a large school of the silver-smooth, smaller Silver Batfish in the hull and helped them relocate as we swam around. We investigated holes and crevices and found a wobbegong and, what appeared to be, a cat shark. This light-coloured, slender shark some 1.2 metres long lay still under some plates of steel. A touch of its tail and it swam off showing the prominent nasal barbels near its mouth.

Having raised the anxiety of all the fish in the area we settled into annoying the small stuff. What an exquisite variety. There were bushy bryozoans but no attendant sea spiders which feed on them. The delicate, transparent, tiny, vase-shaped ascidian was a delight. My buddy found an "Obscure" nudibranch.

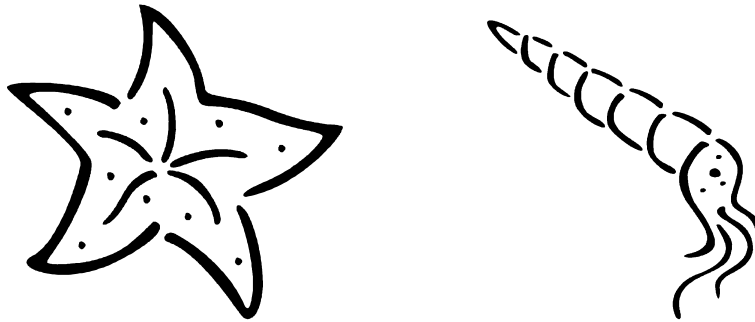


This was one of the more pleasant dives I have done even though we were aware it was a reverse profile dive day, although our maximum depth was only 9 metres.

We skipped across to Flat Rock to dive the Grey Nurse shark gutters. No sharks at 25 metres. However, while on the surface we watched humpback whales breach a number of times about 400 metres north of us. Their white bellies and pointed snouts were impressive. We had seen a pod of three blow as they swam north some time before on the western side of Flat Rock.



The third dive saw us at 13 metres in the gutter between the two islands that make up Shag Rock. This was a beautiful dive with heaps of feather stars, brittle stars and sea urchins. It was a pleasant change from the coral beds of Flinders. A number of sea urchins on the bottom of the gutter were those that cover themselves in all the bits and pieces they can find. I once found one in Tasmania with the polaroid lens from a pair of sunglasses over his head! One large urchin on the walls had black spines and white spines and would have made an appropriate pet for Cruella De Vil out of 101 Dalmatians.



There were groups of Freckled Porcupine fish with their amazing gold-flecked eyes and one very large Porcupine fish that was so long it looked as though he had bent under the weight. There were many hermit crabs and a patch of a lovely flower-like solitary hydroid. I was amazed by the abundance of the soft "Prickly Tree Coral" that seemed to cover the rocks in little bunches. It harbours a beautifully camouflaged volute but I could not find one. I have only ever seen one in such coral in the Tweed.

This is a place that could do with a lot more exploring. What a pleasant day of diving.