

Rhode Island's Tropical Secret

Written by User1

"No good fish ever goes anywhere without a porpoise"

--Lewis Carroll

By Jeff Toorish

Matthew Wills is a biology teacher in Seekonk, MA. He is also an avid diver and collector of tropical fish. That is not particularly unusual. Wills clearly loves the outdoors and enjoys his passion for fish collecting.

What is unusual is where he is collecting tropicals. He is diving along the far side of a large rock outcropping which vaguely resembles a Caribbean Reef in an inlet called Kings Beach in Rhode Island. Wills is chasing small tropical butterfly fish and eventually catches five of them for his collection, which he keeps at the Seekonk High School aquarium.

"I just finished my dive master course and came over here to collect some fish," said Wills as he held up a plastic bag holding the brightly colored tropicals.

Surprising Finds

When you think of diving for tropical fish, you may think of the Florida Keys or Bonaire or the Caribbean Sea or Hawaii but you probably don't think of Rhode Island. You especially don't think of Rhode Island in late September when the leaves have already begun their annual change from green to the bright colors of autumn.

But if you did think of Rhode Island, you might be surprised what you would find.

The Gulf Stream is a powerful warm water current that begins in the Gulf of Mexico and runs along the eastern United States. The Gulf Stream is actually two streams at its northern reaches, running along both the US coast and central and northern Europe. Scientists believe that Europe would be much colder without the warming effects of the Gulf Stream.

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For tropical fish, the Gulf Stream acts as a natural form of public transportation, whisking small tropical fish from their homes to the south to northern reaches. The stream keeps them warm and alive until they find their new homes as far north as New England.

For the most part it is juvenile fish that make the trek north. Larger fish either strong enough to avoid the pull of the Gulf Stream or they don't make the full trip for some other reason.

Warm Water Diving Close To Home

For Northeast divers who can't make a trip to the Caribbean, there is a destination within driving distance. Divers can leave their dry suits and farmer johns at home and bring along thinner wetsuits, the ones that don't get much use in the colder waters nearby.

The more famous Rhode Island dive spot is Fort Wetherill in Jamestown, Rhode Island. On any given summer day, you will find the parking lot full of trucks and cars sporting red and white dive stickers. The water is dotted with dive flags (mandatory in Rhode Island state waters) as divers explore the various inlets at this extremely popular dive site.

Less well known is the nearby Kings Beach dive site in Newport. While Kings Beach does not have the amenities of Fort Wetherill, it is also a bit more remote and affords divers more private dives. It also has its share of tropical fish for viewing or catching.

On the final weekend in September, 2009, a group of divers from the Maine-iacs dive club in (you guessed it) Maine made the nearly four hour trip South to enjoy a final blast of relatively warm water diving and look for exotic fish. At that time of year, the water temperatures fluctuate from about 64 to 68 degrees Fahrenheit; warm enough for a five millimeter wetsuit and perhaps a hooded core warmer. By New England standards, that is practically board shorts and a t-shirt! Visibility was between 20 and 30 feet, better than the usual 10 to 12 feet further north.

Maine-iacs President Pete Boilard sums it up like this, "Traveling from Maine to Rhode Island to dive in search of wayward tropical fish is a nice way to spend a weekend. With the September water warmer than our best day in Maine the diving alone is a treat and spotting some colorful

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fish makes for a fun Easter egg hunt. Diving is largely a social sport so getting away for a weekend of diving and travel is not a hard sell."

The Ocean State

Modern day Rhode Island was called Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, by early settlers. It has a long and proud seafaring tradition. It is the smallest state geographically, and was the first of the original 13 colonies to declare independence from British rule.

The nickname, Ocean State, derives from Rhode Island's geography. Nearly ten percent of Rhode Island is covered by sea water. An Italian explorer named Giovanni de Verrazzano became the first European to view what we now call Block Island. He named it after the Queen Mother of France, Luisa. Eventually, the state was renamed "Roodt Eyelandt" by the Dutch which means red island, a nod to the red clay that permeates the shoreline. Eventually the British anglicized the name. Rhode Island residents eventually decided to drop Providence Plantation from the name because it evoked notions of slavery.

Rich Environment

The Maine-iac group's original plan was to dive Fort Wetherill but upon learning that a large group of divers from Boston would be collecting fish all weekend for the New England Aquarium, the team decided to head to Kings Beach for more private diving, and hopefully uncompromised visibility.

Kings Beach is a simple entry, sandy/rocky beach and excellent diving. There is a long stretch of eel grass that helps keep the cove clean and clear. Once past the eel grass, the bottom varies between sand and plant life. There is a distinctly Caribbean feel to dives here, which is refreshing.

Small fish are in abundance, including schools of local species. But, of course, this is Rhode Island so we were on the lookout for tropical fish. On my first dive I saw two juvenile trumpet fish darting in and out of the eel grass. They are maddeningly quick and were clearly reveling in

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thwarting the macro lens on my camera.

Local divers have found all sorts of tropical fish in these waters including the invasive Lionfish.

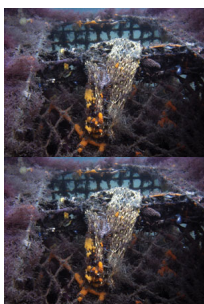
Red Godin is a colorful and experienced technical diver who owns the Giant Stride Dive Shop in Warwick. His show is full of fascinating artifacts from his wreck dives along the Rhode Island coast. Several years ago Red discovered a juvenile Lionfish off the near Ft. Wetherill.

"He was only about an inch and a half long. The appendages were there, just like how the adults have the feathers, but they weren't formed. It was almost like they were little fingers," explains Red.

He says he saw one the following year and every year since, most often under overhangs, which is typical Lionfish behavior. The largest Lionfish seen in these waters was between four and five inches long. Because of the water temperature in the winter months, it's unlikely Lionfish present a danger, as they do in warmer southern waters.

For Northeast divers who want to see tropical fish and swim in waters that are more Caribbean-like, the Ocean State is a great place to be. □

Jeff Toorish is the Chief Photojournalist for Advanced Diver Magazine, a contributing writer to the National Association of Cave Divers Journal and the Scuba Expert for ClubMedInsider.com. He lives in Maine where he is an active wreck explorer and scuba instructor.



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