

Blue Heron Bridge in 90 Minutes with a Canon Powershot S90

by Mark Sagovac

Never disappointing, always changing, unlimited photo opportunities, addicting, spectacular variety of marine life, an underwater photographers dream!- these are words and phrases to describe the shore dive site around the Blue Heron Bridge at Phil Foster Park located in Riviera Beach, Palm Beach County, Florida.

Locals, visitors and readers have long known of this site being one of the most accessible shore dives in South Florida and habitat for astonishing marine life (289 species reported by REEF) that inhabit this area just north of the Palm Beach inlet. Ease of entry, excellent water visibility, location and park facilities make this a unique destination for beginner and professional photographers as well as Scuba divers. The secret to the bio diversity is due to the tidal ebb and flow into the Lake Worth Lagoon. This tidal action flushes the water in the Lagoon out four times a day resulting in a

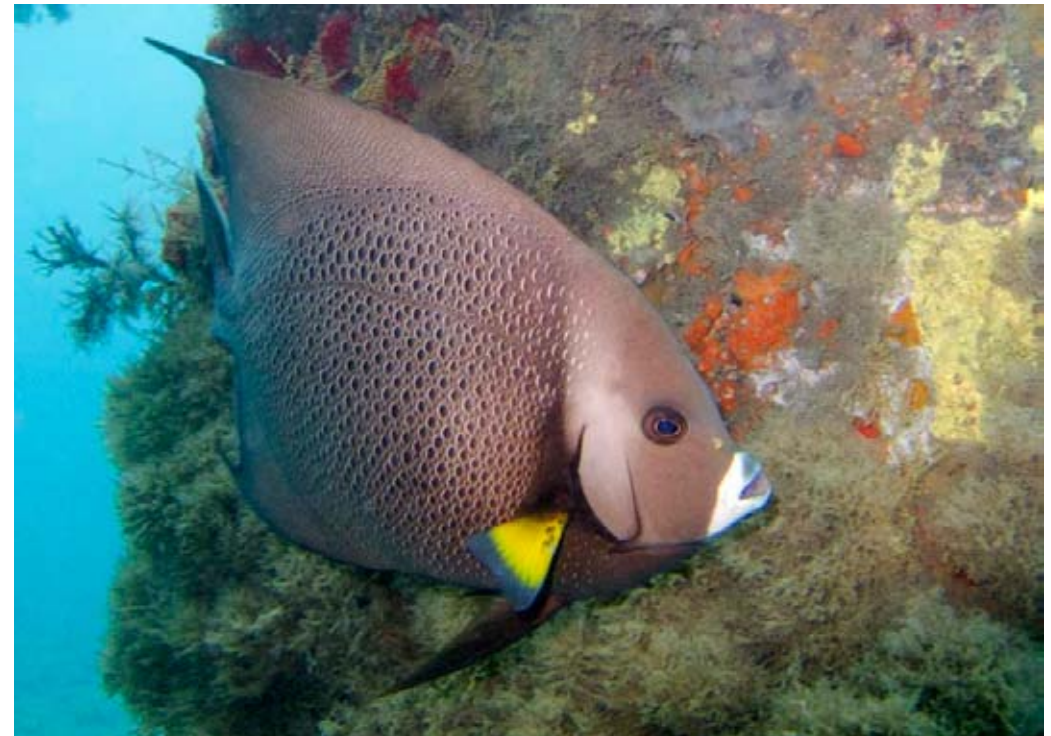
constant flow of nutrients and clean water resulting in amazing visibility even when the oceans are kicking up only a few miles away.

My first introduction to the “bridge” was where my dive instructor took me to complete a portion of the open water certification. My early diving days were without a camera but I knew one day I would start taking shots underwater but wanted to be a good diver before taking on the challenge. I had been shooting terrestrial since I was 12 years old, how much more difficult could shooting underwater be? Was I in for a surprise! Underwater photography has been both a frustrating and amazingly rewarding experience. Within a year and after a vacation to Anthony’s Key in Roatan and many “drift dives” off the Palm Beaches later, I bought an Olympus FE-230 in Olympus housing. This camera suffered from terrible shutter lag and did not provide me with the quality image I was looking for,



West Blue Heron Bridge Span- full span of the west bridge showing fishing pier in foreground. Composite of 3 shots stitched together using Photoshop Elements 7 (1/1000s, f5.6, ISO 200).

French Angel- friendly and always inquisitive they are a diver favorite as they weave their way around the sponge encrusted columns and pilings (1/125s, f3.5, ISO200).





Polka Dot Batfish- these friendly site favorites are always willing to let the divers observe them as they lay motionless and oblivious. (1/40s, f4.9, ISO100).



Seahorse- something about the elegant shyness of these creatures fascinates us all. This area is home to several different species of this docile creature (1/40s, f3.2, ISO200).



Southern Stingray- I came up on this big fellow early morning, covered in sand and gravel, still resting from the night before (1/250s, f2.5, ISO400).



Spotting a Batfish- dive buddy puts the spot light on a young Polka Dot Batfish moving across the gravel (1/125s, f5.6, ISO250)

so I purchased a Sea and Sea DX-1200HD which I turned around and sold on E-bay four months later. This camera had issues with the auto focus and macro mode as well as not having the capability to shoot in RAW (I think they discontinued this product right after I bought it). Today I am using a Canon Powershot S90 (compact) which I am very pleased with. It has all of the features a much larger SLR has but in a compact size. The camera takes very nice shots (on land and under water) and is fully manual. I have it in a Fisheye FIX housing which I think is fantastic. It has strong tight seal and the buttons are easy to work (even with gloves on) and I use a Sea and Sea YS-27 strobe.

One of the things that may surprise you about a dive trip around the Blue Heron Bridge is that the area is comprised of several unique sites and conditions that these “critters” call home. I have made up names for these areas since, to my knowledge, none exist other than East bridge or West bridge. These areas have different subjects to photograph within different backgrounds, lighting conditions and water currents. We can only visit the west bridge today because water under the west span is still closed for construction. Enter the water at least half hour before the slack tide. This will give us a good ninety minutes on one tank of air before the visibility starts to deteriorate due to tidal ebb.

Enter the water from the nice sloping sandy beach at the column just to the left of the playground. Here we head straight out across the “sand flats.” This is a shallow sandy area with patches of brown algae. Expect to see Stareye and Giant Hermit crabs, Spotfin and Eyed Flounder, Pufferfish and Leopard Sea Robins picking their way across the substrate in search of a meal. Look even closer and you may see a Southern Stargazer peering up from the sand as well as the ever present Polka Dot Batfish watching your every move. The Batfish are a local favorite of the park. They are big and healthy and relatively unafraid of the approaching diver. We continue a little further south to discover the “Winn Dixie” wreck. This sunken

24 foot (8m) speedboat sits upright and is covered in good growth and swarms of tropical fish. Pay special attention on the approach because this is where I often see Southern and Roughtail Stingrays patrolling under the moored sailboats as well as groups of barracuda. Look carefully on the encrusted lines for Seahorse and Pygmy Filefish. I have been told this is an area where “Froggies” can be



Florida Manatee- the inlet is a haven for these gentle giants as they stay warm in the shallows in winter and migrate up and down the intercoastal waterways year round (1/250s, f2.8, ISO 100).



Southern Stargazer- not as often seen free swimming they seem are more comfortable laying hidden in the sand “gazing” up waiting for un suspecting prey (1/125s, f7.1, ISO400).



Flying Gunard- blend in nicely with the substrate, almost transparent, until you spook them and then are treated to a vivid display of iridescent blues (1/100s, f2.0, ISO200).



Encrusted with Life- pilings are covered with soft corals, sponges and Hydroids (1/60s, f5.0, ISO800).

spotted but have yet to see one. I call this site “Winn Dixie” because just 30 feet (10 m) to the East of the boat are five grocery shopping carts (from supermarket chain Winn Dixie) on the sand. Each one heavily encrusted with sponge and hydroid. Here you can find the intricate and colorful Decorator Crab, curious Blennies and juvenile Angle fish operating their clearing stations. Be sure to take your self portrait at the old mirror in front of the boat. Since we are still in shallow water there is plenty of ambient light.

We now move a little deeper across the sand flats in a SSW direction just north of the red channel marker to wreck “Belly Up.” This 30 foot (10m) boat is upside down.

Angels, Tangs and Sergeant Majors swirl around the hole at the end. You can always find a little Yellow Stingrays half buried in the sand, Seahorses as well as one of the resident Short Nose Batfish.

Moving due west to the next site “Red Lobster.” This site is right at the edge where the boat traffic turns out from the bridge channel. I recommend you be very careful, take your flag and visit only on a really “high tide” mid week and early morning when there is little boat traffic. This is a great place however. The site is a large mound of natural rocks absolutely covered with red sponge. Rocks are crawling with Spiny Lobsters well as the presence of multiple cleaning stations operated by

Coral Banded Shrimp. Blennies are popping in and out of the formations and here is where I see the largest Queen Angelfish as well as the Long Nose Batfish.

Turning north towards the bridge the water is getting a little deeper now and the floor has changed from silt sand to a gravel mix of shells and stone. These are the “Gravel Flats”. This area is littered with Sea Urchin and Pillow Starfish. Due to the proximity to the open channel I have seen many Spotted Eagle and Cownose Rays pass through. This is also the passage for the Florida Manatee on their way up and down the intercostals waterway. If our compass reading is correct we should come into the southeast end of the

boat channel pilings. The plan here is to swim past, around and through the pilings searching around the column faces and gravel below. These pilings are exploding with life. We start at the southernmost set. Schools of Chub, Spadefish and Snapper are drifting high in the water column. The lower columns are very nicely covered in orange, red and yellow encrusting sponge. Growing are many different species of Hydroid, Tunicate, Barrel and Finger sponge. The water in between the columns are alive with French Angels, Queen Angels,,



Jellyfish- not a common sight for the bridge divers but when they appear they are beautiful to look at and shoot (1/250s, f3.5, ISO250).

Parrotfish (of all types) Wrasse, Tangs, Hogfish, Butterfly fish, Bass, Porkfish and Sergeant Major to name a few. Down on the floor look closely for the lurking Scorpion fish, Sharptail Eel, Spotted Moray Eel, Yellow Stingray, Lizardfish, Stone Crab and Horseshoe Crab. Nibbling their way over the sea floor are Sheepshead, Goat fish, Sand Perch and Filefish. As we weave our way up and down, in and out you will notice it is substantially darker over here. You may have to use your strobe. I normally adjust my camera setting as I transition in and out of the shadow and light areas. This is especially true as we turn into the “Swim Through” which is the narrow passage between the channel pilings and bridge foundation. On display are

Arrow Crabs, Scorpion fish, Web Burr fish, Spotted Drum, Blennies, Lobster, beautiful pink Finger sponge, and did I mentioned Red Bearded Bristleworms?

Now swim north toward the fishing pier. Carrying the dive float does not guarantee the fisherman will not throw his hook and sinker in your direction but swim quickly across and get under the pier. Down at the third last column is the “Bone yard.” This pile of left over bridge pilings and demolished chunks of the old bridge are jumbled up and around. We are starting to feel a little bit of current now and are 60 minutes into the dive but that will not stop us. It is very dark under here but full of colorful life. Train your eye and find the Seahorses...they are here! The juxtaposition of the concrete poles has created habitats. This area is well worth further investigation.

Leaving the shade of the fishing pier we head back out into the varying light and dark conditions found in between the fishing pier and bridge to find great subjects to photograph with different backgrounds, lighting conditions and size. We cross the “Rubble Plain.” This area lies in the path of strong current and the area is littered with rocks and boulders, much of which could have been from construction. This area is popular with photographers. Here we can spot

Nudibranch, juvenile fish, Spider crabs, Glass Shrimp and other super macro subjects. You will also see the Flying Gunard in this area as he tries to blend in with the gravel bottom. Spook him and he will give you a brilliant display of color! Heading east back towards the beach entry/exit point we cross a transition from rock to gravel to sand. This is where we find the Banded Jawfish peering from his well maintained little hole, Pipefish and the secretive Mantis Shrimp. Look up and you will see schools of bait fish swirling in and out between the columns. When the sunlight is just right it is a spectacular show. Unfortunately time is running out. The tide is starting to go out and the silt is starting to kick up. One last look around the bridge pilings and it is time to exit. Ninety minutes are up.

We surface to the sound of chatter and laughter. The divers are relaxing in the shallow water of the beach discussing and describing their dive experience, dive instructors are debriefing their students and children and beach goers are running around having fun. A short walk back up the beach back to the tables to get the gear off and a quick fresh water rinse before heading home. Now the fun begins. Post production work on the amazing images and share them with friends, peers and family!

The Canon Powershot S90

is a great little camera that packs a powerful punch and takes great pictures underwater. I recommend you use a post production software program like Adobe Photoshop. Delete the ones that did not come out right then convert the “keepers” in the CR2 RAW converter using the white balance tool. Next open them in Photoshop and use any of the adjustment tools necessary. I like the tonal balance, brightness, and color select, and saturation tools. Spot healing and clone stamp will take out any annoying backscatter. Follow few these steps and I think you will be thrilled by your efforts!

Give yourself a pat on the back, share your shots with everyone and get ready to do it again!

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