

SS Yongala - Fish Magnet

by Nigel Marsh and Helen Rose

Fish, fish and more fish, all I could see were fish! In front of me were vast schools of sweetlips, snappers, cardinalfish and baitfish, while speeding around me were trevally, mackerel and rainbow runners. But the biggest fish of all were the giant Queensland gropers, three of them and all over 2m long! I was just about to explore the biggest fish magnet on the planet, the wreck of the SS Yongala.

I first dived the SS Yongala in 1986 and from the very first dive was amazed by all the fish life attracted to this historic shipwreck. Every dive was an education, sending me to the guide books to identify species that I had never seen before. I dived this wonderful shipwreck again in 1989 and 1991 and was once more enthralled by the spectacular fish life, and could see why the SS Yongala is often rated in the top ten dive sites of the world.

Unfortunately I didn't get a chance to return to the SS Yongala until 2015. Not that I didn't try, but bad weather saw two failed attempts to reach the shipwreck in 2010 and 2014. Twenty four years since my last dive on the SS Yongala and I

was on Mike Ball Dive Expeditions' Spoilsport and this time the weather was perfect for a day and a half of incredible diving.

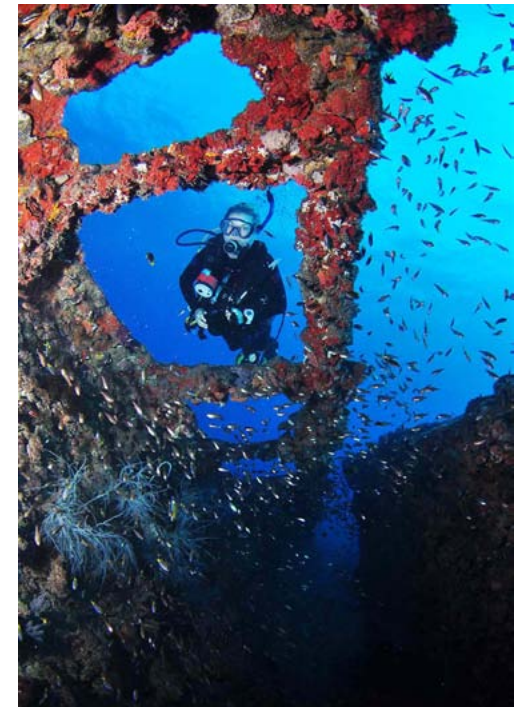
Entering the water I was curious to see if the SS Yongala was as good as I remembered it. I got off to a great start as the visibility was 25m and the fish encounters started on the swim over to the mooring with batfish, giant trevally and a curious black-tip shark all coming to check us out.

Descending a dark shape quickly came into view, the stern of the legendary SS Yongala. However we could hardly see the wreck for the swarms of fish; hovering around the stern like a shroud were millions of damselfish, fusiliers, baitfish and cardinalfish. As we got closer a pack of turrum trevally suddenly appeared and charged through the small fish, causing mayhem. A few of the small fish moved a little too slow and were picked off by the hungry hunters. Also milling around the stern were mangrove jacks, coral trout, coral cod, snappers, parrotfish, butterflyfish, angelfish, several large Maori wrasse and an olive sea snake.

It was mesmerising to see so many fish, but I soon found it could



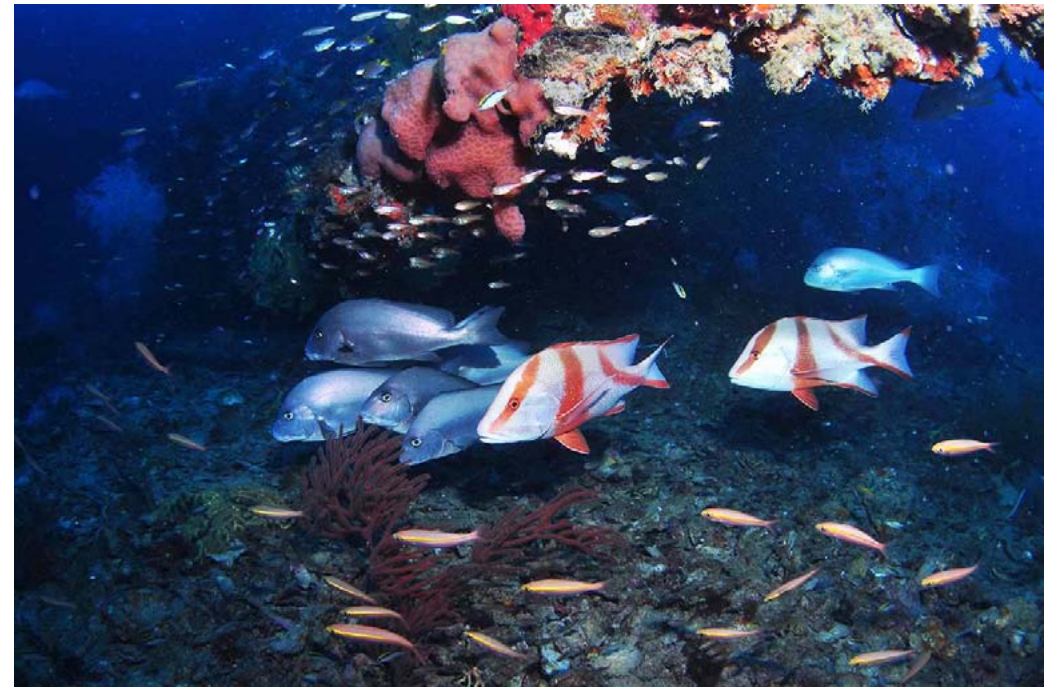
Early morning under the stern with the baitfish and painted sweetlips (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/40, f8).



Helen swims along the hull of the ship (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f8).



Strange bed fellows, a loggerhead turtle and tawny nurse shark sleeping together (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f9).



Painted sweetlips and red emperors encountered under a mast (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/60, f8).

limit my photography. I dearly wanted to photograph as many fish as possible, but also the wreck and the wonderful corals that decorate it, but every time I got Helen in a good position for a photograph she would be swamped by fish. At times I could barely see her, even when we were only a few metres apart. This would happen again and again all over the SS Yongala – I never thought I would whinge about too many fish!

Dropping under the stern there was even more fish to be seen, hundreds of painted sweetlips lined up

into the slight current, plus two large estuary groppers and three even bigger Queensland groppers. These giant groppers, all over 2m long, had their own community of fish, with remoras hanging onto them and a cloud of ox-eye scad surrounding them like a cloud. Looking up at the wreck in the early morning light was just magic, millions of fish silhouetted against the rays of light.

Moving back onto the wreck we started our exploration, checking out the features of the ship, which hadn't seem to change much in 24

years. With such great visibility from the stern we could see the aft mast stretching out onto the sand and the recess for the aft cargo hatch.

At the aft cargo hold we paused to look at a sleeping loggerhead turtle and several large coral trout. Nearby a pretty black coral tree was engulfed by a school of one-spot snapper and cardinalfish. Below was a large flowery grouper sitting in a soft coral watching us closely. It proved to be the shyest fish on the wreck, disappearing into the shadows when we approached for a photograph.

The corals that decorate the SS Yongala are just mind-blowing and better than you would see on most reefs – candelabra gorgonians, sea whips, spikey soft corals, black coral trees, ascidians, tubastras corals and numerous sponges. Hiding amongst these corals was a wealth of reef fish, with some of the standout species being a footballer coral trout, a barramundi cod, a giant moray eel, red emperors and Meredith's angelfish. Cleaning stations seem to be everywhere and they had a lot of customers to serve. We watched one



A green turtle cruises along the shipwreck (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/60, f8).



One of the giant Queensland groopers hanging around the stern of the SS Yongala (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f9).

coral cod open its mouth wide to let the cleaner wrasse do its work.

Continuing to the midship region of the wreck there was suddenly an explosion of snapper species mixed together in a giant school. We noted blue-striped snapper, five-lined snapper and black-spot snapper, but there could have been more. While exploring this section of the ship we saw several turtles, sea snakes and a group of spotted eagle rays. Diving in this fish soup it was hard to know which way to point the camera, at the wreck or behind us, as a constant

parade of pelagic species, such as Spanish mackerel, rainbow runners, giant trevally and batfish, were zooming passed.

Getting close to the bow the fish life never thinned out, with more schools of sweetlips, snappers, fusiliers, fairy basslets and cardinalfish. Near the forward cargo hold a black-tip shark zoomed in to give us a once over, and in the distance we saw a large bull shark cruise by.

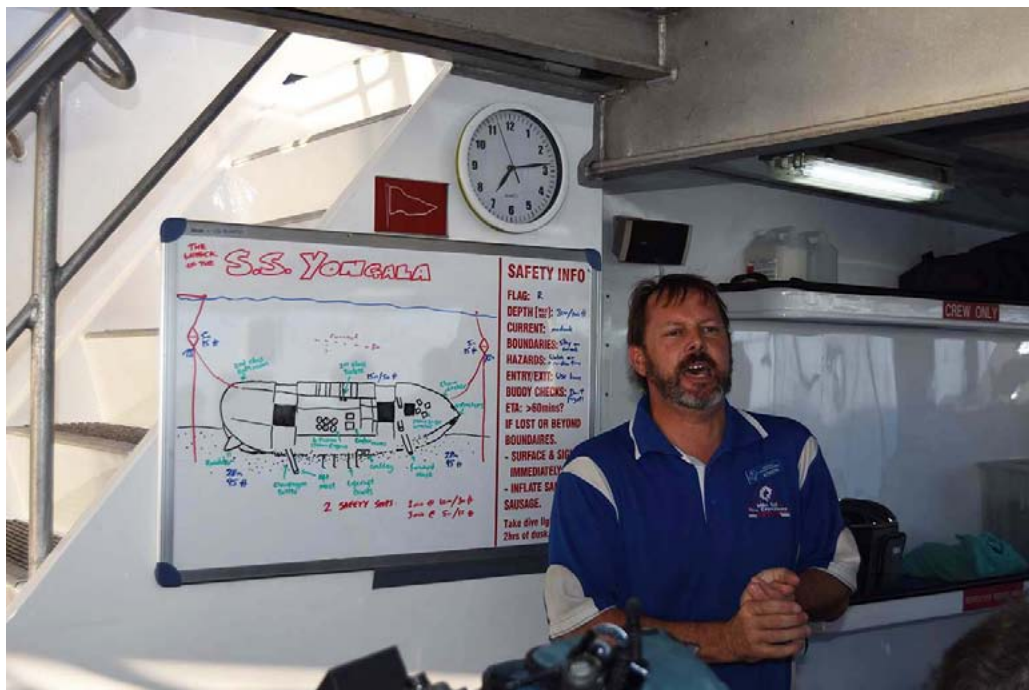
Reaching the bow of the 109m long ship it was hard to believe,

but there was even more fish here – zillions of baitfish. This thick silver cloud was being preyed upon by a dozen turrum trevally that would charge through the shimmering cloud causing it to dance and weave like a flowing wave. Off the bow was also plenty of action with several Queensland groopers (the same ones from the stern that seemed to have followed us), a large cowtail stingray and a family of Maori wrasse.

We lingered at the bow for several minutes to watch the trevally feeding, then swam through this mass

of baitfish ourselves, only to find hidden below the silver blanket coral trout, angelfish, tuskfish, parrotfish, lionfish, butterflyfish and several olive sea snakes.

Returning along the hull we finally found a section of the wreck without a swarm of fish, near the first class dining room. The corals in this area had been stripped away when Cyclone Yasi passed over the wreck in 2011 and hadn't regrown yet. I took advantage of the lack of fish to get some images of Helen exploring the wreck without fish in front of her



Trip director Kerrin gives a briefing prior to our dives on the SS Yongala (Nikon D7200, Nikkor 18-55mm, ISO 100, 1/250, f4.2).

mask.

Once passed this almost barren section the fish life returned in force, more damselfish, snappers and cardinalfish. Upon reaching the stern once more the turrum trevally were back to harass the smaller fish. Lingering at the stern the fish action never seemed to stop, with several barracuda and a wahoo gliding by.

With our air and bottom time running low it was finally time to surface, but just as we were starting to ascend a huge stingray surrounded by dozens of cobia suddenly appeared

out of the blue. This enormous ray, over 2m wide, was quite a sight as it had a smaller pink stingray riding its back. It disappeared just as quickly as it appeared, and it wasn't until we were back on Spoilsport that instructor Ollie, identified it as the largest and rarest of all the stingray species, the smalleye stingray. Ollie was very excited by the encounter as it was only the second time this rare stingray had been seen on the SS Yongala.

Over the next day and half we enjoyed six more incredible dives



A pack of turrum trevally stalk the shipwreck for prey (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/80, f8).

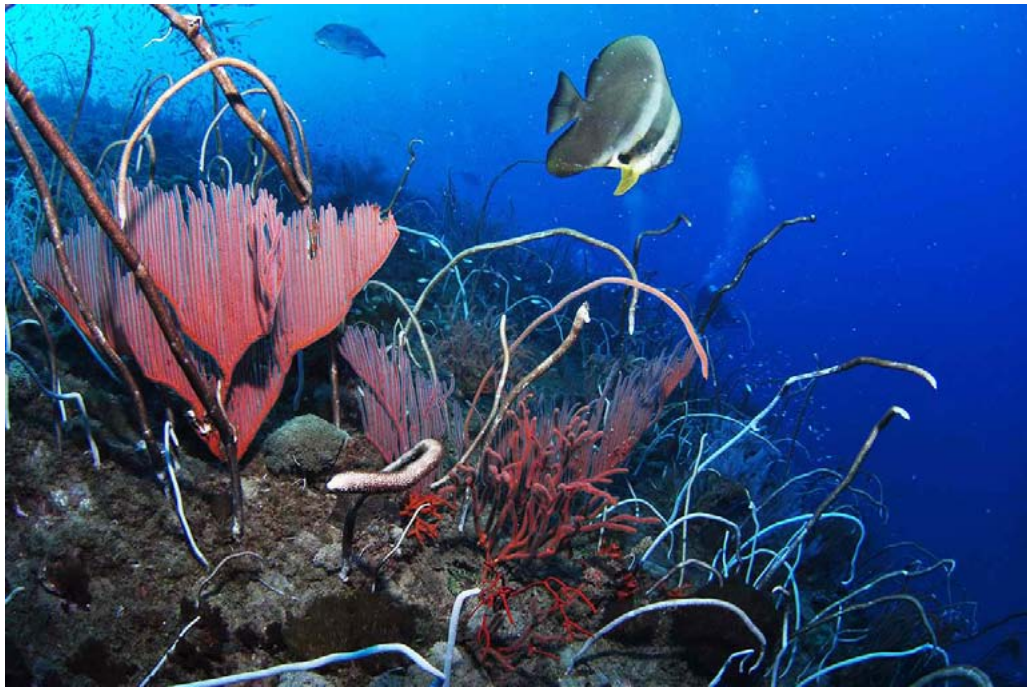
on the SS Yongala, and each one produced just as many fish and usually something special. On one dive it was a school of hundreds of barracuda, on another it was finding a tawny nurse shark and a loggerhead turtle curled up together asleep. While on the night dive it was watching the giant trevally hunting and finding three green turtles using the sea whips like a mattress to sleep on. On other dives we saw black-blotched stingrays, queenfish, a tasselled wobbegong and white-spotted shovelnose rays.

The SS Yongala is a very special

dive site and without doubt the biggest fish magnet on the planet.

Photography On The SS Yongala

There are not many shipwrecks that are as photogenic as the SS Yongala. With so much marine life and spectacular corals you will never run out of subjects no matter what lens you choose. I used a Tokina 10-17mm on most dives and had an endless selection of subjects, and



A jungle of sea whips decorate the hull of the SS Yongala (Nikon D90, Ikelite housing, Inon Z240 Strobe, Tokina 10-17mm, ISO 200, 1/100, f8).

found myself sticking to the widest setting for almost all images. The biggest challenge with photography on the SS Yongala, apart from fish getting in your way, is usually the limited visibility. But with most of the marine life used to divers you can generally get close to most subjects.

Diving in May, autumn in Australia, light levels were quite low, even with the good visibility we experienced. The early morning dives were especially dark. I stuck to 200 ASA and just dropped my shutter speed on the early morning dives to

still get a blue background. I wasn't too concerned about motion blur as I found the fish were not as active first thing in the morning.

For the late afternoon and night dives I switched to my 60mm macro lens, as I was after fish portraits and invertebrate species. But I was soon kicking myself as the late afternoon dive had some of the best action, with many species feeding. The action also continued at night, but night time wide angle photography is not the easiest, especially with giant trevally zooming around you.

Final photography tip is to always use a large memory card, as on the SS Yongala you will be shooting hundreds of images on every dive.

You can dive the SS Yongala on day boats from Alva Beach (near Ayr) and Townsville almost any day of the year (weather permitting), but if you really want to see this amazing shipwreck at its best then the only way to explore it is from a liveaboard. Mike Ball Dive Expeditions operate the luxury liveaboard Spoilsport to the SS Yongala on a number of special trips in May each year.

The main advantage of diving the SS Yongala from a liveaboard is being able to dive the wreck up to five times

a day, and see the ever changing array of marine life that visits the wreck over that time. Our best dives were the two early morning dives at 7am, when the ship was just coming to life, but the night dive was also something special, if a little creepy knowing that 123 people tragically died and this is their grave site. Anyway you get to dive the SS Yongala will be a very special experience.

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