



Text and photos
by Scott Johnson

As I stand on the upper deck of the *Midnight Express*, one of two dive boats operated by Olympus Dive Center, goose bumps cover my arms and a chill lies buried deep inside. Perhaps it is the weather or the dives awaiting me after the two hour cruise. More than likely it is both. This brisk November morning, under skies laden with dark, cumulus clouds, the seas are rough and a most ominous stage is set. It will not be long before I explore an underwater tomb, a reminder of the wages of war, a remnant of the follies of man.

A 10-foot sand tiger shark with an entourage of silversides encircling its head surveys its territory on the wreck site of the *U-352*

North Carolina

*Diving into
Mysteries Off*





I make my way to the bridge where George Purifoy, a respected pioneer in underwater exploration of the waters off Morehead City, North Carolina, and, along with his son Bobby, the owner/operator of Olympus, captains the boat. To his right, Lauren Hermley, the resourceful manager of this dive operation and my bright spirited model for the weekend, seeks the warmth of a nearby vent.

In search of answers to the mysterious sinking of *U-352*, the first German U-boat sunk in American waters in World War II that yielded prisoners of war and the subject of the upcoming dive, I ask George to share his considerable knowledge of the wreck and its history. So begins a pattern of asking questions and then furiously scribbling down George's responses on a yellow tablet that is speckled with the dried droplets of ocean spray. As I listen, the story unfolds.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver explores the wreck of *U-352*; Barracuda at the wreck site of the *USS Aeolus*; Octopus hunts for prey along a North Carolina reef

Location of North Carolina on global map

North Carolina

U-352

Commissioned by the German high command in October 1941, the *U-352* and its crew were ordered to set sail for the North American Atlantic coast in the spring of 1942. Their mission was to disrupt allied shipping off North Carolina in an area infamously nicknamed Torpedo Alley by the U.S. Navy due to the numerous merchant ships that were preyed upon and sunk by U-boats.

The *U-352*'s relatively inexperienced crew of 46 men included three officers, the leader of which was Lieutenant Hellmut Rathke. Knowing the United States had failed to protect its waters, as evidenced by the hundreds of tankers and cargo ships that were successfully torpedoed along the east coast, Rathke was hungry for "easy" kills and the subsequent glory such victories would yield.

After only one week of playing cat and mouse with spotter planes and other American anti-submarine forces and failing to score his first prey, Rathke ordered his crew to perform a daylight attack on what he thought was a large merchant ship on 9 May 1942.

After maneuvering into position, a single torpedo was fired and thereafter a satisfying explosion was heard. Victory dances were short lived however, as predator become prey when Rathke found out the merchant ship was really the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Icarus* and the torpedo had apparently drilled the ocean bottom.

Reportedly, Rathke not only erred in improperly identifying his target, he was also confused on the *U-352*'s actual depth. In an attempt to hide from the *Icarus* and avoid potential disaster, Rathke grounded the submarine in the vicinity of the torpedo detonation.

Unfortunately for him and the rest of the *U-352*'s crew, the *Icarus*' initial depth charges fell directly on top of the U-boat. What normally would have resulted in hours or even days of playing hide and seek with no guarantee of success, *Icarus*



Diver follows a school of spadefish

shot and scored triumph in minutes.

The *U-352*, with flooding in multiple compartments and having apparently lost both diesel and electric engines (though the officer in charge of the diesels was overheard stating that he could still get the engines to run), briefly surfaced, disgorged Rathke and 32 other frightened sailors, then sank to the bottom for good, entombing the remaining 13 crew members.

Sobering, puzzling thoughts arose during George's account of the *U-352*'s fatal voyage. So many questions were left unanswered: Why was Rathke so confused about his depth? What led to the misidentification of the *Icarus*? What

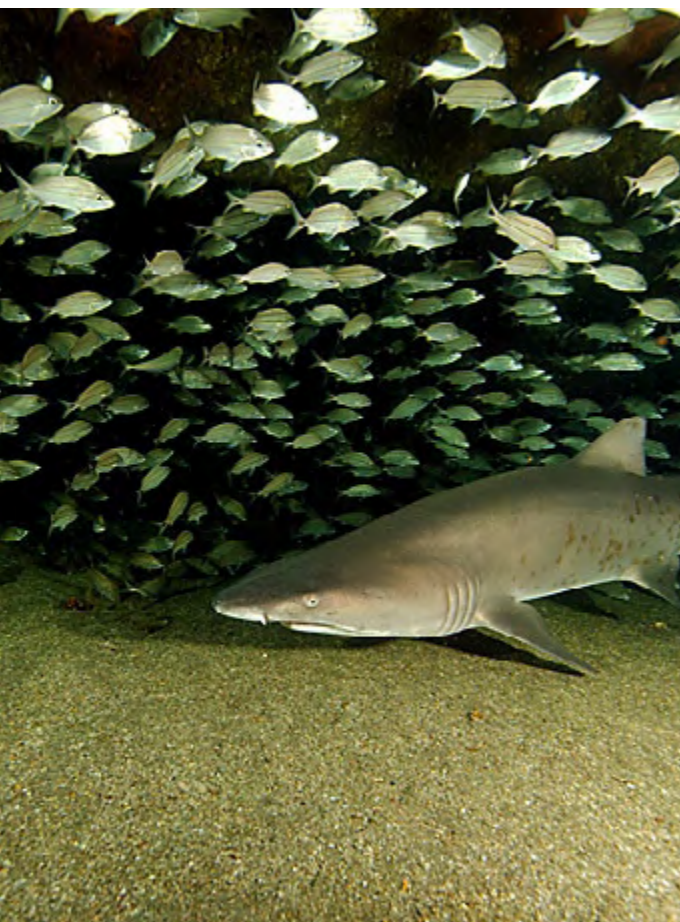
prompted him to break protocol by attacking during the day? How did the *Icarus* locate the *U-352* on the first try? Why did Rathke not try to fight back with the deck guns when he surfaced? What caused 13 crew members to go down with the ship? Why did U.S. intelligence officers allow three months to pass before interrogating the survivors? Why did I not know that U-boats were once so close to our shores that the crews could judge the distance to land at night by the intensity of the nearby lights (Thank God Hitler's U-boats were not equipped with nuclear missiles!)?

Except for a brief examination by U.S. Navy divers in late 1942, the *U-352* lay lost

in time, 35 miles off the Morehead City coast and untouched by human hands for over 30 years.

While her whereabouts were unknown, the *U-352* was definitely not forgotten. Claude Hull, often called the godfather of diving by many in the local community, spent countless hours researching and many years running grid patterns in hopes of finding the missing sub.

In a strange twist of fate, on the one day that Claude decided not to look for her, George, Rod Gross and Dale McCullough used his recommended coordinates and struck gold in April 1975. Now it is my turn to see what remains of *U-352*.



Sand tiger sharks patrol the seas and ocean floor off the coast of North Carolina

Diving *U-352*

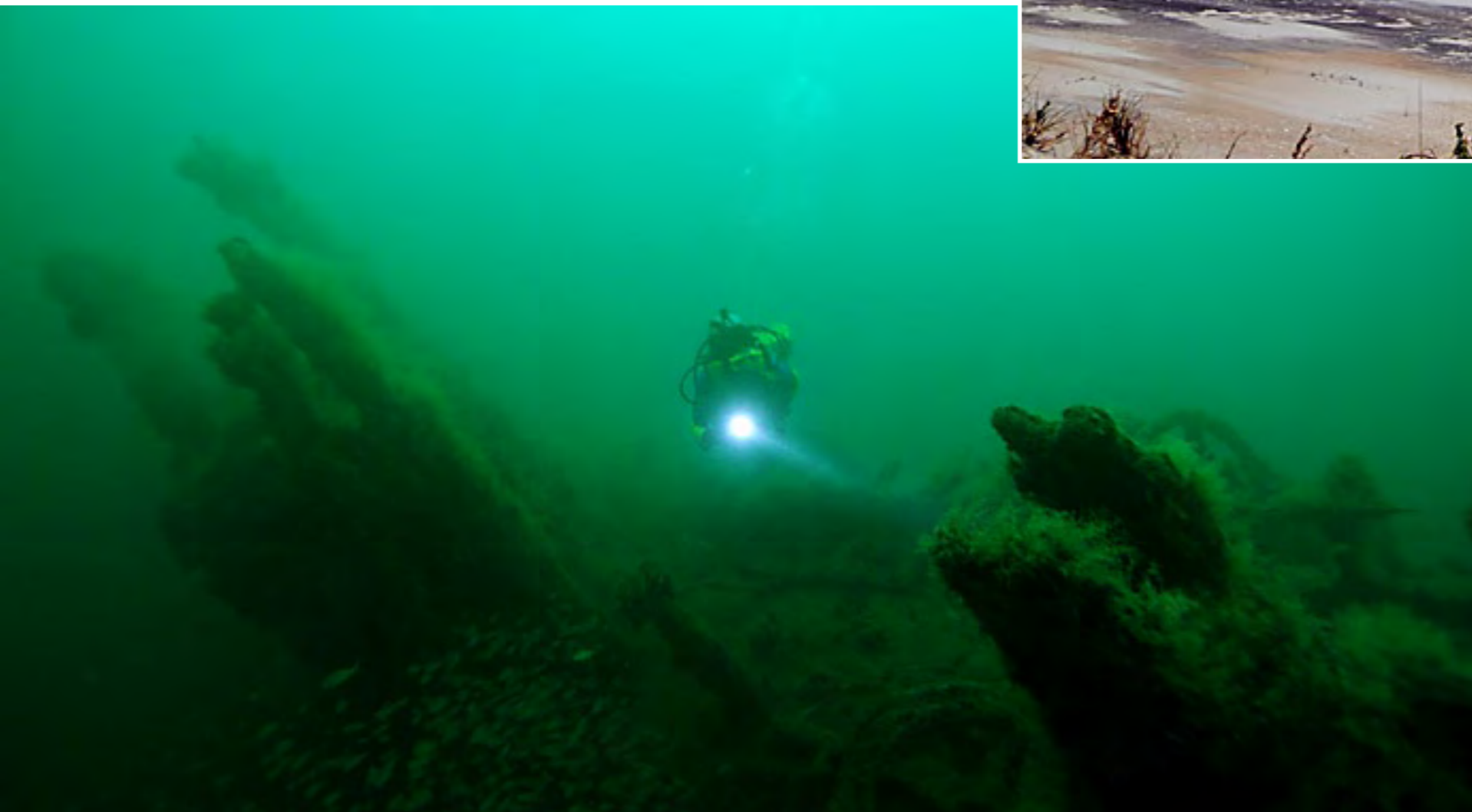
Due to recent storms and the overcast sky, the water I plunge into is green and murky. I estimate the visibility to be 20 feet. The trickle of 65°F water down my back sends chills throughout my body and causes the goose bumps to triple in size. Lauren's vibrant yellow fins serve as a homing beacon as I slowly descend the anchor line. Robust, curious amber-jacks play ring around the roses with me at the center of their attention.

Suddenly, hauntingly, like a ghost ship beckoning to one more weary sailor, *U-352* comes into view. Resting upright on the bottom at 115 feet, she lists about 40 degrees to starboard. The effects of repeated depth charges and more than 60 years of lying submerged in salt water have not yet obliterated her

form. Though it is clear the outer hull has rusted away, she still looks like a sub.

Best of all, the *U-352* is seemingly alive and pulsating with fish. Atlantic Spadefish, seabass, various jacks, and large barracuda are abundant. Swarms of silversides dart and dance in unison to the rhythms of the sea, as if performing a ballet in homage to the slain vessel.

Though my tank is filled with nitrox, the depth and relatively flat dive profile mean our time to explore the wreck is short. Lauren motions for me to



follow her and then excitedly points up. At first, I can not tell what it is she sees. Then, as if the *U-352* has fired on the enemy one last, magical time, a torpedo shaped form materializes from the void.

A 10-foot sand tiger shark, with an entourage of silversides encircling its head and hitchhiking remoras attached to its belly, slowly, purposely swims toward me. Mouth agape, its hundreds of white, sharp teeth seem to sparkle in the gloom. Firing off frames as it passes a mere arm's length away, I think of the shark as a sentinel whose duty it is to investigate all intruders. What an awesome sight!

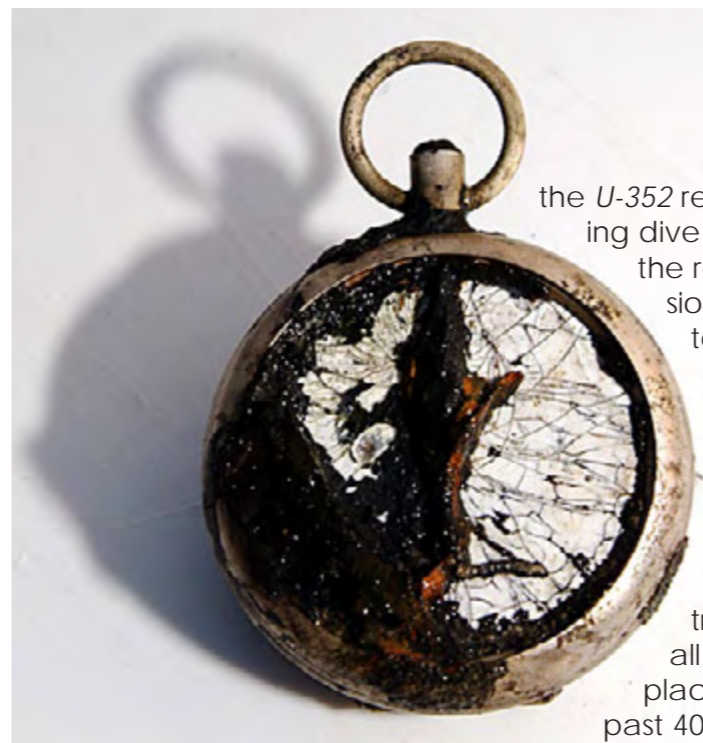
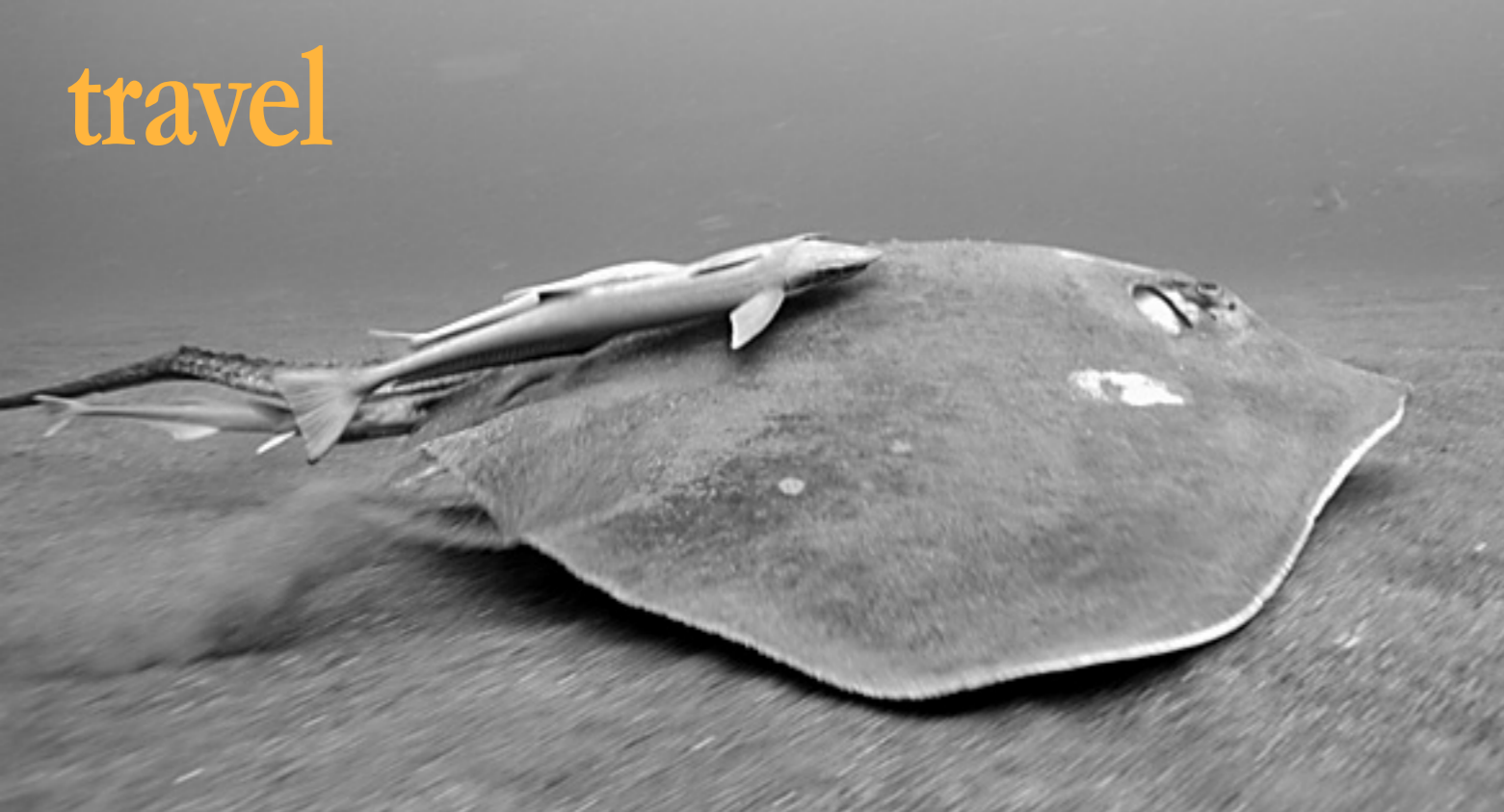
Conscious of the dwindling bottom time, Lauren and I move from the propeller and aft torpedo tube, the happening place for Atlantic spadefish, to the con-

ing tower, the most prominent feature of the wreck. Spotted moray eels have commandeered the tower and make their homes in its recesses. While trying to keep the backscatter to a minimum, I take pictures of Lauren as she shines her flashlight on the structure. After a peek inside the coning hatch, we move on.

While we are swimming above the magnetic compass mount, which is located between the coning tower and the forward gun mount, a southern stingray and seven three-foot cobia comprise a bizarre, almost surreal menagerie that quickly passes along the starboard flank. It is yet one more encounter that makes me wonder if my mind is playing tricks.

We quickly make a u-turn at the bow to examine the port side that tilts toward the surface. A complete circuit around

LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver explores the reef off North Carolina; Angelfish (inset); Brisk beaches along North Carolina's coast make for good strolls to stretch the legs and picnics by the sea



the U-352 results in a flashing dive computer and the reluctant admission that it is time to begin our ascent.

Safely back aboard the *Midnight Express*, I secure my gear and try to recall all that took place over the past 40 minutes.

Meanwhile, after surfacing from his dive at the back of the boat, George clambers up the ladder, plops a net bag on the rear deck and excitedly proclaims, "I think I might have found a watch." Once free of his BC, he opens the bag to reveal a collection of items that look to be a mixture of crusty rocks and really old trash. I certainly do not see any watch.

George proceeds to use the handle of his dive knife to carefully chip away at one of the objects. In just a couple of minutes, what once appeared to be a nondescript rock now clearly resembles a pocket watch. Call me amazed and a bit jealous. The new mystery is how George got inside the control room (a place he estimates he has visited 1,500 times before), stick his hand in silt up to his elbow, feel around in the dark, pull out something that looked like nothing and know he had found a watch?



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Remora fish catch a ride on a swift stingray; Pocket watch found on the wreck of the U-352—could it have belonged to the U-boat's captain Ratke? Graceful ray glides over the wreck of U-352; A spent artillery shell lies on the ocean floor by the wreck; Toadfish makes use of effective camouflage as it blends into its surroundings



Upon more careful inspection, the back of the watch displays a German eagle and swastika. The watch might even have belonged to Rathke.

More mysteries

My visit to Morehead City has revealed more mysteries than answers. For example, it has recently been learned that three World War II wrecks were incorrectly identified when first discovered by divers (perhaps we should call it Rathke Syndrome) and the correct names have yet to be confirmed. This is not the first such case of mistaken identity, and I am sure inquiring minds would like the scoop.

Another topic that demands more attention is the influx of Pacific tropical fish, which have invaded the Atlantic via home aquariums. On one site, I counted almost as many lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) as I might

hope to see on a dive in the Red Sea or the Solomon Islands.

The predominant theory suggests that a strong hurricane and the Gulf Stream combined forces to carry the fry or eggs of the invasive species, which were produced by home aquaria specimens illegally released in the Florida Keys, to the Carolinas. Regardless of how the fish arrived, their current populations, range, ability to adapt and the absence of predators mean that it is too late to reverse the trend.

The big question is which endemic species will disappear due to the new competition. Groupers are thought to be at risk high since they feed on the same prey as the lionfish.

The mystery that lingers the most is why I waited so long to visit Morehead City. I have been blessed with the opportunity to dive and explore oceans around the world,



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lionfish on the wreck of the U-352; Prowling stingray; School of Spadefish at the Titan dive site

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Diver finds a school of Spadefish hovering over a wreck site off North Carolina

North Carolina



always seeking the next big adventure, and yet, in all that I have seen and experienced in far away lands, diving off the coast of North Carolina has mysteries, stories and sights that would take a lifetime to savor. ■

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IN MEMORY OF GEORGE George Purifoy, 63, owner of Olympus Dive Center located in Morehead City, NC, who is credited alongside his friends with the discovery in 1974 of the wreck of *U-352*, passed away on 14 September 2008 after collapsing on board his boat during a dive at the Queen Anne's Revenge shipwreck site. Purifoy is survived by his son, Robert, who continues the family business; his daughter, Sandra Purifoy Maschmeyer; a brother and sister and four grandchildren. A memorial fund was set up in Purifoy's honor through Diver's Alert Network. ■

Two sand perch guarding their territory

