

I couldn't get to sleep 'til late on Friday night thinking about my first wreck dive off the North Carolina coast. We were scheduled to dive on the Hyde and Markham. Both ships are part of an artificial reef program and both are at a depth of 85 feet about a football field apart. The Hyde is a smallish 215' vessel whereas the Markham is quite a bit larger at 340' in length. Interestingly, the Markham spent most of her active life in the Great Lakes as early as the 1960s.

With insufficient sleep, I was up at 4:00AM Saturday morning and on the road by 4:30. After an uneventful ride, my dive buddy and I arrived at the marina in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina where the 48' Aquatic Safari I was docked; AS I would be our home for the next six hours. She is only a year old, purpose-built for scuba diving and, as I was going to soon find out, was a great dive boat. I wore a t-shirt, but had brought along a long-sleeved shirt and heavy jacket in anticipation of a cold ride out to the dive site. I was pleasantly surprised when, at 7:30 when we boarded the boat, the temperature was already a very comfortable 70°.

Our trip out to the dive site was very smooth. There were eighteen of us adventurers ranging from college age to very retired. The NOAA website had foretold of 2' to 3' waves, but I never saw anything larger than a foot until we were already on our trip back home. The early-morning sun was brilliant, reflecting off the calm ocean surface, presaging a perfect-weather day.

The dive boat sets a very nice entry system – they rig a long three-inch pipe about fifteen feet below the surface as a dive bar. When you enter the water, you follow the aft line down to the pole, then make your way forward. At the forward end of the pole you find another line that leads to the anchor line. You then follow the anchor line down to find the wreck. All in all, it was a very nice system for use in water that doesn't have the clarity one finds in the Caribbean. It would also assist a diver conquer a heavy current or high waves; fortunately, we didn't have any of either on Saturday.

We first dove on the Markham. It was a very nice half-hour dive, with water temperatures in the mid-60s. With visibility of only 20 feet, the Markham loomed eerily out of the blue-gray of the ocean just past the anchor. We swam toward then around the vessel. On our dive we were constantly surrounded by an uncountable myriad of small fish, likely cigar minnows, anchovies and herring. Interspersed with these bait fish were schools of Atlantic Spadefish and the occasional individual, including the black bass I managed to capture by camera. The spadefish can be confused with large angelfish and are quite beautiful.

At one point a huge school of the herring streamed into sight from the gray-green ocean twenty feet to the left and disappeared into the same gray-green depths twenty feet to the right, a mesmerizing ribbon of flitting silvery shapes that continued for minutes.

The highlight of the dive was the school of large Amberjack that swam by to check us out, looking quite full of themselves. They were magnificent! I was too captured by their beauty to even think about getting a picture.

This dive came to an end when my dive buddy and I checked our air one more time and sadly realized it was time to ascend. It wasn't hard to find the anchor on the way back; it was surrounded by a dozen divers marked by their combined bubbles rising to the surface in a great cascade. We reversed the entry process, following the anchor line up, and ultimately waited out our safety stop on the dive bar. After we climbed back onboard the AS 1, we spent our required one-hour surface interval relating our individual experiences. I heard about sightings of groupers, sheepshead and other fish. Our serious wreck-penetration diver regaled us with his tale of the large eel he came fact-to-face with while swimming down a corridor. He wasn't sure who scared whom the most! During this discussion, we were visited by two dolphins who did their best to ignore us.

Our hour done, we geared up again for the dive on the Hyde. This time the anchor was actually attached to the vessel, so finding the Hyde was a matter of looking down as we descended the anchor line. The Hyde sits upright on the bottom, whereas the Markham is lying on her side. We swam over and through the vessel as open holds and short companionways beckoned. I felt very comfortable swimming through these very short and wide accesses. At one point we spotted our friendly sea slug sitting on the main deck. It's hard to tell from the pictures, but he was over six inches long. This dive ended too early as well. We boarded the dive boat, stripped off our dive gear and prepared for the trip home. It was indeed a wonderful day and as the water slipped under our keel, we all kept repeated that phrase as if a mantra.

I felt totally at ease gliding through the water this trip, unlike my first dive six weeks earlier when I couldn't control my depth, and swam as if a yo-yo.. The five dives I made at Fantasy Lake in preparation for this trip were invaluable. Not only was I a certified diver, I could actually dive without embarrassing myself!

After we came ashore we walked to a local restaurant just down from the marina and sat on the deck overlooking the waterfront. A seafood lunch was certainly appropriate and our group of seven again related our individual experiences aboard the Hyde and Markham. It was just the kind of perfect ending suitable for such a perfect day.