

The Buoy Project

By Richard W. Bowles (GOFC Newsletter, March, 1994)

The fledgling Gainesville Offshore Fishing Club, fresh from its incorporation August 16th, 1968, lost no time in establishing itself as a service club. The first president was Dennis Curington, of Curington's Ditch fame. Dennis was a man whose idea of offshore was wa-a-a-y out there, where grouper and kingfish were the targeted species. Finding kings (then!) was easy. In season, you went offshore 8 or 10 miles to the bait pods and kept your eyes open. When present in numbers, kingfish were seen skyrocketing bait, their graceful arcs easily visible. Grouper were different and still are. They live on or near the bottom and hide in rocky caverns. To catch them you must find the right place. The ready availability of loran was still 10 years in the future. The Little Green Box, the flashing-light depth recorder was in limited use, but gave little information about fish or the character of the bottom.

Thus was born the **GREAT BUOY PROJECT**. Grouper were so plentiful that experienced club anglers had no reservations about showing newcomers where to find them.

Under the leadership of president Curington and his successor, Bill Smith, club members used the work space in Rowland Richards Gator Marine to build a top-shaped metal form 10 feet high. Into it was poured the chemicals that foam into sturdy styrofoam buoys, topped with a numbered flag. They were anchored with discarded automobile transmissions weighing more than 100 pounds. Stainless steel aircraft cables fastened buoy to anchor.

Ten locations were selected, four off Homosassa and Crystal River, others at the Crystal River Artificial Reef, Seahorse Reef, Suwannee Bombing Range, Hedemon Reef, and Red Banks. The most used, however, was number 10, which marked the Old Grouper Grounds off Cedar Key. It was placed roughly 12 miles off the end of the Northwest Channel on a heading of 240 degrees.

In the area surrounding old Number 10, wife Tommy and I could drift for a mile or more, using 1-ounce jigs, and catch blackfish on nearly every throw. We kept the anchor ready, and when we hooked something we couldn't get up, we tossed a marker and anchored for serious grouper fishing.

The Buoy Project had major frustrations. Shrimpers and commercial fishermen cut them off with annoying regularity. A buoy that required 40 man-hours of work, and Herculean efforts in manhandling the ungainly things into place from tipsy boats, would sometimes remain in place for only a single weekend. Bill Sloan and some helpers placed one on Red Banks that floated up at Horseshoe the following day.

Bobby Adkins, a great grouper fisherman who owned one of the first Loran C units, gave a program at a club meeting lauding the spooky gadget's ability to get you back to a grouper hole after once finding it. He concluded by pointing out, however, that he still counted on his verifier to make sure he was over rocks. "When we get there," he said, "I make my 20-year-old son, my verifier, put on his dive gear and go down and look." With loran, the buoys were no longer needed. But the club, from its inception, had made its mark as a service organization for anglers.