

DIVERS TRAIN on Manasquan Bridge, New Jersey

Story and Photos by Tom Gormley

Every day, thousands of rail commuters pass over the Manasquan River Bridge on their commutes from New Jersey shore towns to jobs in New York City. Few glance up from their newspapers, except perhaps to check progress on replacing the only wooden trestle with a concrete and steel one.

While the new bridge may be essential for added safety for the railroad, the upgrade is demurred by divers. The bridge at Point Pleasant Beach, N.J., is one of the few locations where diving is permitted under a New Jersey bridge. Since last September, the site has been off limits for diving while the span is being replaced. With luck, completion will be in early 2007 and divers again will be able to dive beneath the bridge and in the lagoon to the east, as they have for decades.

Large construction barges are anchored around the bridge as it is being

demolished section by section. New steel pilings will be covered with concrete to complete the new supports, and new bridge abutments will be constructed at each end. Plans call for a one-year project, but similar ones have taken nearly two years to complete.

The old bridge had a special charm for divers. Wooden support beams had a crisscross effect underwater that provided hiding places for fish from striped bass to bergalls. Algae, corals, mussels, sponges and other invertebrates lived on and around the wooden pilings and provided food for all sorts of creatures. On a day with good visibility you could see a beautiful arrangement of light beams cascading from above.

When a train crossed, vibrations penetrated to the bottom of the water and divers could feel the train passing. Photography, sightseeing and spearfishing

are the attractions here. On- and off-street parking is generally available for divers and fishing enthusiasts as part of the Gull Island County Park System. This arrangement makes the bridge a genuine rarity in New Jersey, where parking is often limited.

New divers, students and even seasoned divers have enjoyed diving the bridge. On a Saturday or Sunday during the peak of the season there might be three or four scuba classes training in the lagoon before high tide.

Timing the slack period under the bridge has always been tricky. Getting too close to the channel under the bridge before true slack tide has caused many new and even an occasional accomplished diver to be sucked under the bridge by swift currents. The only real danger is to be carried under the bridge and be spat out on the far side or left hanging on to the pilings for dear life. This is a little scary for the uninitiated, but



NJ Transit train rolls northbound across the old wooden bridge over the Manasquan River at low tide. The lagoon is in the near right.



Aerial of bridge and inlet. Copyright TerraServer.

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Barge blocks access to the bridge during construction.

offers excitement for the seasoned railroad bridge diver.

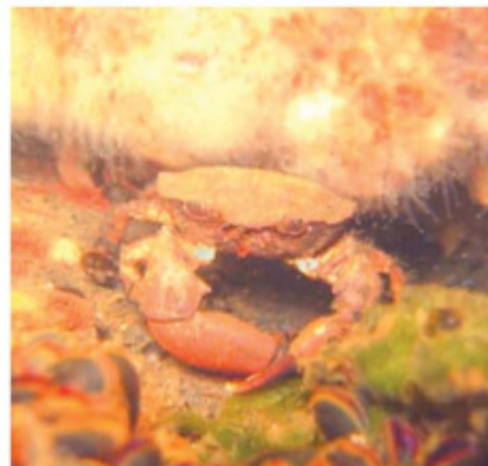
Maximum depths reach 25 feet to the east or west of the bridge. Underwater visibility ranges from nothing to 30 feet, and water temperatures fluctuate from the low 30s F in the winter to the high 70s F in the summer.

At least for this summer, construction makes diving the bridge unsafe. So until some time in 2007, divers will have to go elsewhere for their diving pleasure. Fortunately the Shark River Inlet and the Shrewsbury River are close and provide good alternate dive sites.

When the Manasquan Bridge is completed, divers can expect to see some changes. Marine life will take some time to grow onto the bridge and concrete will provide less irregular space for creatures to hold onto. The lagoon to the east will still support varied marine life and the riprap wall

on Gull Island will also remain. It appears that the span will be a little shorter as well, so currents under the bridge are likely to be swifter. If only the time before reopening could pass more quickly, for bridge divers can hardly wait to be under the bridge again.

Tom Gormley wrote "Shore Diving In New Jersey" and is a member of Divers Anonymous, Clifton, N.J. He teaches scuba locally and can be reached through his Web site, www.safescuba.com.



Crab hides behind mussels under a ledge of coral beneath the wooden trestle.



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