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# TAG & RELEASE

Keys anglers, captains help support science, species studies

By TIMOTHY O'HARA Key West Citizen Jun 4, 2022



Captain R.T. Trosset, left, along with angler Ryan Rea, shows off an amberjack caught west of Key West.  
Photos provided

Using the latest satellite technology, the Marathon-based Main Attraction Sportfishing Charters and Gray FishTag Research recently partnered on a tagging program to help gain a better understanding of the migration and behavior patterns of one the Keys' strongest fighting fish — greater amberjack.

The Florida Keys are an international fishing destination because of greater amberjack and other popular game fish in the chain of islands. The fish can be found inshore and offshore and range from depths of 15 feet to more 600 feet of water. They frequent heavy structure such as large shipwrecks and sea mounts.

While in Marathon, Gray FishTag Research team hosted a one-of-a-kind expedition. In partnership with the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Gray FishTag Research presented the first greater amberjack research tagging expedition. Marty and Katie Lewis, owners of Main Attraction Sportfishing Charters in Marathon donated their boat and expertise to assist Gray FishTag in achieving its mission.

On May 25, the crew boarded the Main Attraction, and departed for what would be a less-than-comfortable day of fishing on the high seas. Despite the challenging conditions, the crew satellite-tagged a perfect 50-inch greater amberjack and deployed a MiniPAT satellite tag and a GFR green spaghetti tag before releasing the fish.

The satellite tag is programmed for four months and will be collecting data by three sensors: light, water temperature and depth during the tag's duration.

“The winds were blowing, and the seas were tough, but our team was tougher, and by earlier afternoon our mission was accomplished,” said Roxanne Willmer, director of Gray FishTag Research.

It was a group effort, with Capt. Marty Lewis at the helm and Ben Zdan in the cockpit with Main Attraction, Andrew Walker and Danielle Cummings on the rod with Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Bill Dobbelaer and Roxanne Willmer with Gray FishTag Research, chef and GFR contributor Stu Webber and Capt. Lee Kerbel and Capt. Billy Springer with Gray Taxidermy.

“It was great to see how recreational fishing can make important contributions to our knowledge of the ocean and the migration of key fish species,” said Walker, president and CEO of Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida. “Being able to be a small part by

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reeling in the amberjack was exhilarating.”

There is limited data collected on the greater amberjack species, and these research efforts will allow researchers and anglers to gain a greater understanding of the migration and behavior patterns of this popular gamefish, Willmer said.

Each month, the GFR receives calls on recovered amberjacks, with recovery as far north as North Carolina from a greater amberjack that was originally tagged offshore Miami. This fish was at large for 818 days before being recaptured, Willmer said.

In addition to the amberjack, the crew tagged and released a blackfin tuna and mutton snapper on the May 25 trip off Marathon, said Katie Lewis, co-owner of the Main Attraction.

“We are really excited about what information will tell us in the next couple months,” Lewis said. “It’s pretty neat to see where they go and what their patterns are.”

Gray FishTag Research is non-profit, all-species, international tagging program, with donations from its research centers, sponsors and contributors. The program is a collaborative effort supported by an advisory board consisting of industry leaders, sponsors and research centers.

Through the for-profit company Gray Taxidermy, Gray FishTag Research has relationships with more than 10,000 captains and mates around the world. In 2015, Gray FishTag Research realized the value of building those relationships to gain real time data and began the research efforts of the program, Willmer said. Since the inception of the program and throughout the past six years, Gray FishTag Research has been able to train, engage and educate thousands of captains locally and around the globe. The Gray FishTag Research program is committed to offering tagging supplies to charter boat captains at no cost and to share the data collected from the tag data cards and satellite tag studies to the public and fishery managers for free.

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“Conservation first starts with awareness,” Wilmer said. “The GFR tagging model is like no other. When we place tagging supplies in the hands of charter captains, we are not only creating data, but we are also creating awareness to thousands of anglers yearly. Daily, our captains engage their anglers in responsible fish tagging and the reporting while introducing our youth, some for the very first time, to the benefits of catch and release.”

Each year, thousands of Gray FishTag Research green spaghetti tags, which are distributed for deployment on all species of fish. They receive calls weekly from captains throughout the USA and internationally wanting to become a tagging partner and be a part of the research and tagging efforts.

The Gray FishTag Research program is the first to conduct long-term deployment satellite tag studies on striped bass and roosterfish and conducted swordfish satellite tag studies in Florida, blue marlin studies in Costa Rica and striped marlin studies in Mexico, Willmer said.

The goal of these studies and work is to gain a greater understanding of the migration and behavior pattern of these well sought-after species, Wilmer said. In 2020, GFR tagged more than 63 species of fish and, in 2021, tagged 58 species with recapture rates twice the average.

“As in all our research expeditions, our GFR team relies on the experience and knowledge of our local captains and mates,” Willmer said. “As we collaborate and include the local fishing community, we can engage, educate, bring awareness, and support fishing through science. It is our team’s mission in our tagging work to always keep the data collected as Open Access to all.”

For information on Gray FishTag Research, visit <https://grayfishtagresearch.org/> online.

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