FROM FISHING TRAWLER TO FISH HAVEN: THE MANDY RAY

By Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

For divers, Long Island's waters are known for shipwrecks. Some of these wrecks are famous for the challenges they present: The *USS San Diego, Coimbra, U-853* and, of course, the *Andrea Doria* represent some of the more difficult wrecks to dive in these waters. Experienced, well-trained and adequately equipped divers should only visit these shipwrecks. But for divers of almost all levels, there are some beautiful wrecks within reach.

In October of 1998, the *Mandy Ray*, a 126 foot fishing trawler became the latest addition to the Shinnecock Artificial Reef. This reef, a collection of small shipwrecks, obsolete armored vehicles and other assorted material, lies just two miles south of the Shinnecock Inlet in waters ranging between 80 and 95 feet in depth. All told, the extent of this reef is about 35 acres (680 yards by 250 yards). The sinking of the *Mandy Ray* was the end result of hard work between the owners of the dive boat *Jean Marie* (Ken and Jean Marie Jastrzebski, who tragically died in a car crash in 2005) and the DEC and the Cornell Cooperative Extension, who joined together to arrange for the sinking of this vessel.

Recently, we set out on a warm, summer day from the Ponquogue Marina aboard the dive vessel *Sidekick*, a 6-pack offering in shore and offshore wreck diving charters throughout the season. After a short, 25 minute run to the site we were ready to go diving. The *Mandy Ray* sits upright and is basically intact. Divers reach the wreck in about 45 feet of water and have to strain to reach 92 feet of depth in the sand if they find themselves in some of the small washouts alongside the wreck.

Swimming over the top of the wreck, the wheelhouse, the bow and the stern section all make for a captivating dive for both experienced and novice open water divers. Visibility on this wreck is generally quite good, although it is subject to the same variable Atlantic Ocean conditions that all wrecks in our area experience.

After circumnavigating the wreck on the outside, we decided to venture inside the wheelhouse, a very picturesque location with ample openings and plenty of ambient light. There are some interesting swim-throughs and we spent about half of our dive inside this beautiful little shipwreck.

Exploring the Mandy Ray
Photo by Michael Salvarezza

Along the way, we spotted Black Sea Bass, schools of Blackfish, Bergall and even a large Conger eel poking its head out from a small compartment deeper inside the wreck. Indeed, the irony of the situation struck us: The Mandy Ray was now home to the same fish life that she once was in the business of hunting!

The *Mandy Ray* is a perfect introduction to the world of Northeast Shipwreck Diving. Because of her location, the trip to the site is quick, the boats leave at a reasonable time in the morning and they return you to shore in time for a late lunch. What more could you ask for? Give the *Mandy Ray* a try. Regardless of your skill level, you will want to come back for more. ■