



# Flower Garden Banks Field Trip

## Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary

Date: 1-5 July 2008

Trip Leaders: George Schmahl and Emma Hickerson



Map of Gulf of Mexico showing location of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, major cities, and location of the ICRS in Fort Lauderdale, Florida

**Field Trip Overview:**

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) is located approximately 185 km (115 miles) due south of the Texas/Louisiana border, in the northern Gulf of Mexico, and includes three remarkable reefs: the East and West Flower Garden Banks, and Stetson Bank. These reef structures sit atop salt domes and are situated 20 to 30 meters (65 to 100 feet) below sea level. The Flower Garden Banks have living coral cover exceeding 50 percent dominated by massive colonies of *Montastraea* and *Diploria*. These reefs are among the healthiest in the Caribbean, exhibiting very little coral disease, algal overgrowth, or bleaching mortality. This is reflected in the ongoing long term monitoring of the reefs that began in the 1980's and is one of the longest datasets for coral reef evaluation. The Flower Garden Banks are also home to a number of large marine animals that may be observed, including manta rays, spotted eagle rays, loggerhead sea turtles, and occasionally whale sharks. Stetson Bank is a coral community rich with invertebrates, and contains unique geological formations. It is dominated by sponges, algae, and fire coral and harbors large schools of fish. Stetson Bank comes up to within 18m (60ft) of the surface.



**High living coral cover at the East Flower Garden Bank, dominated by massive star and brain corals. Photo: FGBNMS/Schmahl**

The field trip will be conducted aboard the recreational dive charter vessel, the *M/V Fling*, departing out of Freeport, Texas (approximately 60 miles south of Houston). See [www.gulf-diving.com](http://www.gulf-diving.com) for a description of the recreational dive charter. Participants will make their own arrangements to get to Houston, Texas (George Bush Intercontinental (IAH) or Houston Hobby (HOU) airports). Shuttles will be arranged to pick up participants from airports on the afternoon of July 1, 2008.

**Date:** 1-5 July 2008

**Cost:** \$500 US (Tips are encouraged for the vessel crew. The cost of the trip includes dive tanks and Nitrox fills. Cost does not include travel to and from Houston, TX)

**Field Trip Leaders:** George P. Schmahl, Sanctuary Superintendent and Emma Hickerson, Research Coordinator, NOAA/Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary



**A pair of yellowmouth grouper (*Mycteroperca interstitialis*) hover over large coral colonies at the Flower Garden Banks. Photo: FGBNMS/Schmahl**

**Itinerary:**

*Departure Date:* Tuesday, July 1, 8:30 PM, Freeport, Texas

*Return Date:* Friday, July 4, 5:30 PM, Freeport, Texas

The SCUBA trip will be arranged through Gulf Diving, Inc. by the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. The charter will leave the dock in Freeport, Texas on the evening of Tuesday, July 1, 2008. Trip participants will be responsible for travel to/from Houston. Shuttles will be arranged for travel between Houston airports and Freeport. Freeport is located approximately 2 hours from George Bush Intercontinental Airport, and 1 hour from Houston Hobby Airport. Trip participants will meet at the “On The River” Restaurant at 5:00 pm for dinner prior to boarding the *M/V Fling* at around 8:00 pm. While on board, all meals, drinks, bedding, nitrox/air tanks, weights and belts will be supplied. The participants must provide all other diving equipment. A packing list will be supplied prior to the trip. The charter will return to the dock in Freeport, Texas on the evening of Friday, July 4, 2008. On July 4<sup>th</sup> participants should book a room in Houston close to the airport to allow appropriate time before flying to Ft. Lauderdale.

We will spend a full day each at the East and West Flower Garden Banks, and a half day at Stetson Bank before returning to Freeport, Texas. Divers will be offered a maximum of twelve dives – five each at the East and West Flower Garden Banks (including a night dive on each bank) and two dives at Stetson Bank.

Diving at the Flower Garden Banks is only recommended for experienced divers. Those new to diving, or those who have not dived recently (within 12 months) are encouraged to obtain additional experience

prior to this cruise. Dive depths range from 21-36m (70-120ft). Sea conditions vary dramatically, but rough seas and strong currents are common.

**Meeting Location:** On The River Restaurant, Freeport, Texas, July 1, 2008, 5 PM (Dinner at expense of participant.)

**Number of participants:** 18-25 people

**Additional Information:**

This trip is exclusively SCUBA, as the reefs are too deep for snorkeling. Dive certification proof is required. Participants that are going to scuba dive must provide proof of emergency insurance (Diver Alert Network or Workers Compensation Insurance).



**A diver hovers over the dense reef of the West Flower Garden Bank. Water depth is 26m (85ft), illustrating exceptional visibility. Photo: FGBNMS/Hickerson**

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