

How I survived being gulped by a giant fish

DOWN IN THE MOUTH: Swedish tourist Andre Ronnlund is lucky to be alive after being swallowed by a giant grouper

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27jan02

A MAN who was swallowed by a fish while diving on the Great Barrier Reef has told of how he was "stalked" by the creature which tried to make a meal of him.

Swedish backpacker Andre Ronnlund, 24, thought he was going to die with his head in the mouth of a giant grouper while diving at Yongala, off Townsville, last month.

"In the beginning, it was fun," he said, speaking for the first time of his bizarre ordeal. "Me and my diving buddy had never seen such big fish.

"But then it came right up to within inches of our faces and followed us everywhere we went. I felt it was a little bit threatening and I didn't like it."

Running short of air, Mr Ronnlund decided to signal his diving buddy that he was going to surface.

That's when the 100kg grouper - a local legend called Grumpy estimated to be 80 years old - made his move.

"I was hit from underneath and everything suddenly went black. My breathing gear was shredded. I was inside the mouth of this big fish

and I blacked out," he said.

"At first I thought it was a shark. I didn't see it coming. I didn't know what hit me.

"I was as helpless as a prawn on the proverbial barbie and I thought, 'This is it', and I would end my days as fish food.

"I was stuck in its mouth and it was squeezing pretty hard. I felt the blood running down my neck and I couldn't move. I was in great pain, just waiting to die."

Mr Ronnlund was about 20m down when he was attacked.

"It came from underneath me. I never saw it coming. Then it was just 'bang' and I was inside the fish's mouth. It ripped off my regulator but my mask was still on and then, just as suddenly, it let me go."

As he reached for his emergency air supply, Mr Ronnlund had to put the boot in as Grumpy came back for another bite.

"I gave him a kick between his eyes and he swam back towards the bottom."

Mr Ronnlund, who had been blasé about stories of the dangers of Australian wildlife, is believed to be the only person to report a grouper attack.

Dive instructor Merv Ruggeri, of Adrenalin Dive company, said Mr Ronnlund was lucky to be alive.

"Giant grouper have very powerful jaws. Grumpy could have crushed Andre's head like a soft peach and snapped his neck like a twig. That's why I think Grumpy was only being playful."