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THE REGION

Snorkeler seriously hurt as houndfish stabs her

BY LISA FUSS
lfuss@herald.com

BIG PINE KEY — A 17-year-old Tampa girl who went snorkeling with friends during Spring Break had a near-fatal encounter with a needle-nosed houndfish that leaped out of the water and stabbed her in the neck.

Stephanie Mittler was recovering Tuesday after emergency surgery at Fisherman's Hospital in Marathon. Stephanie was standing in chest-high water Sunday about 100 yards off Camp Sawyer when the houndfish jumped out of the water and pierced her neck with its needle-like bill at full speed. Two pieces of the fish's serrated bill broke off, with the longer four-inch piece puncturing the teenager's throat and coming within a millimeter of her carotid artery.

Stephanie's sister, Jennifer, and a friend surfaced from snorkeling to find the girl bleeding profusely from the neck. Thinking a shark had attacked Mittler, the girls scrambled

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— LAURA MITTLER,
injured girl's mother

to get her aboard their pontoon boat and to shore. Emergency personnel from Big Pine Key transported Stephanie to Fisherman's Hospital in Marathon, where she underwent emergency surgery to repair the damage and remove the bill pieces embedded in her neck.

Laura Mittler, the girl's mother,

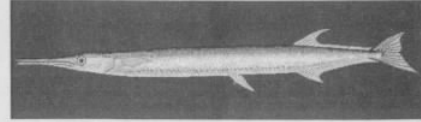
was in Tampa when she received a phone call from a physician at the hospital requesting permission to operate. At her daughter's bedside Tuesday, Mittler said Stephanie is still shaken by the incident but is otherwise in good shape.

The teen was taken off a respirator Monday and moved out of the intensive care unit Tuesday morning. Stephanie has several drains in her neck to help heal the wounds, as well as sutures in her throat.

"It's so ironic that Stephanie hates seafood and she hates fish," her mother said. "I told her the fish gods must have gotten back at her for hating them so much."

The fish that injured Mittler was never caught, but hospital staff was able to identify it as a houndfish, Laura Mittler said.

A junior at Sickle's High School in Tampa, Stephanie arrived in the Keys Saturday for a six-day Spring Break vacation. She was snorkeling for the first time when the accident occurred.



FISHBASE

DANGEROUS: A fish similar to one shown in this drawing jumped out of the water and speared the girl in the neck. Houndfish range throughout much of the world. It jumps out of the water when alarmed or attracted to lights at night.

Houndfish, technically known as *tylosurus crocodilus*, are related to needlefish but are typically bigger. They average three to six pounds and can grow as large as 10 pounds in the Atlantic Ocean. Fishermen are known to fear the houndfish because it has a tendency to leap out of the water and cause stab wounds when startled.

Although Mittler detests fish in general, she apparently wants a token of her near-death experience, her mother said. The teen asked hospital

laboratory staff to save the broken bill pieces for her as souvenirs. No matter, Laura Mittler suspects that her daughter will remember the incident with or without them.

"If she ever goes swimming again, she'll probably only go in shallow water — knees or below," the mother said. "The whole thing was extremely traumatic for her. I think it's safe to say she's going to stick to pools for a while."