Magnolia Rocks, Mass.

There's plenty of live "lobsta" off the coast of Massachusetts. All you have to do is catch them.

BY ED GRASSO

One of the highlights of New England in the summer is diving for lobster. Considered "trash fish" by colonial settlers, these cranky-looking crustaceans now occupy the ionosphere of upscale restaurant menus.

But any diver with $40 and proof of Massachusetts residency can obtain a permit to catch as many lobsters as he can—which I discovered isn't quite the bargain it sounds like.



Like everything else in diving, lobstering requires special equipment. You'll need a catch bag, so named for its proclivity to catch on rocks and dive gear. Your other hand holds a lobster stick, usually a homemade implement, used to cajole your dinner out from its home. Now with both hands full, you need to find a way to carry your lobster gauge, a device used to measure the lobster for legal size.

But the most important thing you need for lobster diving is an experienced lobster diver—someone who can catch the damn things—like my buddy, Roy. Based on Roy's expert advice, we waded into the water at **Magnolia Rocks** and sure enough, it didn't take long to find lobsters. Their pink claws glowed from under rocks like neon welcome signs. I immediately went on the offensive and a few hundred psi later, had nothing to show for it. Roy, knowing that lobsters need to be coaxed into the open, demonstrated that a lobster's vulnerable spot is from behind. Lobsters back into holes and crevices for protection and a good lobster diver knows how to slip his tickle stick around the lobster to gently tap it from behind, forcing the creature out of his hole. It's here the real chase begins.

A lobster in the open immediately realizes his lowly position on the food chain and bolts. This leaves the diver flailing after him with his one free hand (until he drops the tickle stick and catch bag). By the time both hands are free, the crafty crustacean has lodged himself into another hole. The process repeats several times until the tired lobster allows himself to be caught, gauged, deemed too small and released. At this point—and I don't know if the Cousteau Society will back me on this—I'm sure I've heard lobsters snicker.

Despite it all, we were able to come back with some lobsters. More importantly, I discovered a new respect for them. I mean, I still ate them and all, but not with the same indifference I'd display downing a chili dog.

Not too long ago, I passed the lobster tank at the supermarket. Here, in water no deeper than a supermodel's last thought, sat more of my quarry than I had seen all summer. And all I needed to fumble with was my Visa card. Tempting, but somehow both the lobsters and I knew it wouldn't be the same. And as I pushed my carriage toward the hamburger, I swear I heard them snickering.

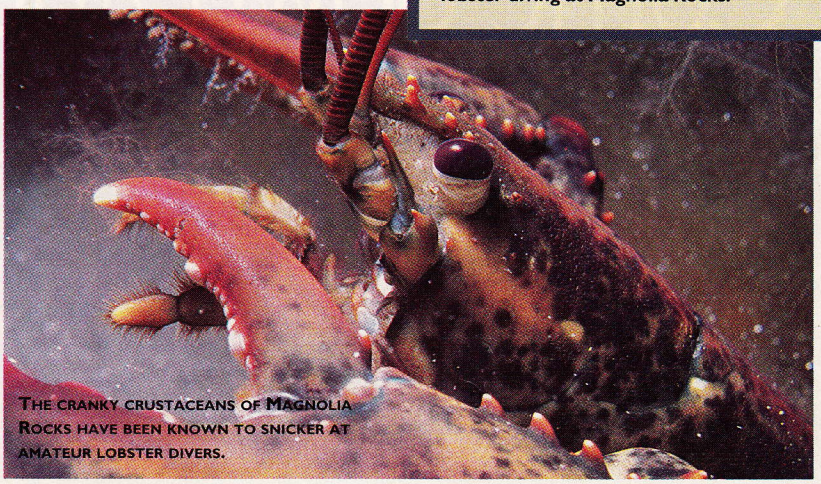
Ed Grasso is a freelance writer in Newtonville, Mass.

DIVE IN

To find Magnolia Rocks—and with any luck the lobsters who live there—follow I-93 or I-95 to Route 128. From exit 15, follow signs to Route 127: Manchester and Magnolia. A sign for Magnolia will direct you off Route 127 onto Raymond Street and into the village. Turn right onto Shore Road (one way) and follow it along the rocky point to the intersection with Lexington Street, helpfully marked by a large rock painted with the word "Lobsta." Park on Lexington or any of the side streets.

Large rocks at the site provide a good staging area for the dive. Entering and exiting the water requires a little skill, depending on the tide and wind. The site is quite popular, however, and the local divers can offer helpful advice. Visibility ranges from 10 to 25 feet and currents are common. Summer water temps range from 55F to 65F.

Air fills and rental dive gear is available just up the road in Gloucester (pronounced *gloss-ter*) at Cape Ann Divers (508-281-8082). East Coast Divers in Boston (617-277-2216) also specializes in lobster diving at Magnolia Rocks.



NICK LUCEY

THE CRANKY CRUSTACEANS OF MAGNOLIA ROCKS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO SNICKER AT AMATEUR LOBSTER DIVERS.

MILLARD T. HENNESSEE