

the tight line[®]



VOL 8, PART 2

THE TIGHT LINE VOLUME 8

- PART 2

The Tight Line is back again! It's always great to get another issue put to bed - gives me another excuse to get out and fish some more. Hopefully the emag can serve as a bit of inspiration to get out there and have a fishing adventure - it is a bit of theme in this issue.

This time around we have some action from Northern New South Wales, chasing native cod and bass in the rivers as well as a piece about the love/hate relationship that many anglers have with that destroyer of the tropics, the red bass. Angus Gorrie takes us on a trip of a lifetime to PNG in search of the famous Papuan black bass. We also have a pictorial from the stunning and remote Montebello Islands of Western Australia.

Until next time

Duncan O'Connell

Fish Head

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RED

BASS

FRIEND OR FOE?

You've been waiting for this moment for a long time.

It's a stunning morning out on the reef; wall to wall sunshine, just enough breeze to put a little chop on the water and the current is running along to perfection. Bait showers can be seen all the way along the reef edge, sparkling in the sun like little baitfish angels taking off to heaven. Predators are hungry and it is a great to be alive (and not be a baitfish). It is going to be a fantastic day. No, it is going to be an absolutely epic day.

It's the sort of day that deserves something special. That one-of-a-kind, custom handmade stickbait which has been waiting for a special occasion, simply must have a swim. There is a monster GT out there, just waiting to write its name into your record book and that stickbait is going to do it. Load up and bang! Out she flies, so, so far up onto the reef edge, landing

right beside the gutter pouring off the shallows. Has to be a fish there... One sweep, two sweeps, the lure is dancing, darting and swimming like the lovechild of Ian Thorpe and Mohammad Ali. Seriously it is that good. The lure dives behind a wave for a moment and there is an almighty splash – Oh Yesss, you strike hard and feel weight. Fish On! There is a hard surge and then the fish comes easily for a moment.

"It's ok, not so big" you call out to your mate, who is mentally frozen, caught between fishing-on and jumping on the motor. You start cranking the fish harder, but something is not quite right.

"F#@* No, no, nonononoooo! The fish isn't coming in easily, it's swimming towards you and power diving for the bottom like the possessed spawn of Satan. You crank harder and faster and swear faster and harder. None of it is going to do any good, not the drag, the cranking, the swearing, or the 200lb leader, because when that fish hits bottom, it will be buried so deep into a coral crevasse that not even Jacques Cousteau himself could get it back. And besides, in the time it took to think this,

A fully 'lit up' bass caught on an FCL FT jig

your braid exploded on the coral....

Congratulations! You have just been done over by a red bass. And it probably wasn't even a big one.

The red bass, *Lutjanus bohar* also known as bohar snapper is a close relative to many species that anglers hold dear; mangrove jack, golden snapper (fingermark), PNG black bass and the American cubera snapper, to name a few. Unlike its other highly esteemed relatives, which are high on the angling hit list, the red bass is often treated like a red headed stepchild at a family reunion. Perhaps on the East Coast of Australia there is a reason behind the dislike; red bass are known to carry ciguatera poisoning in the Coral Sea and therefore are a no-take species in Queensland. But it is more than that. Many anglers who show dislike for them are catch and release anglers anyway, so the fact that it can't be eaten means nothing. I believe it has more to do with their afore-mentioned ability to embarrass anglers, particularly where big GT lures are being used. Being smoked in the river by mangrove jacks is just the price you pay for landing a few. But when a red

bass steals a lure from an angler running 100lb braid, then there is hell to pay!

As Peter Morse once said; "I haven't caught a bad fish yet". And red bass are definitely not a bad fish! Red bass can grow to upwards of 90cm and 13kg as well as live for over 50 years. The average fish may only be a couple of kilograms but they all share the same hard pulling, angry temperament. They are the perfect coral reef light/medium tackle species for catch and release. Bass can be found in Australia from Fraser Island on the East Coast up to Cape York and across to the Central North of WA. They are also present from NE Africa through to the Central Pacific and north to Japan. Around the oceanic islands in the central Pacific, red bass can be particularly abundant – on my personal trips to places like the Solomons and Kiribati they have been one of the most common captures, whether casting or jigging.

Targeting red bass is not too difficult. As they are found in a wide variety of reef habitat, the bass can turn up in a number of situations. Red bass prefer pure oceanic waters, loving the outer side of the reefs, offshore islands and



atolls, hunting from the surf zone out to 100m+ deep. One moment you can catch them on topwater lures in the shallows, the next you get one on a jig in 100m of water. There certainly are some places you will find them scattered all over the reef, but generally I would describe prime bass habitat as

being the second-best spot on the reef.

In most locations in the tropics, the absolute best piece of reef will be occupied by a giant trevally (or two or three). The prime points, best upwelling on a reef edge, best gutter flowing off the shallows and so on - if GTs are

present, then this is the habitat they most commonly occupy. Red bass fit in on the edges. They can't straight up compete with the larger trevallies so they occupy the fringes around them. The good looking coral edges leading up to, or away from a killer point are a good starting locations, small channels flowing off a reef or into a Blue Hole are another. Open coral flats with little bommies for cover, or deeper open reefs that look good but don't get the ripping current, they are all worth a look. Some days the fish will be found close to cover, ambushing only the lures thrown suicidally close to nasty looking structure. Other days, red bass will be out roaming the reef edges or coral flats in packs and the best approach is to move quickly and cover some ground, making long searching casts as you go. Once one is hooked in this situation, more can often be tempted.

Taking this approach on the reef can yield far more than just red bass too. Coral trout and other groupers, emperors, jobfish and various 'lesser' trevally species will add variety to the catch. If you want a mix of sport and the opportunity to take some eating fish for dinner, then it is a fantastic way to spend a day or two out on the reef.



Bass love blue holes inside coral reefs



Even little ones can bury you deep in the reef

The number one method for many anglers is to fish with topwater lures. There is little that beats a good surface strike and red bass often follow a lure in view of the angler before belting it, making the anticipation all the more exciting. The second best thing about a surface strike on bass is it gives the angler a better opportunity to extract the fish before it reaches home. They eat

both poppers and stickbaits, but can be timid at times preferring less aggressive presentations. For the surface, bass will eat lures from 100mm through to giant GT lures of 250mm or longer when the mood takes them. The most common sizes though, range from 100-180mm. Some popular lures include Tiemco Salty Red Pepper Magnum and Max, Maria Loaded and Patriot Baby Pats.

Going sub surface with slow sinking stickbaits is possibly the most deadly way to chase red bass on the reef edge. The strikes are not always as visual, however the hook-up rates are better and the fish hesitate less in striking. You also pick up more bycatch from species which aren't as aggressive on the surface, such as long nose emperors. It is hard to go past lures like the FCL Labo CSP S110s and S145S for this kind of fishing, though the Mangrove studio Volador and ASWB SS-90 are right up there.

In casting tackle, there are two ranges of outfits that get a lot of use on bass: one is a PE2-3 rod that casts lures in the 20-70g range, such as the Zenaq Fokeeto Twitch 70/3 or FCL 73L and 73M. This I team up with a 3500-4000

Daiwa or 5000 size Shimano reel. The next size outfit up is a rod that can cast up to 100g or so and PE4-5 line. Some examples include the FCL Labo UCB74, Synit Van Diemen X35 or Zenaq Fokeeto Tuna 83/4. The key with using this gear on bass effectively is to hit the fish with everything you have got and not rest until the fish is flapping in the boat. By this I mean: when you get a hit, set the hook and start cranking immediately! Don't pause to feel the weight of the fish or let it run – just get the head coming towards you and keep it coming. Fish a firm, but not locked drag. If the fish pulls line add a bit of hand pressure on the spool to make sure you are using maximum tension for your gear. Once the fish is in more open water away from the shallows, don't stop! They have a nasty habit of turning on the afterburners and powering down to the bottom at this stage. Also a larger bass may have only just woken up and realised its predicament at this time, so it can still be pumped up and full of fight. Win or lose, a fight with a red bass will be over in seconds.

With leaders for casting at bass I tend to favour a hard fluorocarbon leader in the 50-60lb range. This kind of stiff leader is not the most casting friendly leader out there but it certainly can cope with a lot of abrasion around the coral, when compared to most mono leader materials. When running larger lures and heavier tackle, I may step up to 100lb mono which is far more castable than very heavy fluorocarbon while maintaining enough toughness for the job.

Lastly, jigging is a very successful way to chase red bass. In deeper water the lure losses to bass are much lower and some quite large specimens can be caught without too much drama.

The authors best land based bass - taken on 25lb braid over a very shallow, coral studded boulder garden. Possibly the unluckiest fish alive!



This bass caught by Martin in Socotra is about as big as you are likely to see them. The fish gave a very good account of itself on 130lb GT tackle!



The business end of a red bass: they possess an array of sharp teeth to pin their prey before swallowing. Note the prominent nasal pit in front of the eye which allows easy identification, compared to mangrove jacks



Slow pitch jigs are killers, particularly Jigging Master fallings, Shout Cradle, Palms Slow Blatt and FCL Labo MSL. The bass love to hit on the pause and usually within 5-10m of the bottom. If you are not getting attention on the jig, a few

long fast lifts followed by spooling the jig back to the bottom can get a strong reaction, not just from bass but emperors and coral trout as well. They seem to love that first twitch up after a lure has fallen 15-20m down to the bottom, it really

can bring the fish in from a distance. A range of jigging outfits can be used, but a nice lightweight slow pitch style rod is perfect for the job. NS Black Hole, Palms, Wiki Jigging and Synit all have rods perfect for the job at a range of price points. The handy thing with slow style jigging is that although the rods are often quite light in power, the fish is fought with the rod held low, even with the rod tip in the water. This way you can simply

use the drag of the reel, with added hand pressure if needed and not worry about the light rod being overloaded.

While Red Bass may not be the first choice target for many anglers out on the reef, their fighting prowess makes them a determined and challenging adversary. They are definitely worthy of respect as well as bragging rights for a good one!





FCL Labo by Y. Tsurusaki Handmade in Japan Rods Stickbaits Poppers Jigs Minnows Cranks @ Fishhead.com.au

Hit the Road

The concept of a road trip is etched pretty deep in film and literature, especially that of the late 20th century. The idea that travelling away from your everyday surroundings and experiences can help to make a better, more enlightened or maybe just a more interesting person, is central in most of these stories. The road trip is a time honoured tradition amongst anglers too. Grab some camping gear, hook up the boat or throw the kayak on the roof and get out of town. It maybe a little too much to ask that we come back a better person (though the rest can do wonders for your state of mind), however, I would happily settle for coming back a better angler.

A good fishing road trip for me involves a few things: awesome locations with great scenery is a start, being far enough away from my usual fishing that it gets out of my comfort zone is another (and the bit that helps me become a better angler), camping is not a necessity but it

definitely adds to the trip, likewise good company is fantastic but I've done some great solo trips as well. Going solo has its own challenges, as far as logistics and personal safety is concerned, but it certainly gives you more time to think or read if you wish to exercise your mind as well as fishing skill. I'm sure most literary enthusiasts would at this point recommend Jack Kerouac's 'On the Road' (mental note to read it myself, too), but one of my favourites would surely be the 1974 classic 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' by Robert Pirsig.

There are a few things I don't like on a road trip. Mobile phone service is one, at least not where I'm fishing. As a tackle shop owner, there is always the feeling that I should be providing real time updates to Facebook or Instagram; keeping the flow of information up to the hungry beast that is social media. At the best of times, I'm pretty poor at doing this, so at least if there is no mobile





coverage then the guilty conscience is removed! Booking ahead is another. Sometimes there is no choice in booking ahead to a campground or motel, but the less structured and more flexible the trip is, the more interesting it usually becomes.

When Tsurusaki san of FCL Labo in Japan recently asked if we could catch a Murray cod and some bass on his trip to Australia, I was very happy to oblige. We have fished together many times, most recently on a freezing, windswept southern Japanese island chasing sea bass. Tsurusaki san is a highly respected lure and rod designer back in Japan, having worked for major companies such as Duel/ Yo-Zuri and Evergreen as well as presenting one of the very first fishing TV shows in Japan. When not fishing, he now runs his boutique hand-made lure and rod brand, FCL Labo from a small factory in southern Japan.

For this adventure we would be travelling inland and south from my home on the Gold Coast, ending up

in Ashford NSW, before turning east at the mighty Clarence River and heading North back home. The trip began two day prior to the opening season for cod in NSW, so I added in a little diversion to Sundown National Park in Queensland's border country to fill in the extra time. As far as getting out of my comfort zone, this was to be right up there. I was playing guide to an angler from overseas, when my cod fishing experience was actually fairly small. I certainly had the benefit of many experienced anglers advice, but this was to be mostly new waters for me.

The Gold Coast was very dry as I packed my gear for the trip. Coming through a hot, windy spring meant that every plant in our garden had gone dusty brown and was either dead or looking like becoming so. Looking at rainfall charts, I expected the same would be true for all of the Slopes and Plains area of Northern NSW. The main question was how much water would be in the rivers and how would that impact the fishing?

The start of the trip didn't go off with a bang either, when Tsurusaki san's plane was delayed by most of a day, due to a cancelled Jetstar flight out of Tokyo. When Tsurusaki arrived into the Gold Coast at 8pm, we just had time to hit his favourite Aussie fast food at Hungry Jacks (really), and then get on the road. After the drama of the cancelled flight, just getting moving was a relief! Conversation flowed easily as fishing chat ate up the travelling time.

It was some relief to see the countryside on the top of the ranges was noticeably green under the beam of the car headlights; it was obvious that there had been some rain around the Stanthorpe area. Hopefully this would mean the Severn River in Sundown had benefitted from some flow. Our arrival at the campsite was rather late, so a quick tarp was set up to keep the dew off the sleeping bags and our first view of the river would wait until morning.

Dawn arrived in no time, gear was hurriedly packed and we began our hike down the river. Despite the green tinge back on the top of the range, it was clear the rain had made no impact whatsoever

on the river. In fact it was really just a string of waterholes that had not seen flow in a long time. We skipped the first couple of easily accessible sections before starting to cast. The water still looked great. Cascades of rock ran from the steep hills above, plunging into still, dark pools where sinking lures seem to take forever to touch bottom. Water dragons stood sentry at every turn and insects buzzed, fluttered and paddled across the surface.

Thump! Oh, that was a fish! The line went limp and I recommenced the retrieve. It was only about the third cast and my brain was still getting into gear. One hit was all I got. Tsurusaki san called out that he had had a strike too. Tsurusaki's hit was on a new shallow jerkbait he was testing. My strike was on a deep flat sided crank, that had its origins during our last trip together hunting barra in the Mackay region. Several more strikes followed on the jerkbait for Tsurusaki, but no solid hook-ups.

We kept moving. Walk a while, fish a while. The sun slowly crept its way down the steep valley through the broken cliff lines, heating rock, cypress



Lime green Daiwa river walking boots - only in Japan!



A nice Yellowbelly from the Severn River

Working the whitewater on the Clarence



A cod from the fast water on a prototype fat sided crank





and eucalypts as it went. Silvereyes, wrens and finches were busy all around us and the odd goanna scampered up a tree at our approach. Only one red-bellied black snake put in a bankside appearance to give us a quick scare, but that was about it. No more bites.

We still had a fair drive ahead of us today and the heat was rapidly intensifying, so we decided to turn round and fish our way back. First pool on the return journey and I heard the call from up ahead.

“Duncan san, fish!... Murray cod!” I dropped everything bar camera and set off. By the time I arrived, a nice little cod was resting on its tether at Tsurusaki’s feet. For a few moments the cod was a star. Both of our still and video cameras recorded the precious few seconds of interaction as the fish was unhooked, held up and then released. First objective achieved, and the pressure was off! Naturally the next two pools produced a flurry of strikes on prototype shallow cranks, resulting in 2 more cod and a solid yellowbelly being released.

From there on in, the rest of the trip went pretty smoothly. The heat was

pretty intense and the lack of creature comforts was a little bit of a concern for someone not entirely used to bathing in a river and taking a shovel to the toilet. We broke the trip up with a motel stay in the middle to get some bulk battery recharging done, as well as washing some clothes. The fishing was never easy throughout the week and better quality cod were very scarce indeed. But that is ok when you are on a lure testing trip, it makes you concentrate a lot harder on how and why things are working - or not working, as the case may be.

The lures we were testing were mainly deep sided cranks in a range of sizes and styles, from wakebaits through to ultra deep divers and sizes from small bass lures through to larger Murray cod sizes. Most of the lures were made in a couple of different buoyancy rates and in some cases multiple bib sizes and shapes. From these twenty or so different variations only a couple will get to production, with a fair bit of fine tuning along the way. Each evening we would play around with different hook setups to see if we could improve the action or rate of flotation. It is amazing how much



130mm topwaters too big for bass? definitely not in the Clarence

you can change the performance of a lure with a change in size, weight of hooks or slight variation in bib shape.

As with previous fishing trips with Tsurusaki san, I learnt heaps. I never tire of watching the way he fishes. Methodically working every bit of cover in a snag from multiple angles, each cast is specifically placed to work a particular segment of the available cover. It is almost surgical the way he dissects the available water. His casting is precise too, to the point that I've seen him cast right through a tangle of snags in order to fish otherwise unreachable water on the other side. With these skills he naturally catches a lot of fish, especially in unfamiliar waters where many anglers – myself included, might struggle. Tsurusaki's casting style is quite different to most Australians too. Whereas most anglers would crank the lure very close to the rod tip for most accurate casting, he drops the lure 1/3 to 1/2 way down the rod, swings back a little way and punches pretty aggressively with the tip of the rod. The result is a low flat cast where the

lure travels through below shoulder level, travelling like a bullet towards the target. When questioned as to how he became such a good caster, he simply shrugs and says "it is my profession".

As the days continued we shifted east over the ranges to the Clarence river. The bass were quite spooky in the clear water, so it took a little time to work things out. Larger surface lures in low light were most effective and anywhere with rapids or a waterfall was also a near certainty. One reach of the river had been affected by an intense thunderstorm, stirring things up and reducing the clarity. This section of river had a far more consistent bite, right through the day and we racked up some good numbers of fish as a consequence.

Pretty soon we were on the road again, making

our way back to the Gold Coast for the home leg. I don't know if I came back a better person, let's face it that might be too much to ask. However I was definitely happier, more relaxed, my casting had improved quite a bit

and we had some great fishing in the name of R&D! Tsurusaki san caught his plane and we both headed back to our normal lives, refreshed and ready to start planning the next the next trip away.



**GEARING
UP
FOR
THE
BLACK**

BASS

**PNG
RIVER
FISHING
BY
ANGUS
GORRIE**



Planning a trip to battle some of the world's toughest river fish? Angus Gorrie spills the beans on things that have worked for him in Eastern Papua New Guinea.

When you mention black bass to anglers in the know, images of dense jungle, steamy weather and brutal, hard hitting fish usually come to mind. With this frame of mind, I set out on my recent explorations up the rivers of West New Britain in search of these infamous adversaries; the black and spot tail bass. Much chat among the tackle stores and others accompanying me set a very serious standard of gear that would be required to not only land a black, but to even be in the game. Suggested gear for bass usually consists of spin or bait cast set-ups in the 40-60lb class and reels to match. This proved a problem as the new ranges from Nordic Stage, which I distribute and therefore set on using, did not feature anything that could match these specs. Being true to the cause, my 'heavy' set up for the trip consisted of a Nordic Stage Cheater rated 10-22lb matched with a 5000 size Shimano



reel, 30lb leader and typically 20-30lb braid. Suggestions made by others attending these trips alluded to the fact that I might be burning through some serious gear by fishing this light! This being said it was with determination, or at least stubbornness that I committed to my personal challenge and stuck to it.

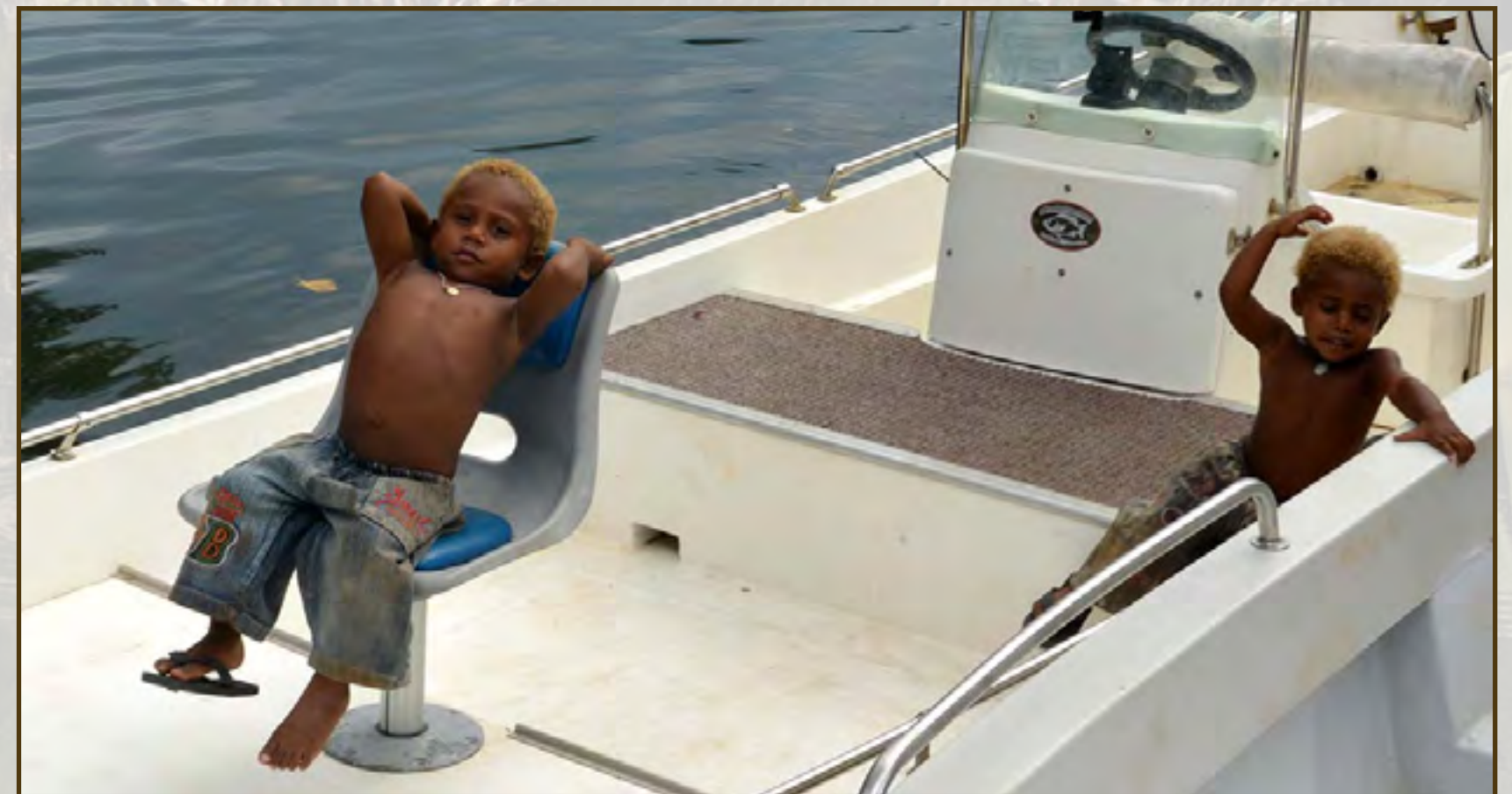
Location:

With the effort required to travel to PNG to target these amazing fish we have never mucked around choosing our operator.

Research directed us to Baia Sports Fishing (www.baiafishingpng.com).

Testimonials, with some firsthand conversations had led us to favouring this operation as the one to use. After two trips now, it would be hard to consider using anyone else! Riccard Reimann, the owner operator of Baia was incredibly helpful leading up to the trip helping with everything from date suggestions, lures and gear and plenty of other useful little tid-bits. The location of Riccard's lodge is in West New Britain, which is situated off the North-East coast of PNG.

The remote nature of the lodge and subsequent rivers ensures the waters are fish rich and relatively unspoiled. One of the really noticeable and endearing features of Baia Fishing Lodge, is its connection with Baia Village located adjacent to the lodge. Most of the guides and staff at the lodge come straight from the village and many local projects including the school and the church were funded by the lodge itself. These factors are no doubt responsible for the incredibly warm and welcoming feel you receive as a guest arriving on the sandy





path leading from the pier to the lodge.

Finer Points:

As mentioned it was with a sense of trepidation that I entered this foray with the calibre of gear I planned to use. When thinking of black bass, one must compare them to their close cousin the mangrove jack. Despite possessing blue water size, black bass inhabit snaggy, treacherous water and have no other intention once they hit your lure than

to return to their lair. There is no option to use light drag to wear fish down but conversely locked, fish stopping drag must be applied. The black bass also has a much greater ability to bite through leader than a typical jack, due to their significantly larger mouth and teeth. With this in mind, 30lb braid was chosen and a 50lb leader to match. FG knots were the go and saved a lot of re-tying when the inevitable brickings did occur. Running 30lb braid and 50lb leader over

a rod rated to 22lb is usually something I would never recommend, at least from a sales point of view! However, with careful consideration to not high stick the rod, it actually performed beautifully. The power I was able to put on a fish was rarely responsible for any losses.

The power of the 10-22lb Nordic Stage Cheater (to date, my go to PNG rod) was in fact so pleasing it led me to downsize further and give the Nordic Stage Scout (6-14lb) a crack on the bass as well. After catching several mangrove jacks (also prolific in the rivers), I was finally rewarded with hard strike typical of a black. After a short but brutal battle, the first black bass ever caught on a Nordic Stage Scout surfaced and my satisfaction was soaring. To be fair, it was touch and go and I returned to my heavier set up soon after, due to an absolute smoking on the next cast. This being said, on our most recent trip to PNG, Henry Do exceeded all light tackle expectations by boating the fish of the trip, a 36.5lb spot tail bass on the Nordic Stage Cheater CHS672M, a 6-14lb rod! This is just about unheard of on light tackle, but I would probably not recommend this approach for everyone.

A lot of planning goes into each trip and a much of it had to do with the timing. Utilising the expert advice from Riccard the dates were set to coincide with the full moon. This not only resulted in bigger tide movements and more run in the water (which was a definite benefit) but one more very important factor. In the rivers of West New Britain a monthly event occurs which stirs the black bass, and many other predatory species into an uproar. This is the white bait run. Ideally trips should be planned to coincide with the lead up to this event. The logic is simple... If a trip can be planned as close to the white bait run as possible then the black bass will be fiery and aggressive. This timing means it has been the longest possible time since these fish have gorged and they are waiting, hungry and eager. The flip side to this however, is that if a trip is poorly timed and the white bait have already commenced their run, the fish can overfed and sluggish. It is a tough gambit with the white bait not being perfectly predictable and sometimes not arriving at certain rivers at all. Needless to say local knowledge is the key to success in these predications and Riccard served



as an invaluable resource in this regard.

While Riccard served an important role in the organisation of the trips, our local guides have always been pivotal to the success on a day to day basis. These guys live and breathe black bass fishing, know the rivers, the locals and conditions like the back of their hand. The rivers present themselves with an overwhelming abundance of snags, ledges and banks to fish. An inexperienced angler could waste a lot of time casting at aesthetically pleasing structure for no result. With this in mind, I cannot recommend enough to listen to the guides! Often we would bypass seemingly awesome terrain in favour of something quite mundane, only to hook up first cast. With an innate understanding of feeding patterns and local bait, the guides were also excellent commentators when making lure selections. As weird as some suggestions sound, once again heed their advice!

The Fish:

Black bass (*Lutjanus goldiei*) look and act much like their close cousin the mangrove jack. In fact, the systems black bass inhabit are liberally populated with

jacks as well. You know you are a spoiled angler when 'it's just another jack' becomes a catch phrase to the trip. One key difference is unlike jacks, bass do not appear to leave the rivers to inhabit the reef once they mature, remaining among the snags of the lower and middle reaches. While estuary jacks over 60cm are uncommon (unless land locked), black bass regularly grow far in excess of this and can weigh up to 40lb. James Cook University are currently doing studies on the black bass movements around Baia and the results should be very interesting. Another stand out difference is the weight ratio. On average, black bass far outweigh an equally long mangrove jack. For example: Two fish were weighed on a recent trip, both 60cm and both healthy. The mangrove jack was a respectable 7.5lb while the black bass was a chunky 11lb. This emphasises the need for tiptop gear as extracting a jack, let alone a huge black bass from tight structure can prove tricky.

Not much is known about the spot tail bass (*Lutjanus fuscescens*), probably due to their limited geography and unfair second placing next to the mighty black.



Pouring rain can't dampen Henry's joy at catching a monster spot tail!

They seem to inhabit the same sort of snaggy country (although push much further upstream) as the blacks but also seem far more inclined to school up. If you cast or troll up a spot tail, it is more than worthwhile peppering the area with some more casts. One

fact that did seem evident however, was that schooling fish seemed to be dominated by the smaller specimens. A few larger fish are alleged to hang in with the schools, but the larger spot tail bass we have caught were solitary and hugging the snags much like black bass.



Do not let the small size of spot tail bass in some rivers deceive you. Spot tail bass (as inferred earlier by Henry's epic capture) grow to huge sizes. The more estuarine rivers do seem to hold as many of these brutes but there are two distinctly different types of rivers in New Britain. As well as the typical estuarine, mangrove lined rivers one would expect, there are also some where the volume of fresh water pushing out is so strong that it is literally fresh to the sea. These rivers have become my favourite because in

the dry season they provide crystal clear hunting grounds where every strike is visual. It is the spot tails that dominate these clear rivers and it is actually quite easy to forget about the black bass while targeting them!

Spot tail bass were one of the main reasons (and have continued to be) that we opted for a New Britain black bass experience. The mainland lodges, despite offering some amazing black bass fishing (with the bonus of barramundi, saratoga etc.) do not include spot tails in their repertoire.

Lures:

Lures are obviously a very important consideration when chasing black bass and spotties alike. Like rods and reels, lure choices are often heavily reliant on confidence, personal preference and budget. First and foremost hook upgrades are essential. Almost no standard treble

is up the scratch when it comes to black bass. Any time invested into upgrading hooks is well and truly worth it. There is quite possibly no more disappointing a way to lose of a good fish than something as absolutely avoidable as straightening a factory standard hook. All of my lures are upgraded with either Decoy or Shout hooks, which have served me very well.

Another point to be made is that trebles seemed far more effective on black bass than singles. Although some fish inhaled the lure leaving hook choice somewhat irrelevant, many seemed to swipe resulting in facial and gill plate hook ups. A few times, using singles only, this attack style cost me hook ups. Since I have committed to using predominantly trebles, an increase in hook ups has been very noticeable. Needless to say split rings go through the same upgrade treatment.

The lures themselves also require some serious consideration and any that are not wired all the way through, or feature an in built in metal plate are probably worth a second thought. At least two very large bass have been lost to me due to relatively high end lures just not

being up to scratch. Common failures I witnessed over the course of my trips include smashed bibs, rings being pulled right out of the lure and lures simply being crushed by the bite pressure of the fish.

Hands down the most durable and effective lure for me over the course of the trips was the FCL Labo D1-B. This lure is a lot smaller than what many consider a 'typical' black bass lure but the lack of size certainly did not result in a lack of fish. Best resembling a mullet or possibly an archer fish (also prolific in the local systems), most of my fish, including my biggest have been a result of this lure. This range of lures in general is tough, wired through and for a high end quality of lure, very affordable.

A range of surface walkers were also the absolute go to for spot tails and with the exception of maybe 2 or 3 fish, all spot tails (certainly the largest ones) were caught on surface. Poppers certainly work, but the ability to slow walk floating stick baits over the abundant lay downs proved irresistible for the spots.

Hairy Moments:

Despite my lighter than average gear being surprisingly suitable in PNG, this by no means suggests there were not hairy moments. As previously stated, black bass love structure and it is the first place they retreat to once hooked. This is really important when considering braid and leader brands as supple should probably be traded in for something relatively abrasion resistant. Two of my better fish have given me heart in mouth moments by making it back into the snags where a game of tug and war ensued. Only a combination of abrasion resistant leader, and sheer luck in the snags, which being palm fronds, are seemingly more forgiving than trees or rocks, saw these battles go my way.

Henry's 36.5lb was another perfect example of luck with the fish making a hasty rush for a fallen pandanus palm. The smooth surface of this tree gave him the opportunity to fight it back out and secure this unlikely victory. Once again it was not the power of my gear that had the potential to

let me down. Please do not for one minute think this article suggests that 20lb is all you need for a PNG black bass trip. My largest fish was less than 25lb and it was a close call. Black bass allegedly grow to over 40lb and that would be a whole different battle!

Summary:

What was planned to be a once in a lifetime trip has somehow made its way onto the 'must do again at the soonest possible convenience' list. With two trips in the bag we have already scheduled trips for 2016 and 2017, including some exploratory missions to rivers that have quite literally never seen modern angling.

With all sincerity, if you have a love for snag bashing, brutal strikes, visual excitement and exotic fantasy-like destinations, then a trip to New Britain PNG needs to be penned onto your fishing bucket list.



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FOKEETO Whippy

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Jigging Lineup



Casting lineup

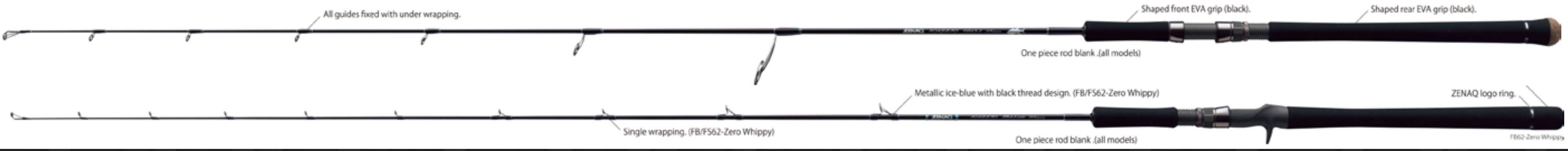
- Falcon G 120g and 160g
- Falcon Fat 90g and 110g
- Diving Tuna 90g
- Falcon F Abalone Custom 80g
- Falcon sinking 120 45g



- Long Slider 210g
- Rear Light Slide/Flutter 220g
- Falcon Z Remain Darting/Flutter 200g

More great
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Zenaq Rods and Sea Falcon lures are available in Australia from Fish Head

DESERT ISLAND

DELIGHTS

Western Australia's Montebello Islands are one of the nation's marine treasures. Situated off the Pilbara coast from Karratha and Dampier, the barren archipelago is the location of Australia's earliest known ship wreck in 1622. The network of 174 small islands were once a site for British atom bomb tests in the 1950's, and the region is now a hub for Australia's natural gas industry.

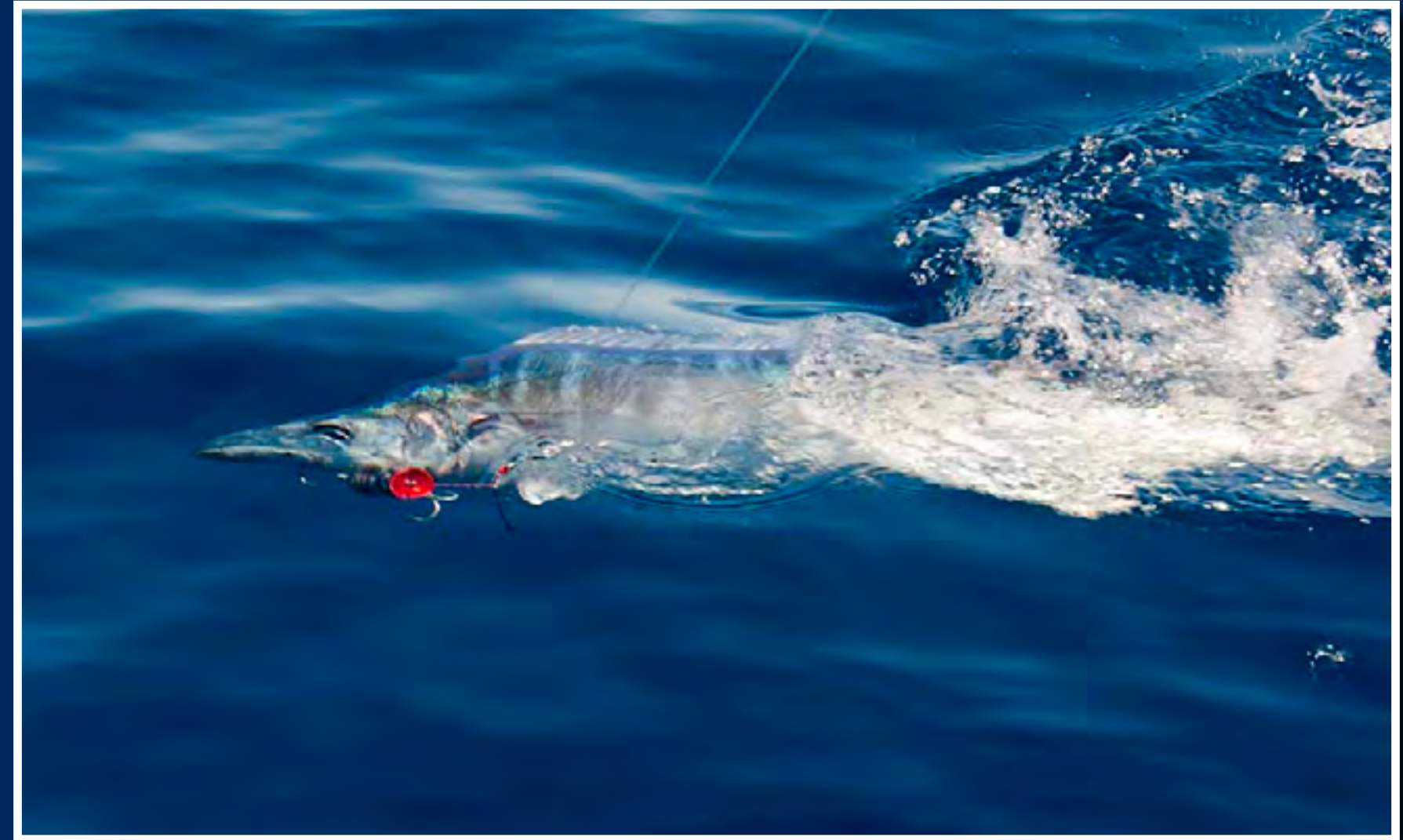
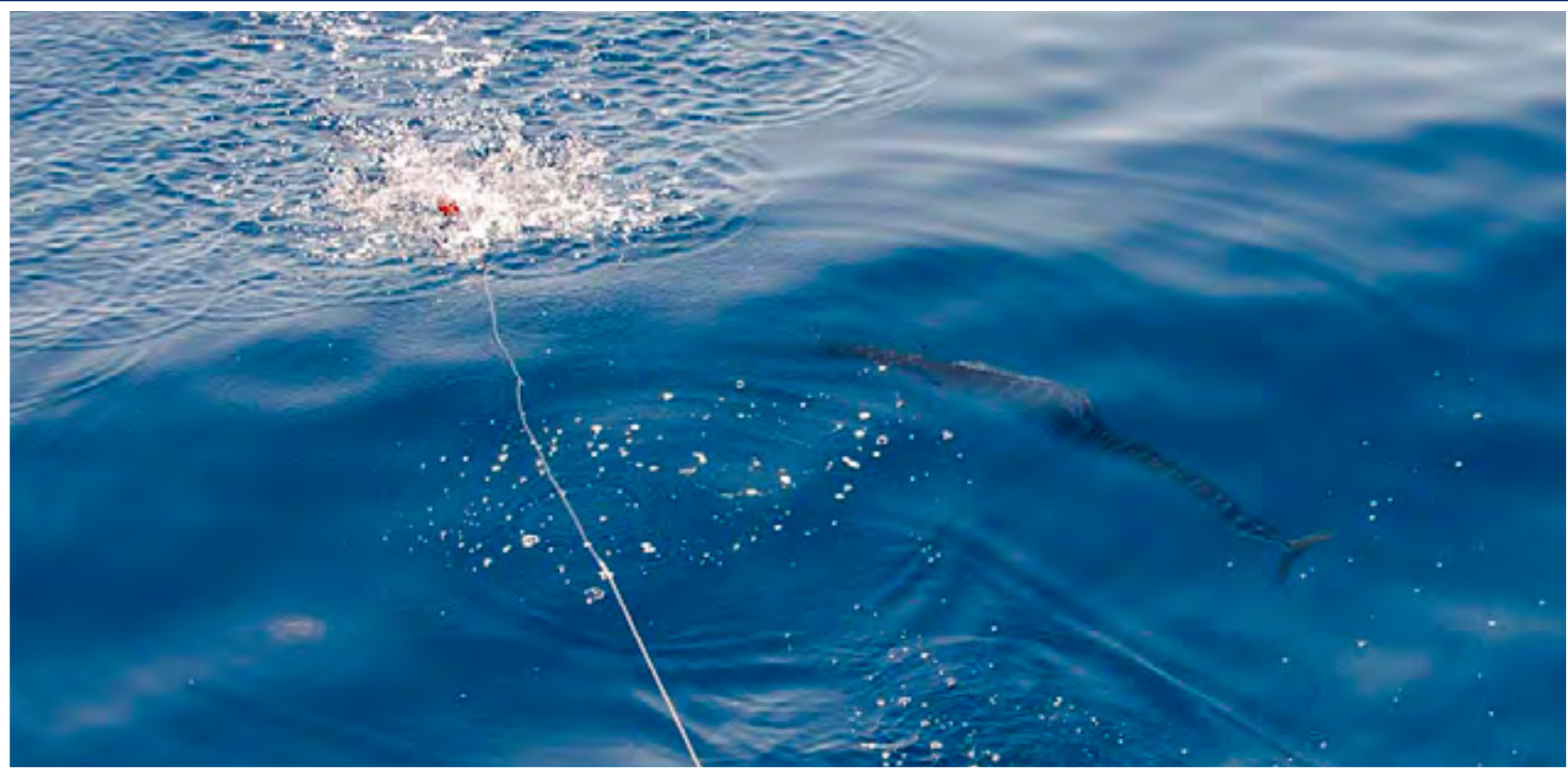
Now the Marine Park teems with aquatic life. The fishing is varied, from casting small lures under limestone overhangs, to GT popping, reef fishing and bluewater trolling for billfish.

A trip with friends on Blue Lightning Charters was a not-to-be-missed opportunity to explore the area, catch some cool fish and take in the amazing landscapes!





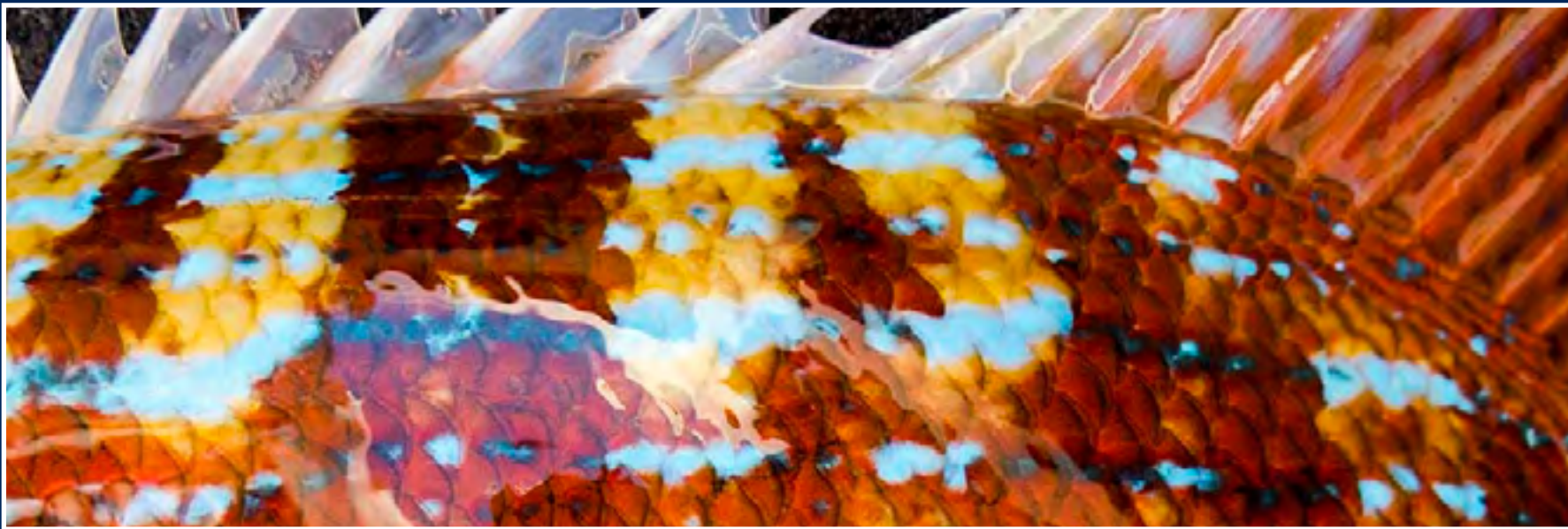
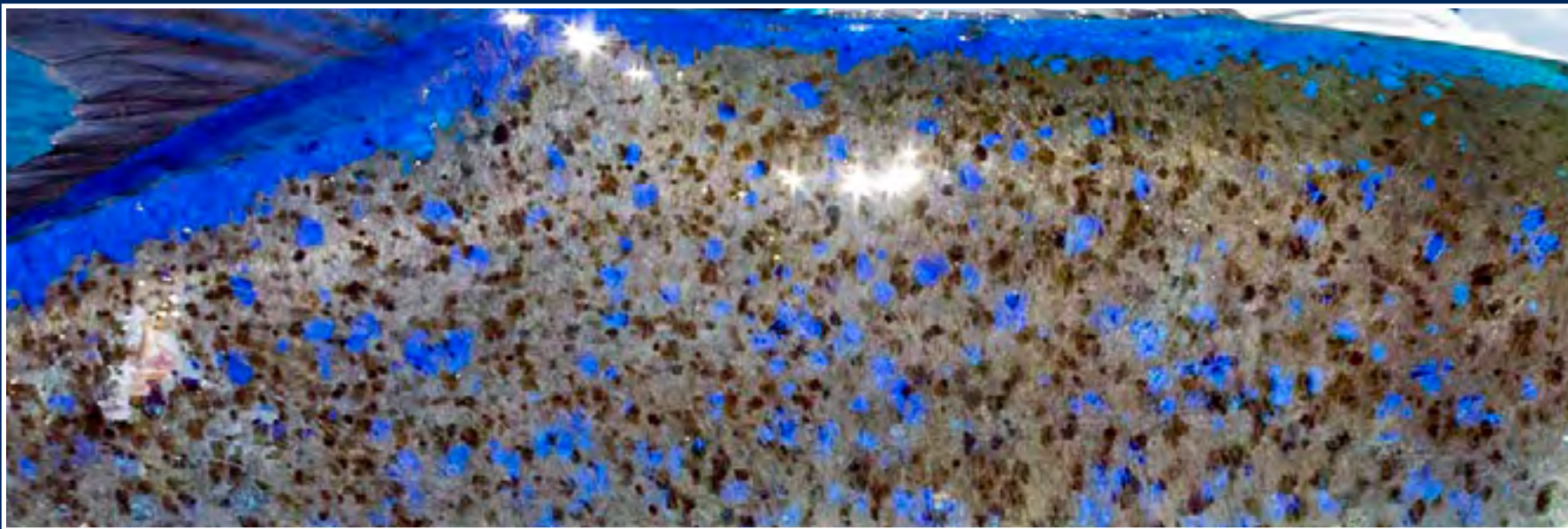
Sailfish Lazing on the surface,
flying fish and sea snakes: just
another day in the northwest



I was keen for some pictures of wahoo schooling around the boat, so I asked Chad the skipper to tease some up while I got the camera ready. Unfortunately the fish didn't understand 'wait till I'm ready', but I still managed a couple of frames as it tried to chop the popper in half boatside.



Just a few of the tasty treats on offer.



Casting lures at the myriad of overhanging ledges around the Montebello Islands can easily occupy your days, as well as empty your tacklebox to rampaging jacks, cod, emperors and trevallies.



Shallow water brawlers





Off Shore Casting Rod



FOKEETO  Trevally

ZENAQ

EST. 1960



Zenaq Trevally Lineup

Fokeeto Trevally 80-5 Duro Length 8'0, Best lure match 90-140g Max 170g
Line PE5-8, Avg Rod Weight 390g

Fokeeto Trevally 83-5 Length 8'3, Best lure match 90-130g Max 170g
Line PE5-8, Avg Rod Weight 440g

Fokeeto Trevally 83-7 Length 8'3, Best lure match 100-150g, Max 180g
Line PE6-8, Avg Rod Weight 440g

Fokeeto Trevally 76-7 Length 7'6, Best lure match 100-150g, Max 180g
Line PE6-8, Avg Rod Weight 420g

Fokeeto Trevally 80-10 Length 8'0, Best lure match 120-200g, Max 230g,
Line PE8-10, Avg Rod Weight 425g



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20 Parma Court

Mount Nathan

QLD 4211 Australia