



Neil Dunstan:

Ebb & Flow...

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Up here in North Queensland, one of the mainstays of our fishing year are the various types of mackerel that school up around here each year from about August until after Xmas.

For the last few years they have either only arrived very late in the season or not at all, which is quite unusual, but since the abolition of ring netting of mackerel some years ago, they have slowly been increasing in numbers. I think that mackerel netting is very damaging and as they are a schooling fish, sometimes the entire school of breeding fish are taken with serious consequences.

I saw a professional fisherman using a 600 metre net set in a bay, catch over two tonnes of grey mackerel in one night. These mackerel are much less plentiful than other mackerels and they had so many that a lot of them went rotten before they could clear the net and process them - what a sickening waste.

This year we have had some good schools of mackerel turn up and we have done okay for a change. Usually the school mackerel or “doggie mackerel” come in close to shore when the northerly winds bring the schools of bait into the coast, where they often hole up in the shallow bays when they can’t go any further. The normal spots for this to happen were not firing so we went looking around, as we knew that some of

the old timers were onto them. We eventually found them in a secluded bay where we had not fished for them before. However, they may have been coming here all the time, but we just fished the spots we knew. This bay was typical of the spots where they are found being only about 10 metres deep with a sandy bottom and the bait just school up in giant balls bringing all the predators with them.

I called my mate John Turnbull (J.T.) and asked him if he would like to go out and see if we could catch a few and his response was, “Is the Pope a Catholic?” which I guessed was a ‘yes’ so we arranged to meet at my place next morning at 6.00 am. The best time to catch macks is just after daylight.

Next day we launched my Quintrex 4.5 metre Dory at the Hay Point boat ramp and took off for the area where we reckoned they would be. This involved quite a few miles of travel to get around the Hay Point and Dalrymple Bay coal terminals, where we have been banned from fishing, as the Government thinks that we may blow the joint up or something.

When we arrived, there were no other boats around, so we set about trying to find the fish and here is the trick to finding these bait schools and their fellow travellers - the mackerel.

Most fishermen know that if they want to find the bait schools then they



The Mackerel . . . Are Back Again



*Neil's mate John Turnbull, barely recovered from serious cancer treatment, is as game as Ned Kelly; no way was he going to miss the fishing trip in the Quinnie with Neil.
(Goodonya, JT - great to see you up and about and giving 'em plenty!.*



Above: These are the two lures the blokes swear by up in central to Far North Queensland. The 'Qantas' colours have been a well known, preferred choice of many pelagics for a long time in various lure types. However, the success they've been having with the 'sickly green' RMG Scorpion is interesting. **Below:** This could rightly be described as the 'original tackle rig' for getting lures down deeper, but whilst it has its roots in polynesian fishing hundreds of years ago - hey, it's still one of the fundamental arrangements that everybody should have in their bag 'o tricks !



watch out for flocks of birds circling around in the sky waiting for the predators to drive them up to the surface. However, we have found that the flocks of terns and other birds are not always there even when the bait schools are. The trick to finding them is to find the cormorants sitting on the surface. These birds are diving birds so when they locate the bait they land on the water and then dive down to pick them off, so you have to find these little black dots sitting on the surface. Sometimes there may only be one bird but if he is diving, then he is onto the bait schools.

We began circling around and soon spotted some shags on the surface and went over near them, being careful not to go too close and scaring them away, when all of a sudden, the water column was filled with schools of bait from the bottom right up to within a couple of metres from the surface.

There were a few big echoes, but they weren't that obvious, so we decided to just skirt the bait schools and see what was around.

The normal method that the old time experts around here use, is to run out a couple of chrome spoons on a 100 pound handline which has about thirty feet of wire trace, then a series of barrel sinkers above a swivel to keep the lure down. This whole lot is then tied to a bicycle tube attached to a wooden pole across the foredeck of the boat, one for each side, then they tear around at more than ten knots to keep the spoon spinning madly.

When they get a strike, they don't bother to slow down. They just skull drag the fish to the boat and keep on fishing. This method works quite well, but it is a



Seen by many fishos as a pest, the ribbon fish (wolf herring) is one of Neil's favourite baits - especially for king salmon.

bit too much like meat fishing for me, although I sometimes use the spoons when I can't get them to bite on anything else.

One of the things that annoys me using spoons is that they twist the line like crazy as they rely on the high speed and the fast spinning to catch fish. I came up with a different rig that uses a special keel system to eliminate the line twist and does away with the heaps of swivels and barrel sinkers used. A picture of the device is included and I believe that they are easily available, I got to know about them when I used to fish with the Mackay Game Fishing Club.

The method I use to catch mackerel is to troll deep diving, hard bodied lures around the edges of the bait schools. As we came up to the shags sitting on the surface, I noticed that they were catching large herring and bringing them to the surface to swallow, so we decided to use our most successful lures which we have used on just about anything that takes a lure.

On one line, we pulled an RMG Scorpion 150 dd in the bright green Elton John colours (which we call the green death) and on the other I attached a Classic

190 plus ten in the Qantas colours. It is interesting that the RMG letters are the initials of the original designer of the Scorpion, Rob Gard who sold the business to Halco some years ago.

He was then required to not operate in competition with Halco for a certain period and when that period was over, he produced a new range of lures called the Classic. I find that the Scorpion out fishes almost every other lure we have tried providing we use the sickly green colour, but when it comes to spanish mackerel, the Classic is unbeatable.

For some time, we cruised slowly around the bait schools at between three and four knots and had a ball catching mostly school mackerel, but we also got a couple of spotted mackerel of quite a large size. The most fun we had though, was when we got double hook ups on some of the other predators hanging around the bait. We got quite a few good sized GTs and some fair mackerel tuna along with some wolf herring.

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cancer treatment and not used to rods, he was pretty bugged when we finally boated the both of them.

After a couple of hours we had a full compliment of doggies plus some nice spotted macks along with a number of wolf herring which I always keep for bait as they are terrific bait when creek fishing. As a matter of fact, it is not well known but a strip of wolf herring (ribbon fish) is just about the best bait for catching king salmon there is, even better than live prawns.

There have also been a number of monster spanish mackerel caught around the same bait schools but we never saw any. However, the fun we had on mackerel tuna, GTs and golden trevally was plenty for us.

We then decided that as it was such a beautiful day with flat calm seas, we would go and investigate a few spots in that area that we knew about. Besides, the crowds had arrived with boats roaring straight through the middle of the birds and scaring them away.

As the bait schools move around a lot you need the birds to keep tabs on the bait and they soon get scattered by such idiots.

We checked out quite a few spots that I had on my GPS which I had been given over a period and decided to give them a bit more time at a later date. Arriving back at the ramp just after lunch time, we were off home and cleaned up in no time with a good haul of good eating fish for the freezer, stopping at the store for a hot pie, (delicious), and we had used the princely total of four litres in the Parson 25 hp 4-stroke.

You wouldn't be dead for quids.

TBM