



Neil Dunstan To Catch A Mackerel

One of the most sought after fish in our area of North Queensland are the four or five species of mackerel. The species caught locally are mostly spanish or broad barred mackerel, grey mackerel, Queensland or “doggie” mackerel, and spotted mackerel.

There is often confusion in identifying school mackerel and spotted mackerel as they are both spotted. The school mackerel has several rows of indefinite grey blotches whilst the spotted mackerel has four rows of black spots. When the dorsal fin is extended it is black with a section of clear membrane near the rear, whilst the spotted mackerel has a bluish dorsal fin.

Spanish Mackerel

The Spanish or broad barred mackerel usually arrives in our area around June and is around up till Christmas time, however they are most prevalent between July and October. The main reason that they appear in any particular place at any particular time is the arrival of the schools



of bait fish such as herring, sardines, hardheads, white bait and pilchards, which they feed on. This is the case for all the various mackerel species and also a lot of other pelagics such as queenfish and trevally. This year, the bait has yet to arrive in numbers in July, and as a consequence the mackerel are still very scarce.

We often catch large spanish mackerel all year round in very specific places where usually lone specimens will hang around all year, we call these fish “homers” as they stay at home all year.

There are a number of ways we catch spanish but due to our lethargy, trolling is the preferred method. Using three lures ie two

Halco RMG Scorpions, one a deep diver to five metres and the other to two and a half metres. We prefer the lime green colour, but gold, purple or pilchard colour work well. These are run out with a Halco Laserpro in Qantas colours and the speed is kept at about four knots.

Spanish are usually found where a good current flow runs around a point or headland or where the baitfish are herded up against a rocky shoreline with deep water right up to edge. They are also found out on the Barrier Reef along the deep drop offs and where the current runs around a point sticking out. The other places where they can be found is over patches of reef, rocks or pinnacles

and areas where there is a gravel or shale bottom, even if the bottom is a hundred feet below they still patrol the top ten feet or so of the water column as this is where the bait schools often ball up.

We have found that they are regularly caught in the same places so that once an area they frequent is found they can be caught there on a regular basis. The old fashioned way to catch them also works well and that is with spoons. Most of the old timers around our way use four inch or six inch Halco spoons or Macca spoons mounted on handlines with about thirty feet of single strand wire trace preceded by the right number of barrel sinkers to keep the lures down around at least ten feet.

The trolling speed is up to ten knots and as the spoons work by spinning madly, they must have plenty of swivels to stop line twist. I use a device called a keel, which is a cast lead triangular keel through which a length of swivel chain is moulded. This gives sufficient weight to keep it down, and the swivel chain stops line twist.

The other trolling method which is very popular is trolling rigged ribbon fish or wolf herring. These can be caught easily by trolling a small spoon or better still if you have still got any, the famous Wonder Wobbler.

These are dynamite on ribbon fish and if trolled in the same area that the mackerel are hunting they are usually travelling together. The ribbon fish are rigged with up to ten hooks along the underside of the bait and a large ball sinker tied under the chin to stop spinning. Rigging ribbons is a bit of an art but once perfected, it is probably the best method of catching the really big Spanish mackerel.

The second most popular method for Spanish is the floating bait. Whenever we stop to do a bit of bottom fishing, we always run out a floating bait.

This can be a pilchard or a live bait fish caught on the spot or a dead sennit or mullet, it doesn't seem to matter as long as it is presented well. Our rig is a ten foot long rod mounted on the centre rod holder on the bait preparation board to keep it up out of the way from all the other activity going on. This line has a three way swivel tied to it with a 12/0 hook threaded on the horizontal part of the swivel using a large split ring.

The purpose of this is to hook the piece of scrap styrene foam onto the line so that when the fish strikes it just rips out and does not interfere with the fight. I have tried all sorts of ways to attach the float to the line and this is the easiest and quickest.

To the other end of the swivel is attached at least three metres of heavy mono trace and then a metre of stranded steel trace, a swivel and three ganged 7/0's. The pilchard or live bait is then threaded on with the front hook through the pilchard's eye and the lot is fed out about thirty metres behind the boat. The fish will usually hook itself and the first thing you will know is

the reel screaming as the fish makes its initial hundred metre dash for freedom. We have used this method for years and it has discovered many hot spots that we didn't know existed but now we go back to these areas and they invariably produce.

Another method of catching mackerel is what we call "slackline fishing". Often when using floaters to try for mackerel they will come up with nothing but the mackerel can often be seen following the bottom baits up to the boat when retrieving your lines.

This happens when the fish are holding at mid-water and they will not take bottom baits or floaters. This method is pretty simple really and involves attaching a couple of ganged hooks to the end of the line with no weight or steel trace. A heavy mono trace is attached and a pilchard threaded onto the hooks.

A tip here is that if the pilchard is damaged in any way, the fish will not touch it. They are sight feeders and have terrific eyesight, so if the guts is hanging out or the bait broken they will ignore it; sometimes you can watch them swim right up to the bait then turn away.

The line is let down into the current till you reckon it is in the area that they are holding and suddenly you

will start catching them.

Whilst reading through what I had written and thinking about the rest of the article I thought to myself that the methods I have discussed so far really apply to most of the various mackerels and if I had to discuss catching most of the others the methods would be essentially the same except for the grey mackerel.

The grey mackerel or broad barred mackerel, is different from the school or spotted mackerel in that it is a very deep bodied fish in comparison and has a short stumpy head and wide vertical bands along its body. They usually travel in dense schools and were often caught in large numbers by net fishermen even though they are the least populous of the small mackerels. Now that ring netting has been banned for mackerel the greys have a better chance of surviving.

We have found that the best method to catch them is to troll baits such as pilchards or garfish using a plastic planing device. This is attached to the line about thirty feet in front of the bait and adjusted by moving the attachment point so that at a slow trolling speed the bait travels along, well down in the water column. They don't seem to like the bait moving too fast and it must be down near the bottom, but when you have got it right

they are suckers for this method and you can max out very quickly.

The other mackerel that is caught in our area is the shark mackerel. These fish are only found in the super clean waters of the outer Barrier Reef and are almost never taken close to shore. However if you are lucky enough to get out in the area sixty or seventy n. miles offshore then the method the pros use is pretty simple. A heavy handline has a three metre steel trace attached and on the end is a six/o stainless hook. Over the top of this is a small yellow rubber squid and the lure is trolled at around six knots using a sweeping hand motion to encourage the fish. These fish usually come into the reef areas to spawn and are caught in their hundreds when found by the pros but luckily they only stay together in large close groups for a couple of weeks so most escape back out to the waters outside the reef till next spawning season.

Well that is about the lot for my tips on catching the various mackerels but if you use some of these methods I am sure you will start to get a bit of a handle on them and catch plenty of one of the best looking, best fighting and best eating fish in the ocean.

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