

Bottom Bashin' Techniques!

Heading out for a day's bottom bouncing with a few mates is probably the most popular form of fishing undertaken by most of Australia's boating community.

The search for that ever elusive 20lb snapper or red emperor has been the driving force behind many "bottom bashing" trips. However, for most fishermen the reality of the day's fishing often doesn't coincide with the day's expectations. So this month we're going to look at a few of the ways to add a bit more success to your next reef fishing trip. The following article looks at some of the more subtle (and not so subtle) ways F&B's favourite fishing scribe has found to improve the quality of your catch throughout the course of a day's fishing.

Best Baits Before worrying about where to anchor the boat, how to read the sounder or what hooks to use, the bait you select for the day should be of major interest. Everyone knows that fresh baits are obviously best. However, live baits will always out fish any form of dead bait. Some of the best bottom bouncing the author has ever done has involved using live baits

Matthew Falt with a gnarled old knobby taken east of Fraser Island in 'Red Ink'. We'll let you decide who is the rougher looking customer!!

We've all seen the magic pictures . . the mouth watering captures that make you wonder what the hell it is that 'they' are doing, and 'we' are not ! In this special report we bludgeoned out of Damon (after threatening to cut off his propeller allowance on the Horizon/Honda combo!!) our resident young Fishing editor Damon Olsen, shares some of the secrets concerning the latest techniques for catching big table fish offshore.

in the remote reefs to the north of Fraser Island.

The best forms of live baits are often whatever can be jigged up at or near your chosen fishing location. Whatever type of baitfish is in the local reef system will no doubt be appealing to any attendant predatory fish, otherwise they would not be there. Baitfish such as yakkas and slimy mackerel are fairly

common all over the country, and are very hard to beat for using as livebaits-whether it be for billfish or coral trout. But really, any small (and legal) fish that can be obtained will be appealing to the larger target species.

Dead baits undoubtedly account for a vast majority of the bottom fish caught in Australia, and much success can still be had with these types of baits. Usually the best forms of dead baits are fresh pilchards (either freshly caught or in IQF form), or strips of fish flesh. Strip baits cut from fish like hussars and whiptails are particularly effective in northern areas, where the red colour on the skin of the bait seems to have some appeal to trout and emperor. Likewise, the tuna found in southern areas definitely draw interest from snapper and other species when cut into strip baits.

Whatever bait is chosen for the day, it should be made to look as natural as possible. This means that dead baits should be attached so as they do not spin in the current, rather so they drift around or waft down in the current. Just hold the bait over the side in the current and see how it looks.

Presentation is important in all fishing, and bottom fishing is no different. An attractively presented bait will catch far more fish than a 2 week old chunk of tuna spinning in the current.

Terminal Rigging The selection of which rig to use for any particular bottom fishing application depends on the targeted species, the chosen bait





Above: Emily Olsen with her biggest spangled emperor which ate a strip of tuna at the Southern Gutter.

Below: Ben with a very tasty pearl perch which ate a pillie on the paternoster rig.

and the area in which you intend to fish. The different techniques for using these rigs are as important as the successful implementation of the rigs.

The most common rig used in Australia is (unfortunately) the standard dropper or paternoster rig. This rig commonly consists of 100lb trace with a snapper lead attached to a bottom loop and single or gang hooks attached to loop knots equally spaced at about 700mm up from the snapper lead. This rig is commonly used on charter boats for the less experienced anglers where it is easy to rig and does not require as much 'feel' on the anglers behalf. This rig is probably best used in deeper water where the fish are often not as fussy as their shallow water counterparts. The rig is often also solely used in deeper water because it allows a large sinker to be attached and this gives the angler a better ability to know where their bait is relative to the bottom.

While the paternoster rig is very successful in the correct application, the author feels that it is far too widely used as a common bottom fishing rig. The paternoster rig does not allow the bait to be presented as well as with many other rigs. This in turn means that the paternoster rig is often used for catching larger numbers of smaller fish (this is not to say that large fish will not be caught with this rig, as they often are). It is quite common that anglers using the paternoster rig, fishing alongside anglers using better presented rigs, will not catch the quality fish that a better presented rig



and bait will account for.

The rig most commonly used by the author in nearly all depths of water consists of a ball sinker running on about a 2 metre length of 80lb trace (which is tied to the braided mainline at one end), then connected to a swivel with about another 100 mm of trace connected to a pair of 8/0 Gamakatsu octopus hooks. The bottom hook is tied to the trace and the top hook is snooded to the mainline to allow it to slide up and down in accordance with bait size. Rather than waste time with rigging demonstrations, it should be pointed out that the snood knot can be seen in Geoff Wilson's excellent book of knots. This rig allows the use of all forms of live and dead bait and allows the sinker size to be changed by cutting and tying the knot above the swivel. Baits such as pilchards, strips of tuna or hussar or live baits can all be attached to the hooks so as to be presented as close to natural as possible.

The key to a well presented bait with the above rig is to attach the bait with the effective tow point at the front of the bait. The front, snooded, hook should be put through the head of the pilchard so that the front hook is in effect towing the bait, and the trailing hook is simply put into the rear section of the bait, but with no pressure from the mainline to the rear hook. This may sound a bit tricky, but it is dead easy, just have a play around with the rig until the baits look some way natural, and this really just means that they don't spin in the current.

With a strip of tuna for example, if the top hook is attached to the front of the strip of bait, the bait will sit in the current and sort of waft or flap from side to side. This looks quite appealing to the fish and is sure to catch more quality fish than a spinning chunk of tuna.

Live baits can be attached to the snood rig by passing the front hook crossways in front of the eyes and through the nose of the baitfish. The hook should not be passed through the head of the baitfish and out the bottom jaw of the baitfish as this will quickly kill the fish. The second trailing hook can really be put anywhere in the rear section of the fish, but passing it through behind the anal fin will usually give good results.

The two aforementioned rigs are only some of the possible rigs which

can be used for bottom bashing. These rigs are the most effective in most situations, and will give first time bottom fishers a good starting point to success.

Angling Techniques

There are a few important things to

Below: The author holding 24kgs of spanish mackerel taken on a floating live bait in August on the Breaksea Spit. Floating baits will often account for quality pelagics during the course of a day's bottom fishing. Mackerel this big demand near perfect terminal tackle and setups.



consider when letting your line out the back of the boat, and in particular there are some important techniques which will put your bait in the strike zone for longer.

A very effective approach commonly used for targeting bottom species is to fish with two different rods which target different species. One rod is set up with a floatline and the other with a lead line. One angler fishing with these two rods can cover the whole water column and have a far greater chance of catching good fish.

The floatline is actually just something like a spin rod set up with (in the author's case) the snood hook rig and a very light sinker for the conditions. The idea with this rig is to cast it out from the boat as far as possible and let the bait very slowly sink or 'waft' down the water column. This is the technique which will most often account for the larger specimens of a species. The larger fish have a tendency to feed up quite a distance from the bottom in most situations. It is not uncommon to be fishing in 80m of water for snapper and encounter the larger specimens 30-40 metres from the bottom. Whether fishing at anchor or drifting the floatline should be the first line to be put out, and is usually the line you can set and forget. It is important to remember to use a small ball sinker (often size 2-4), but one which will be big enough to get slowly down to where the fish might be feeding. The floatline technique is just as applicable to fishing for coral trout in 10 m of water on the Barrier Reef as it is when fishing for knobblies in 100 m off Long Reef in Sydney. The major difference concerns the depth of water. As a general rule, the deeper the water, the more likely you are to need a berley trail for the floating bait to work in.

The leadline is the rig which is actually fished with by the angler. This rig is very simply the snood hook rig with a larger ball sinker intended for fishing closer to the bottom. The sinker size depends on depth and current and can range from a single #6 ball for fishing 30 metres to a pair of #10 balls for fishing 100 metres plus on a windy day (not my idea of fun, by the way!).

When fishing with the leadline the angler is targeting species dwelling at between 0-6 metres from the bottom. So while your floatline is taking care



Ben and Tim with a double hookup on big snapper in 100m of water to the east of Lady Musgrave. The snapper ate the live baits nearly as soon as they hit the bottom..

of the big knobblies feeding up high, the leadline is being actively fished down deeper to pick up some pearl perch or smaller snapper.

The idea with the leadline is to be able to drop down to the bottom and feel your sinker hit the bottom, then by action of the current your line will drift up from the bottom, the bait should then be let out again so it sinks back towards the bottom. It is often while letting line out and letting the bait sink back to the bottom that the fish will hit. The so called 'bottom fishing' rod actively used by the angler should not be a set and forget scenario like the lighter weighted rig. The angler needs to be constantly letting line out as the bait rises and falls from the bottom. Basically this technique involves fishing in freespool until a bite is felt. If the angler feels that the bait is too far from the boat and no bite has been registered, then it is time to wind in and start the whole process again. Often casting the bait up current of the boat is a good way to start to drop off a bait.

This technique is equally effective for both drift fishing and for fishing at anchor. When drifting, the movement of the boat will act in the same way as current on an anchored boat. The old saying amongst bottom fishermen of 'No Run, No Fun' probably has something to do with the fact that this technique does not work at anchor if there is no current.

Clearly both of these techniques are just a variation on the same theme, but used together they will account for a lot of good fish. Some days the bigger

fish are feeding on the bottom and some days they are up high. By using both these techniques the angler can find the quality fish on any given day and in any conditions.

Tackle

It is very difficult to recommend various types of tackle when we are talking about such a large range of fishing applications and techniques. However, the tackle used successfully by the author in the past has included:

A spin outfit consisting of a 7-8 foot graphite rod in the 8-10 kg class combined with something like a 6500 Shimano Baitrunner or a Penn 850SS Spinfisher. The Baitrunner feature is extremely useful for floatlining as the angler can set the spool tension in freespool and thus let the bait slowly take line and drift out behind the boat. The Baitrunner also allows the fish to take the bait naturally and swallow it without any resistance from a drag.

For leadlining with the snood hook rig or for using a paternoster rig a heavier overhead outfit is generally appropriate. In areas where large fish are common a rod in the 15-24kg category is usually needed. A rod of 7ft length and a 24 kg rating such as some of Sabre's land based game rods prove ideal. These rods have sensitivity in the tip but have real pulling power in the butt. There are of course several other local rods around that also fit this category, but the best bet is to simply go and have a look in the local tackle store.

An appropriate reel to match a rod such as this could be anything from a

Shimano TLD 20 to the trusty old Diawa Sealine series. Personal experience has shown that the Diawa Sealine 450H is well and truly up to any test.

One consideration with a reel is whether or not to get a lever drag. This really comes down to personal preference, but for leadlining, where the reel is constantly in freespool, a reel with a star drag has often proven best. A star drag reel allows the angler to go from freespool to full drag by usually flipping a switch on the side of the reel. This feature is often easier to use than a lever drag which can take longer to get to full drag. And while you lose that vital second, the fish is all that much closer to the coral.

The choice of line for bottom fishing is possibly as vital to success as any other part of the set up. For spinning reels used on the floatline, standard monofilament in 8-10kg is fine and should never give any problems. But for the overhead rig which is often used in deeper water and is required to be able to feel the bite of a smaller fish, a braided line is nearly the only choice. I will not go on about all the technical points and reasons for using braided line, suffice to say that once tried, there is no going back to standard mono. A braid such as the Australian made Platypus Bionic Braid is excellent for using on any overhead reel in the pursuit of bottom dwellers. A spool of 300 yards of 50lb Bionic braid spooled on a Diawa Sealine 450H coupled with a 24kg Sabre LBG rod will see any angler stop just about any big reef dweller.

As already mentioned, the use of chemically sharpened Gamakatsu 8/0 octopus hooks has proven very successful when used on the snood hook rig. As you have seen in the previous pages from the Gamakatsu catalogue, there is a myriad of different hooks available to the prospective bottom fisherman that all work well, but the Octopus range from Gamakatsu have proven very easy to use in many different forms of fishing.

Summing Up Hopefully this brief description of some successful bottom fishing techniques has been useful, and will enable the average angler to go and catch more fish. Please, however, don't think that this is all you will ever need to know to catch reef fish. There are other very important aspects to

catching fish such as anchoring the boat and how to use your sounder to locate fish. Both these subjects for example are worthy of articles in themselves. Successful boat anchoring has already been covered by F&B in depth (F&B #28).

Producing an in-depth article explaining the technical workings of the modern depth sounder and how it relates to finding fish is a bit out of the depth of this little black duck, but I promise I'll bring pressure to bear on PW to put this needed report together asap.

However, making use of the tips and techniques in this article should certainly go most of the way to helping the beginner or experienced reef fisherman put a few more quality fish into the esky. But just remember, the ability to go and fill a big esky with fish shows nothing about your fishing prowess and certainly won't impress most people back at the boat ramp.

Always take only the fish you need for the immediate future, and check local bag and size limits before fishing on any reef. But most importantly, go out there and have fun.

After all - that's why we do it.

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