



For a Victorian snapper fisherman, there was no little irony in Mick Witt driving thousands of clicks to Sarina, to catch . . . a very nice snapper!

White-Out Off Sarina, FNQ

Special report by Neil Dunstan

Last year my nephew who lives in Melbourne, decided to do a 'trip of a lifetime' and tow a tinnie up to Cape York and through to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

He bought a thirteen foot tinnie and hooked it up to his Landcruiser, which he had set up for camping, and because the mate who was going to go with him pulled out at the last minute, he decided to go on his own. He did the trip without catching much in the way of fish, but had a pretty good time and saw lots of places he had only read about before.

He managed to partially destroy the boat trailer which he left with a friend in Mount Isa who was to repair it and sell the complete rig locally. The first I knew about his adventure was when he lobbed on my doorstep on the way back to Melbourne. I invited him to stay for a while and get a bit of a rest and clean up

everything before finishing the trip.

He spent a couple of days camping in the granny flat at our house and as the weather was beginning to settle down after some pretty windy days, I suggested that we take my 4.5 metre Quintrex Dory out and have a bit of a look around the local area that he had read about in some of my articles in F&B.

We did a couple of short trips out to some of the closer areas and down to Sunken Reef, about seven miles down the coast with limited success, but he liked the area a lot, so I suggested that instead of dragging a boat all the way to Cape York, that he come up to Sarina Beach next time, stay for a while and I would show him around.

My suggestion was to come around September as the water temperature was starting to rise after the winter but the wet season will still be around two months away. At this

time, the whales are beginning their trip back to Antarctica and the bait schools are arriving with their attendant schools of various mackerel. After a couple more days with us, he took off and headed back to Melbourne, and I didn't hear much more from him.

Around August last year, I got an email from him to say that he would be arriving in mid-September, towing his new boat and he would be staying with us for a while.

He duly arrived after covering the three thousand or so kilometres without any problems, except that it rained the whole way!

When he arrived I said that as it was still the dry season up here the rain would not last long and we would be back to blue skies and sunny days as usual.

Right, the stage was set!

So for the next couple of weeks the rain pelted down, the wind blew

and the rainfall total for September for Mackay was the highest since records were kept, going back to the 1890's.

This bloke is a real harbinger of rotten weather, however the day he arrived, there was a small break for the next few days so we hurriedly prepared the boat for a trip out to the local islands where we would camp on an island for two nights or so, before the forecast bad weather got here and spoilt everything.

Early next morning, we took off and headed for Knight Island, about twenty nautical miles due east of Sarina Inlet. On the way we stopped over at Elemang Island which is about three miles short of Knight to do a bit of fishing and pull a few lures around the island.

If the mackerel are around, we usually catch them around here, but we only got a couple of half hearted taps on the lures which I reckoned were only small school mackerel so it was back to the bait fishing. We spent most of the rest of the day around this area and managed to get a couple of legal coral trout and the usual mobs of wire netting cod plus plenty of blue bone parrot fish (venus tusk fish).

A short trip over to Knight Island and a couple of hours of trolling with our favourite lures over shallow coral failed to raise any more coral trout which we usually catch in this area. It was then decided to take the boat up onto the beach near our camp site on the western side of the island and unload all our camping gear.

Camp was set up in a semi-permanent camp which my mate and I set up with bush poles and galvanised iron many years ago, but which has since been vandalised to destruction. Luckily, some other keen locals have rebuilt the camp with a great unit which I suspect was put together in the workshops of one of the many coal mines in the area, disassembled and re erected out on the island. It is made of galvanised iron piping set into concrete and covered with aluminium sheeting with a 200 litre plastic drum for water caught off the roof. It's quite a spooey setup.

We made camp by installing our air beds in the shed and cooked tea on the bench complete with stainless steel sink which has been installed,

anchored the boat up for the night and turned in.

As I had obtained some new marks out wide in the deep water to the east of the island we got up at daylight and headed out, in perfect conditions. Our first stop was at Jack Rock where we landed a couple more coral trout while we entered all the new marks into the GPS and headed off into the wild blue yonder.

The spots where we were headed were nine nautical miles east of the last of the Beverly Group of Islands out to sea, and are over forty n. miles (eighty km) from shore in fifty metres of water. These areas are shaly bottom and rock which hardly show up even on a good sounder, but are where the old timers have discovered ideal bottom for large red emperor, nannigai and very large coral trout.

It is very difficult to get in the right position for these spots as there is usually plenty of run and the various marks are only twenty or thirty metres across. If you are not right on the mark when the anchor takes up all you will get are sharks and rubbish such as sand grinders.

We spent some time trying to get in position, but as the anchor winch had a fairly slow rate and no free wheel clutch we tended to miss the spot most times. I have seen us try for an hour to get it right and when it

happens we usually get instant reds on every line at once.

After an hour or so, we got close a couple of times, but only managed to catch some mackerel and other small reefies, when I noticed that the flat calm water was suddenly getting roughed up by a fresh south/easterly. Within ten minutes, it was blowing around twenty five to thirty knots and getting a bit hairy.

As the boat we were in was only 5.2 metres long and was a low sided centre console, it would be very soon getting into waters that it was not meant to be handling, so I ordered "Anchor up - and let's get to hell out of here!"

It took us more than two hours to cover the eight n. miles back to Double Island and into a bit of shelter where we went ashore for a bit of a rest and to dry off.

I have heard people say that a boat is "an all weather boat" and this one was no exception. *All the weather* came into the boat; we were soaked, and had burning eyes from the salt.

The boat, which is a "Monsoon" platey made in Melbourne, did quite a good job in such heavy weather, but as it is basically an open boat with very low sides, we had to trim it carefully to stop it poking its bow under some of the bigger breakers which would have filled it up in



Neil with a really good size 'bluey', one of his favourite table fish and considered by many to be superior eating to many other possibly more popular species.