

Big Mackerel

By Doug Hanning

The time had once again come for another crusade to the north, the fish populations would no doubt be in healthy numbers since we had not been up for a while, just the perfect time for a little harvest.

The long and gruelling drive towing the boat all that way really knocks me around but someone has to do it the boat won't get their self and shore diving is simply not an option up there unless you like diving in soup, give me clear water any day. For that reason we time any run to the north with heavy regard to the tides they are the major influence on visibility on the inshore regions. The other influencing factor tends to be the wind, unfortunately this time around we were on the back of three months of bad weather so the visibility on this trip would never really be great even with the tides in our favour. Not to worry we were just going to have to work a little harder to get the fish.



The visibility may not have been great in relative terms but the weather turned perfect just as we arrived, it was spooky considering it had rarely dropped below 20 knots for the past two months, the locals kept saying to us 'you pulled this one out of your arse'.

The first day would see us running out about 55ks to dive some shallow reefs in 5 – 8 metres which we new would be covered in fish and sure enough this turned out to be the case as the boys got stuck into the parrots and trout like a pack of rabid foxes in a henhouse, bloodied and foaming at the mouth that is apart from PJ whom had already raised the white flag after seeing a couple of sharks, he was swimming around in circles more concerned with looking out for them than actually diving. The sharks actually did prove to be very plentiful on this trip for some strange reason and not only plentiful but more aggressive than on past trips. It did not take long before their constant attentions became a real pain in the arse as first the skinman had a fish torn in two off his rig then later on I also lost a couple of nice fish off my float forcing me to climb up onto the rocks to save the remainders as the sharks circled below.



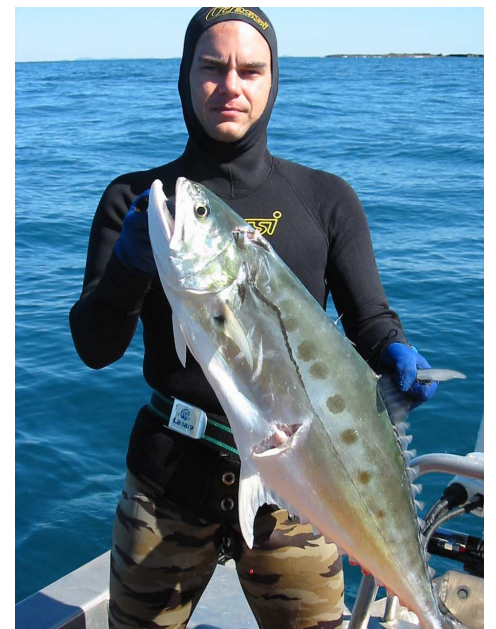
After a long tiring first day we were all packing up in the boat when Daniel Skinner and I decided to try one last set of bommies, the visibility in this area was very poor so this last effort was going to be short. After a few largely blind dives I was about to call it quits when I just spied the back end of a tail beneath, sensing the urgency to move down quickly before I lost sight of whatever it may be I dropped quickly and made some discrete noise which just happened to bring back what I now realised was a Spanish. The shot made from no more than a metre away sent the average sized fish off in a crazed frenzy I followed by free styling



with the chase lasting a long time, I could hear the boys in the boat jeering me on they could very much tell was suffering from fatigue after my 200 plus dives for the day, a long chase was the last thing I needed. Still the 13 kilos of Spanish flesh left a pleasant taste in the mouth and got us all thinking maybe there are some bigger ones around it was something to ponder anyway as the battle wary crew marched back to base camp.



The next day saw us trying a couple of different spots which at first appeared to be fairly lifeless, so our only possible response was to instigate the burley regime and dive in pairs which is the ultimate technique in these waters. The burley brought the fish out almost instantly, a lifeless patch of reef would suddenly have four or five trout feeding only metres from us and by diving in teams we were able to set traps so to speak whereby one diver would leave a speared fish on the bottom the other would time his dive to slay the second or third fish which would almost inevitably appear within moments, curiosity certainly does kill. This efficiency with the



reef fish enabled us to free up some time to look for pelagics just for some more excitement, you see we just don't get to shoot enough pelagics out of Brisbane, I am kidding of course the reality is we just love it.

Brett was the first to find some action, Dan had yelled to him giving him a heads up about some GT's which had flew past him a school of around 50 fish all in excess of 25 kilos an impressive sight no doubt. Dan was not interested in the gear smashing fish but he knew Brett was keen to try out a new reel gun on something that would run. Brett slugged the fish and it went off like a

rocket, Brett applied some tension but was being dragged down to 2 or 3 metres below the surface and could not sustain it so he let the line run towards the end of the spool when the unthinkable happened the knot at the end of the spool pulled and the line went sailing off into the distance. Brett chased it as hard as he could but he was already tired from the dive and subsequent drownings thanks to the strong fish, no he had to watch it all disappear into the murk the funny thing was about 30 minutes later Dan just happened to have a 30 kilo GT fly past him trailing a heap of line, he said he would have shot it if the spear was still attached.

Not much longer after that both Brett and I had moved back up against the rocks to check out a crevasse we both new held jacks from time to time, today however the 4 metre wide crevasse held only one lonely tusky. Brett Quickly put a shaft through him and was having a real battle trying to keep him clear of the snags when two over excited whalers appeared from nowhere trying to get the fish, with both Brett, myself, the tusky and two hostile sharks it was a little too overcrowded in the confined space so both Brett and I moved out of there in a hurry.

Meanwhile my brother Dan had been working out a little deeper where he witnessed something quite remarkable. Finding an undercut ledge in about 12 metres of water he noticed the tail of a very large ray resting underneath on the bottom, a common sight which you would not blame someone for swimming over to look elsewhere, Dan on the other hand decided for some reason to take a closer look at this ray, preferring to glide in behind without awakening it. As he approached the ray he noticed two shapes on its back, 'no surely not' he thought but as closed in his initial thoughts were confirmed...Cobia! There were two sitting right on its back, Dan quickly assessed he could not shoot them without striking the ray in the same instance then he suddenly realized that astoundingly the Cobia like the ray were asleep! He sat only half a metre from these two cobia just admiring them till the end of his breath before he gave them a quick nudge waking them and sending them flicking up off the ray where Dan then smashed the closest fish, amazing stuff.

Brett and I continued on our way finding some good activity right on a point where the two currents were meeting, with schooling barracuda and trevelly complemented with the ever present cruising sharks it was an entertaining dive. Brett decided to get it right with the reel gun and slugged one of the barracuda, as the fish tore off in a rage it changed one of the sharks from a cruising juggernaut into a raving lunatic. I was on the bottom making some noise to try and bring in some tuskys and trout when suddenly he came at me carving up the water as he approached. He flew in fast and strong I only just had time to swing the gun around striking him in the head with the spear, the fend off was short lived however as he backed away turned around and came flying back in once more this time he looked pissed. I threw my torso back as he approached just enough to free the gun and release a shot in self-defense just as he struck the end of the spear for the second time. The shot entered just behind the head sending the shark into a earth-shattering tumble smashing into the reef only a couple of metres from me where he entered a death roll completely destroying the spear, not that I cared I was out of there and on my way to the surface away from all the madness. Eventually he broke the flopper and freed himself, I was relieved he managed to break free as I definitely didn't want to deal with him anymore.

After that ordeal I surprisingly decided to make a move and headed out to another drop off looking for some action. It did not take long it was in-fact about my third dive when after hanging for a while in fairly dirty water I turned around to be greeted by a very big mackerel and it was close too only about 1 metre from my gun as I extended thanks to the dirty water. I released the trigger sending the shaft crashing into the fish's



side right between two of his black bars, a solid shot now I thought 'let the games begin!'. The fish disappeared in an instant as I scampered for the surface I was smashed in the back of the head by a bunch of reef fish I had strung onto my float, they were now water skiing for the first time pity they were too dead to enjoy it. The the mackerel shifted up a gear and took everything under, I freestyled madly in an attempt to keep up with the float as it traveled horizontally about 5 metres down with several reef fish spinning uncontrollably in front of it. The float began to slide away from me and eventually I could no longer see it, I continued swimming in that direction looking out of the water when suddenly about 50 metres ahead it popped back up. The rest of the fight was quite manageable as he had tired significantly, back on the boat I had a chance to weigh the fish as it came in at 27kilos a fairly big mackerel, then I just had to go and make sure all the boys were aware of it, what a trip and what a fish!