

Eye of the Tiger

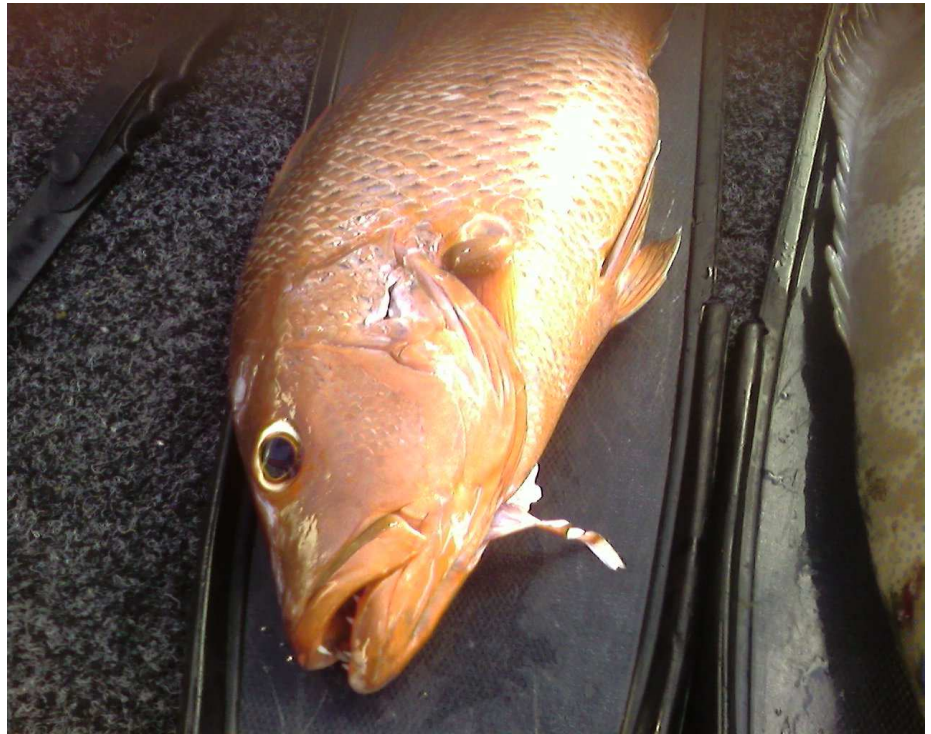
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What can one say about tigers, these large powerful sharks can be both graceful and menacing, either way they are very intimidating especially when you are faced with one armed with only a camera.

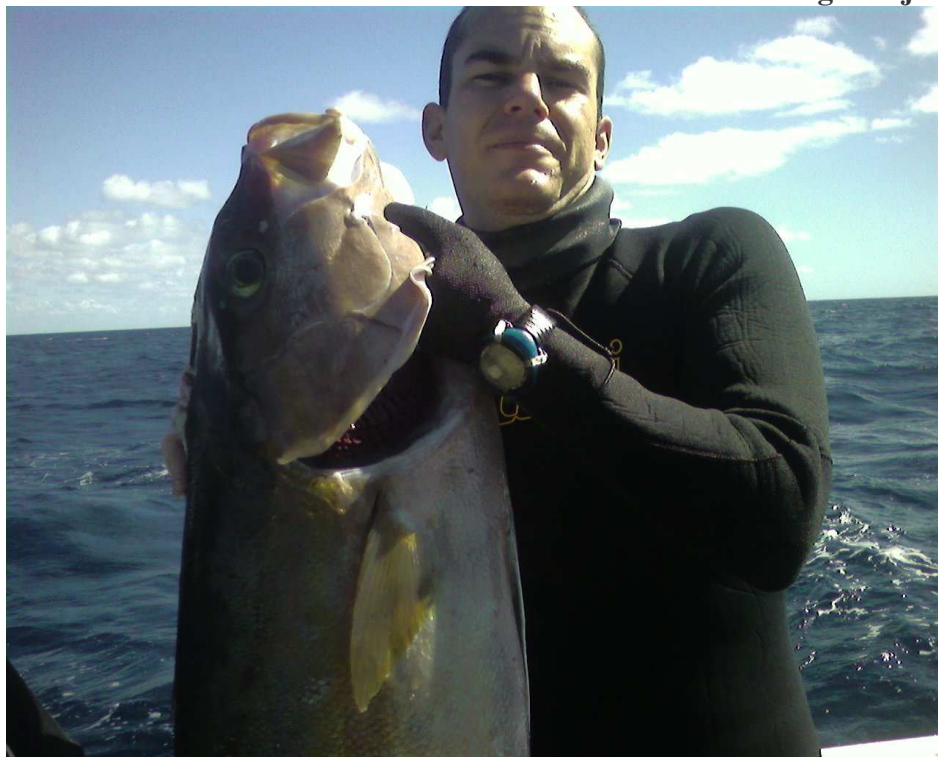
The impending long weekend coincided with some good weather to the north, the temptation proving too great so plans were set and after sneaking out of work early on Friday the quest for fish had begun in earnest.

After arriving at our accommodation around 11pm we stole a few hours kip before rising an hour or so ahead of dawn the next morning, fortunately our bodies are well adapted to this routine so they know full well what we will demand of them in the hours to come, there is no choice especially this morning as we prepared to hit a deepish shoal area first up.

After an hour or so by boat we were ready to hit the water with a pale, particle filled visibility of around 20 metres, the lack of sun due to cloud cover on the horizon giving an aerie impression. There appeared to be little to no current which in the context of what we hoping to do was a very helpful, striking a ledge at 21/22 metres is ten times easier without current. Time to smack the reef.

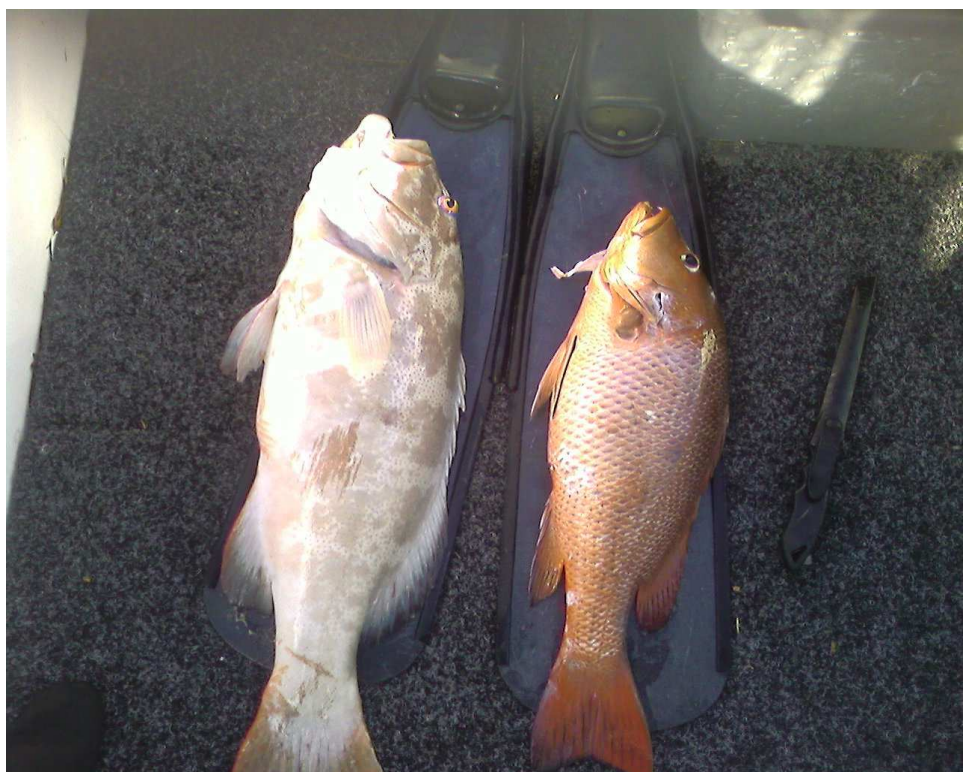


The ledge starting at 20 metres and dropping to 21/22 was covered in bait mostly hussar with Jobbies and Mangrove Jacks swimming around. These fish were proving to be very skittish, the second a gun was pointed at them they wildly flicked away. However even this level of mistrust could not save one mangrove jack from falling to the sword. After that fish had been speared the rest were spooked so we stood no chance of getting anymore. I made a drop down to the ledge for one last look gun in hand, I couldn't see anything in amongst the bait until I turned and in the distance a macky was passing behind me. Being at 21 metres I didn't fancy a chase, instead turning my back hoping it would come in for a closer look, alas this plan didn't work because when I turned back the fish was no where in sight. Just when I was about to surface I saw some movement, he was back and now heading straight towards me, I adopted plan B this time and that was to swim straight at the fish. The two of us now destined for a collision course, well a collision with my spear that is. The fish approached to the point where it had to turn giving a nice broadside x marks the spot target, the fate of this fish was sealed before the shaft even left the gun. By the time I made it back into the boat Dan Skinner had just mentioned that he had spotted a tiger on his last dive, a bit of an omen of things to come.



We had not been overly impressed with the catch at this point what quality fish we had seen were proving to be very elusive, so we decided to move further up to another shoal. Here we sprayed around some burley acquired from the previous location hoping to bring in some fish as things looked a little too sleepy round here. Patiently we watched as the burley drifted down, almost willing it to fall faster we were very eager to see if it has a response. By the time it had fallen to about 15 metres fish on the reef began to take notice, initially some smaller parrots and trout along with a few sawtails that were more or less just having a look. This initial interest is all you need most of the time as within a few more minutes a couple of sizable trout suddenly just appeared like they do, just as quick as they appeared so too did three dark spectre's above. Within moments three nice trout were on, Doug was swift in dealing with his before quickly reloading to stone another parrot that was trying to run away. The fish were pulled clear of the reef no problems apart from Skinners trout which decided to hole up thrashing its way inside a bommie and ringing the dinner bell in the process. With the trout stuck at around 19 metres we gathered above it preparing for an arduous task of freeing the fish, spear and line when somewhat surprisingly the trout swam straight out and was quickly pulled to mid water. I thought 'that's odd'

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I looked for an answer but didn't expect to find it in the form of two Tiger Sharks! They had moved in quickly obviously scaring the trout out but yet they didn't see it leave so began to circle the bommie with purpose, in unison they performed tight figure eight turns. I had to get some of this on film so I dropped down falling mid water above them when suddenly the larger of the two made a run for something on the surface. Tigers are good at spotting things at the surface that other sharks miss, this time the target was Greg's poor float it got hit, but it was not damaged I think the shark may have pulled out at the last second. This was pretty exciting stuff, I quickly headed over to where in the direction of where the shark went, my heart began pumping a bit faster when it began to materialise at the edge of the vis, it was now swimming straight at me. I continued swimming towards it before it turned away to slide past me very close to the camera, it was exhilarating. The teeth on the shark were clearly visible as it past by me, it was quite intimidating with the way the light was reflecting off its back melded in perfectly with its stripes it really looked amazing. The shark continued to slide past me and I reached out my

hand to try and grab hold of the tail but it must have sensed the water movement and quickly flicked away then it was gone. The adrenaline was pumping through my veins I popped my head out of the water and let out a big holler what a great rush I was revelling in the moment. The boat happened to be right next to me with both Skinner and Dougie on board, I was excitedly explaining what happened to them when suddenly I was interrupted by a scream of 'Tiger!' from Greg further down the drift. The shark that had just left me somehow knew where to find him and took a whole fish off his rig before nosing right up to him. Greg was panicked as he had seen the fish taken right in front of him and was anxiously trying to load his gun, but there was no time! The Tiger now with a taste for blood came straight in at him and Greg was forced to fend it off with just the barrel on the spent gun, he was in a real battle.

I quickly jumped on the back of the boat and we speed over to help Greg out, the sudden appearance of a noisy boat forced the shark to move away and a very relieved Greg was able to get onboard. Once the old boy had calmed down and began talking about the incident I looked out over the stern to see it was back making another pass behind the boat. I don't get too worried around sharks so I quickly grabbed some burley threw it in and leapt over with the camera keen to get more footage of our newly acquainted colleague. As the bubbles cleared I caught sight of it hanging only two metres under the surface pushing forward to gulp up the burley I had just offered it. It was now I realised that Gregs rig was still in the mouth of the shark, trailing alongside its body after gulping the fish down whole, I needed to get his rig & float back so the only think I could think of doing was to grab hold of it. Wrapping it around my hand the line became tense as the shark passed further away, the pressure was now applied on the shark and it didn't like that much deciding to turn on the juice and drag me through the water. I knew the rig would break once those razor sharp teeth had their way so I just had to hold on and wait, then snap one float and half a mangled rig retrieved and the memorable encounter was over.

Back in the boat the talk was all 'Did you see that? Bloody tigers!' it was enough to convince them to try another reef, no sense spearing here anymore when we were probably going to lose our fish, plus its just too hard to relax and hit 20 when those things are circling around.

Racing further north for about another twenty minutes or so we found a raised section of reef consisting mostly of mixed rubber and small amounts of coral. Jumping in next to me, Doug starting chanting through his snorkel the tune for "eye of the tiger" just to keep all the boys on edge. The area had a fair amount of small bait around but there didn't appear to be much else, in-fact I got a bit bored and started to look for other things to film. Just then straight underneath me a sea snake emerged from the coral and was on its way up to breath. I clicked record and filmed it surface before it started to dive again. Being that I was bored I thought I would follow it back down again, the temptation to touch its tail proving too great bringing an instant reaction from the snake as it flicked around swimming its head back and forth trying to see what had grabbed it. That was contact with two dangerous creatures in a matter of minutes, sure was shaping up as a fantastic day.

Finding fish here was proving very difficult, there just didn't seem to be much going on the bait were asleep, we were waiting and waiting for something to turn up when finally our prayers were answered. In came a Spaniard more interested in looking at Greg than feeding on the bait, which made it easy for him well at least that part was easy because the fight was anything but easy, the little bugger fought for a very long time. The funny thing about this was the other boys couldn't find any fish while this was happening and after finally joined back up after this long fight he was the next one to find fish again. This time a cobia swam off the bottom to look at him, Greg chased it down as it turned south the fish running all the way down to the reef below at 24 metres with Greg hot on its tail. The cobia continued to swim away and just when Greg was about to flag the chase it made one last turn back towards him, gotta love the curiosity factor. The Cobia had actually led the boys towards a very nice nest



of trout amongst other fish, a couple were taken but time was running out for the day so the mark was saved for the next day and we were off.

Cruising out the next day we knew the weather was going to pack it in throughout the afternoon so we had to work fast, the plan being to head straight to the spot we had marked yesterday and bring on the action early.

Hitting the water in about 17 metres we had about 25 metres vis but it still was a little bit on the dark side with the sun behind some clouds on the horizon. The area consisted primarily of finger coral clusters these staghorn ridges as we call them are very popular with baitfish which can hide in amongst the branches, in turn they are also popular with other predatory fish especially the menacing coral trout. There were plenty of trout milling around clearly visible from the surface so it didn't take the boys too long to warm up and start nailing a few. The ridges were coated with bait humming away as you approached, some trevally moving around the background watching your every move as the trout appeared and disappeared in and out of the structure. The fact that there was a fair amount of fish around was further highlighted when Skinner surfaced from a dive to look over at Doug whom had a sailfish not more than a couple of metres behind him, Doug was totally unaware as the fish raised in sail in passing him. Skinner was mortified he didn't see it, although Doug said in the boat even if he did see it he didn't know whether he would shoot it or not 'yeah right, good one Dougie' was the response from the others Dougie just laughed as he casually pulled in a Spanish he had picked up before getting back to the boat.

After some time had passed fish had scattered somewhat so we just allowed ourselves to drift off the back edge of the reef for a look at some deeper water, after hitting the bottom around 24 to 25 metres aside from one massive trout that cruised away there was not a great deal happening so we decided to move up close to the reef to get out of the increasing sea.

Starting along a familiar drop-off we began to run some burely and quickly noticed some nice trout and jobfish moving along in the deeper water. The jobbies were completely unapproachable which was not overly surprising but the trout too were very skittish darting away whenever we got close this was particularly strange and it was a sign that we were diving an area frequented by spearo's something we hate to do.

The burley did however bring in a couple of Spaniards one of which was coerced into making a close pass only to have its spine clipped sending it reeling upside down, its such a beautiful sight I don't think I will ever get tired of seeing that.

With the fish that skittish we decided to jump into a shallow bommie area for a last look, we were all very tired now so were looking forward to some nice 5 – 8 metre depths. To our great surprise there were plenty of trout milling around in this very shallow, nothing big but still respectable in size.

The shallow bommies are always alive with small colourful fish living in amongst bright healthy coral, I found myself distracted for most of this time filming all manner of sea life including barramundi cod, turtles, eels, rays and a million different of aquarium type fish. I had found myself a nice large bommie and was busy collecting some nature footage when I could sense a black cloud was forming. I looked up to see Greg hovering above this little Garden of Eden, the reef punisher had arrived. I cleared out back to the surface and could only watch as over the next 10 or 15 minutes he selectively eliminated my subjects one by one. He went about his task with a cold efficiency like no other taking all fish in the head, I watched one such target a trout which just would not turn for him so Greg patiently took aim 7 or 8 times each time lowering the gun to try and make the fish turn, he has a solid breath hold so it was only a matter of time before he got his shot taking it the very second it was offered to him, bang lights out.

The sun was now leaving us for the day so we had to begin a long run back where we would cop a bit of spray but it's a small price to pay for a great trip, seeing a tiger up close being the highlight for me maybe next time he will give me a ride.

