

Working the Ledges

By Brett Craik

Generally when forecasts come in at possibly reaching 30 – 40 knots you would expect that offshore boating couldn't be further from most people's minds, well that would apply to most clinically sane people but not to the serious underwater hunters whom have sworn an oath of defiance against the persistent incompetence of the Bureau of Meteorology. Stoically we gathered more information and come to the conclusion that the forecasters bless their ultra conservative don't sue me souls had got it very very wrong, preparations had already begun. Sure enough just as we were set to go the forecast was heavily downgraded, too late at 3am for most people to prepare but we were already on our way.

After running behind Moreton Island we pushed north into the exposed Ocean, it was fairly smooth due to a lack of wind but a sizable swell of 2 metres was rolling in, lifting to 3 metres across the shallow pinnacles on the reefs.

Jumping in to the north of Hutchinson Shoal we drifted the reef initially hoping to spear some pelagics, vis was good and the water warm, very quickly we lost interest in the upper water columns as nothing appeared on the up current section of reef 'the strike zone' so with no pelagics spotted during that part of the drift it became significantly less probable we were going to see any on the remainder of the drift so our attentions turned to the potential of the reef below, could it produce the goods?

Progressively the guys began to dive deeper and longer and some good fish were being seen, that's the way it goes out of Brisbane you see at least 10 times as many fish than you ever get a shot at due to the depth and clarity of the water. It is however a breeding ground for excitement and encourages deeper diving, being regularly placed in these conditions you find yourself testing and enhancing you skills not specifically as a hunter but more generally as a diver.

By this stage a few parrot had been taken on the shallower parts of the reef around 15 metres but it was not until we drifted out off the back where it ledged down that we began to see some quality fish such as snapper, jobfish and spangled emperor. All of these fish were playing hard to get by proving to be very unapproachable, Dougie in particular had made several dives on some jobfish in about 22/23 metres eventually getting a couple of shots off but failing for distance.

Although these elusive fish were evading us by hanging wide and quite deep around the 25 metre mark it still made for some incredibly exciting diving, Graeme McCutcheon from the Sunshine Coast had been fortunate enough on landing a spot on board the Hanning's premiere hunting vessel, its almost as difficult as making the Australian Cricket Team, he was enjoying seeing some incredible fish and diving with some experienced hunters, the whole situation must have encouraged him as he broke 20 metres comfortably for the first time.



Seeking some shallower ground to ply our trade we decided to move to another reef which is predominantly 19 – 20 metres in depth. As cruel fate would have it just as everyone had jumped in the boat and I was wound up ready to join them a lovely 25 kilo Spanish rose out of the blue to no deeper than 10 metres below me, I could do nothing more than watch as it gave me a wink then turned and glided back down from where it came, needless to say I was not real happy at that point.

To relieve some pain straight away on the next drift a smaller Spaniard moved in beneath me again but this time I had a loaded gun, quickly I exhaled and fell on him in a flash he turned and flicked as I let rip slotting him in the tail, 'oh crap' I thought as he ran off as he ran off with the gear float going past me. I could hear Graeme in the boat "here we go!" but I knew better it was not that big just a poor shot. A few minutes latter I pulled him up and Dougie applied the second shot insurance theory. As I handed the macky to Graeme he had a bit of a laugh when he noticed the wound.

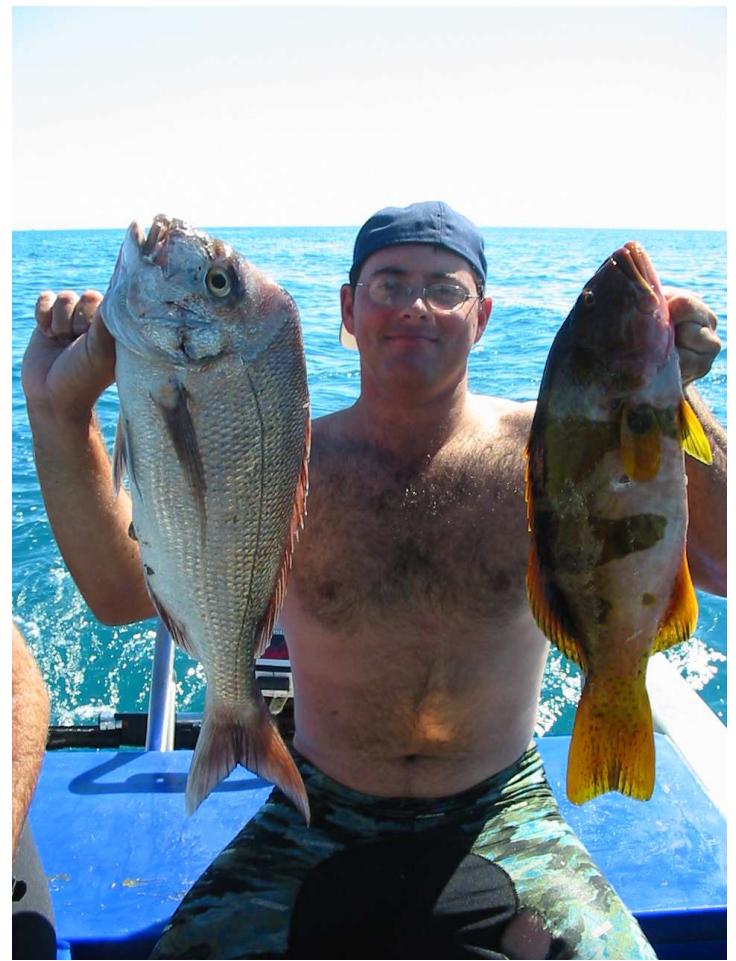


The swell was beginning to get a grip on me so I leapt into the boat or should I say limped into the boat while simultaneously adding to the burley trail, a skill in itself I reckon. Relegated to boat duties I deployed the troops up current from a good ledge and began watching over them. Before long Graeme threw a small Spanish in the boat before swiftly getting back in the water he was eager for more. My attention at this point had become focussed on Dougie, I noticed he was performing some longer dives, in-fact one was long enough for me to become concerned and head over in his direction not that I could do much from the boat. Just when I began feel anxious Dougie hit the surface, letting out a cry of success, he had bagged a snapper that he had been chasing for almost 30 minutes, it wasn't a huge fish but it was obviously a rewarding hunt. Since I was right next to him waiting with the boat he quickly threw the fish in and rushed to get back in the water, he said a footballer had come out when he had shot the snapper. Quickly Dougie prepared himself again, Graeme too had noticed the footballer on two previous dives but was unable to approach within killing distance. Dougie made his descent quietly on top of the trout closing into range before placing a solid shot. He was elated two excellent fish back to back, one an excellent foe a real challenge and the latter a rare jewel for Brisbane waters. The footballer came in at 57cm the new rules say they have to be 50 – 80cm since they have been for some reason classed as a blue spot trout. Dan Hanning also picked up a large six banded parrot another less common specimen, it appeared the reef was running hot.

Everyone was quite pissed at Dougie's success, it tends to be the way things go on this ship, "good fish you bastard" some of the boys were in denial refusing to acknowledge the snapper, subsequently the description 'Pink Bream' was born.

To gain some relief from the persistent swell and to shorten the distance home we moved into the bay to dive another ledge for some more tasty reefies. The boat pulled up and everyone lethargically began to gather their gear before someone yelled "what's that?" everyone looked over the side of the boat to see several grey shapes with yellow to golden fins milling around under the boat. Immediately it was dismissed as 'must be batfish', batfish are common around here a big dumb poor quality fish that follow you in big schools sometimes. Dougie was not convinced so he grabbed his mask and lent over the side of the boat to get a look, he then leapt up and said "golden's" by that he meant golden trevelly the finest of all the trevelly. A mad rush in the boat had now began Dougie and Graeme fell into the water first, Doug made his dive first waiting on the school for a while as they circled him, he was waiting for a double header, a difficult prospect, then he seen his opportunity and fired. He had two on one took the gun to the right while the other took the spear to the left it was crazy, eventually the fish on the mono broke free it was not shot as well as the one on the shaft. The Golden weighed 10 – 12 kilos not a bad size, Graeme took one down too but somehow he seemed to manage the smallest from the entire school he tried the I was leaving the breeders excuse, yeah good one.

To cap off the day we moved once more to a wreck in the middle of the bay, it was in about 8 – 13 metres, the vis was only about 7 or 8 metres here but we were able to get dropped right on top of it. Doug made the first dive where he slammed a striped sea perch a very large one for the species, unfortunately it got stuck in the wreck and he returned to the surface. Begin the fine upstanding gentleman that I am I humbly offered my services and set forth on my way to free the shaft, as I came across the fish on the wreck I could see it was hooked under some metal I also noticed three wobbegong sharks of size moving aggressively on top of the wreck. They were agitated I could tell, just as I was about to reach for the shaft to pull out the perch I noticed a tusky move in my left, I could not resist quickly I transferred my gun to my right hand and took a broadside shot, the Tusky ran over the top of the wreck down the side and back underneath taking my gun with him, 'oh no' I thought when suddenly I felt a strong tug at my fins, one of the wobbegongs was having a go at me, I kicked him off and headed for the surface. At the surface I could see two teeth marks in my expensive carbon fibre fins, I was mad no I was fuming and I knew I was going to have a fight on my hands to get this Tusky back.



Graeme had made a dive looking for the fish and my gun but could not find them, I went back down swam around to the deeper edge of the wreck and looked underneath there he was, the spear was outside the wreck but the mono was wrapped around a big beam a couple of times, and another thing looked troublesome too half of his head was inside the mouth of another wobbegong which was trying to tear it off. I returned to the surface and instructed Dan to get the wobby off him, he went down and smashed it in the head until it let go, then I went back down and cut my gun free before looking back inside the wreck to find that a second wobby now had half of the fish in its mouth from the tail end this time. I returned to the surface once more and once again I sent Dan down to get the bloody thing off it, he did and this time when I went back down it was free from harassment, I was able to cut the spear free then make two more cuts in the mono on the beam to free up the fish, exhausted I returned to the surface and to the boat. Thus ended another magnificent adrenalin packed day working the ledges.