Spanish mackerel secrets

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The narrowed barred Spanish mackerel is one of the widest spread pelagic fish species in the world and can be caught in waters stretching from Africa to the Middle East, central and northern Asia, and deep into the Pacific.

They are known as king mackerel in South Africa, tenggiri in Malaysia, tanigue in the Philippines, konem in India and kanaad in the Middle East. But no matter what part of the world you find these fish they all share the same reputation, as being one of the best sports fish in the ocean.

It’s not hard to fathom why this fish is regarded with such high esteem as its combination of size, weight, and raw fighting power makes it a tough opponent for any angler.

Spanish mackerel around Australia are regarded as one of the top sports fish to cruise our waters and for many an Aussie angler the Spaniard is always a much desired catch.

While there are many variables that contribute to the Spanish mackerel’s prowess, what really makes this fish special is that you do not require a big boat or large golden laden reel to target them. Their seasonal behaviour, which sees them move to inshore waters, means they can be targeted with consistency in relatively small craft. In fact, just about every semi offshore or offshore fishing ground along the Queensland coast, sees large aggregations of Spanish mackerel take up residence on a seasonal basis making for some exceptional fishing.

The ‘Spanish season’ as many Queensland anglers know it as is one of the most anticipated time of year and who can blame them when you consider just how awesome it feels to find yourself connected to 40lb of raw pelagic power!

Seasons

While Spanish mackerel are considered an all year round possibility, especially out wide on outer reefs, it is the seasonal closer inshore areas that experience large congregations of Spanish mackerel. This can be caused by changes in water temperature, the behaviour of certain currents as well as the movement of bait schools.

In my area of Bowen, the annual run of Spanish mackerel is very much determined on the arrival of bait schools, like wolf herring and gar on the inshore grounds. Once these are established the Spanish mackerel are never too far away.

These aggregations of Spanish mackerel can also be caused by spawning behaviour that sees large populations of hungry fish move into an area. The majority of the spawning takes place in northern tropical waters during the summer months as this is when and where the nutrient-rich food is most available for their just spawned larvae.

This spawning behaviour is quite common and sees big runs of Spanish mackerel in the far northern part of Queensland around the summer months. At the other end of the state the story is quite similar with the more predominant runs usually taking place around the southeast corner between January and May. The central and northern areas of Queensland usually see their bigger inshore aggregations anywhere between the winter and spring months of July and November. There is not much known on how far these fish move or whether they do travel up and down the coast, however it is known that female fish mature much quicker than males and can reach the legal 75cm mark in just two years. This is one of the reasons why Spanish mackerel is second behind coral trout in terms of commercial fisheries as they grow so quickly and are so abundant.

While they are heavily targeted for commercial fishing the good news is that they are no longer able to be netted and must be taken by line.

Wherever you target these fish, the first step to snaring a big Spanish mackerel is to find out when these fish are most predominant in your local area. Once you know when they are ‘in season’ your chances increase dramatically, as well as the number of fish per angler.

Areas to target

Being pelagic fish, Spanish mackerel love to frequent areas where there is good current, and rubble ground or structure that will hold bait.

For offshore areas like along the Barrier Reef it is a pretty simple job knowing where to drag your lures or bait as all you need is to find where the current is pushing along a hard-faced coral ledge and you will be in business. Inshore areas are a little more tricky as the structure and current is much less obvious and therefore the fish can be harder to find.

The most important rule to remember when looking for Spanish mackerel haunts is to find structure that will hold good congregations of bait. Large shoal areas, which resemble rubble patches on your sounder, are always a good start. These often compromise of coffee rock or shale covered mud bottom with bits and pieces of fern and rock. These areas are often in the middle of current lines or channels that act as highways and stopovers for bait schools.
The ability for these areas to hold bait will consequently bring in congregations of smaller mackerel, wolf herring, gar and trevally, which will then ultimately draw in the larger Spanish mackerel.

These patches are well known right up and down the Queensland coast. There are no secret spots as the number of boats that usually sit on them during the Spanish run is sometimes quite comical. Even in my hometown of Bowen it is not unusual to see 60+ boats on these spots on any given day.

Other areas worth investigating include isolated bommies or large structures, like wrecks that also hold strong concentrations of bait. These areas can be real hotspots when the Spanish mackerel are around and being such small spots they are ideal for techniques such as jigging where the fish are really concentrated. The secret to fishing these spots is to recognise where the current is pushing onto; Spanish mackerel will always swim into the current. Fishing on the wreck or past the current face will see you out of their faces and ultimately limit your success.

Islands, artificial jetties and isolated semi submerged rocks are also hot spots for Spanish mackerel because they provide ideal structure for fish to congregate. The other ideal variable is that these structures provide the ideal requirements for current to influence the behaviour of baitfish. Sweeping current-effected turbulent waters often see baitfish ball up or congregate, which in turn brings in the larger predatory fish.

Some good indicators that you are fishing the right area include by-catch of fish like queenfish (especially in northern waters) and tuna and smaller mackerel in the south. Trevallys are also a good sign as all these species feed in the same cycle and food chain as the Spanish mackerel.

No matter what type of structure you are fishing on for Spanish mackerel the two main variables need to be present – current and the presence of baitfish. Without this combination, having any success with snaring a Spanish mackerel will be difficult even in some of the best fishing grounds in Australia.

**Terminal Tackle**

Before we move into the techniques for chasing Spanish mackerel, it’s important to understand the bare terminal tackle basics for chasing these fish.

First up, wire is absolutely essential when targeting these fish. Spanish have razor sharp teeth that will slice through 200lb mono like butter. I have witnessed Spanish mackerel tear through 250lb twisted leaders with an effortless snip, so make sure you wire up. Also be generous on your length of wire and make sure you give a couple of feet bare minimum; you’d be surprised just how far down these fish can scoff a bait or lure.

Next try to minimise the use of shiny swivels as they can often attract smaller mackerel, which often hang next to Spanish mackerel. These smaller mackerel are renowned for picking off the scraps when the larger macks feed. When you are battling Spanish they are never too far behind and will often see a shiny swivel as a morsel of bait and snap through your line leaving you empty.

When thinking line class and drags, don’t go overboard as Spanish mackerel are clean fighters and therefore do not require the likes of 65-80lb or 20kg of drag. Smaller poundages to 20lb are sound and 10kg of drag is more than enough. In fact, due to their very tough upper and lower jaws using lighter drags, especially when using trebles is a must. As mentioned before, Spanish mackerel are no hoodlums and will always run for clear open water so there is no need to put the heavy brakes on them.

The debate over whether to use mono or braid comes down to personal preference. Many anglers prefer to target Spanish on mono due to its stretchiness as this can reduce the number of pulled hooks during the fight. Braid on the other hand allows for a more responsive feel when jigging.

**Trolling**

The first and probably the most common form of chasing Spanish mackerel is on the troll.

Trolling is a favoured method as it allows the angler to cover long distances in search of fish. It is ideal when chasing Spanish mackerel along current lines or open water bathometric lines, especially around channels. Trolling can also be an ideal method when working large deepwater reef systems where fish could be spread over a large area.

When trolling for Spanish mackerel the easiest method is to wire on a couple of large 20cm+ fast running lures over varying depths and lengths and begin the hunt. Lures such as Rapala Magnums or YoZuri Hydro Magnums or the ever-faithful Halco Laser Pro have always been a favourite amongst trollers for mackerel and when they are thick are very reliable fish takers.

For those after the more wary fish, rigged dead baits can be much more effective. The most common dead rigged bait is the humble garfish, which makes up a large proportion of the Spanish mackerel natural diet. More specialised mackerel trollers will use large baits, such as wolf herring, mullet, small mackerel or trevally. Wolf herring is by far the most desirable bait as their large size, stream-lined shimmering bodies make for perfect swimming baits.

No matter what type of dead bait you use, the rigging is pretty much the same. The head of the rig is dominated by a weighted keel, which for wolf herring usually constitutes a chin rig or large jighead usually weighing between 3-6oz. The weighted keel provides stability to the bait so it does spin in the water and also gets it down to the desired depths. I prefer to use a weighted jighead as this allows me to vary the depth of my bait. A 6oz jighead usually sees the bait swim between 20-40ft, and a 8oz will get it down between 50-60ft. Attached to these weighted keels are a multiple string of straight shank hooks between 7/0 to 9/0 in size that are suited to the length of the bait. These hook rigs are easily put together using hook eye opening pliers that allow the eyes to be opened and closed to either join hook to hook or be joined by a
black crane swivel. I prefer to use a black crane swivel as it allows for baits to swim more fluidly in the water.

When rigging a wolf herring you can either choose to rubber band the hooks down one side of the fish or using a more difficult technique threading the hooks inside the bait.

For garfish, the rig is much simpler and usually constitutes a ‘bullet head’ keel with strand wire going straight to a double set of ganged straight shank 7/0 to 9/0 hooks. I like to add a little bit of rigging wire at the front of the hooks to wrap around the beak of the gar and keep it in position. When using garfish have an extra attractant like wog hair, it is a must.

Another technique that I have employed in the past to mix it up is to colour your gar baits using simple food colouring and water. Soaking the gar in different coloured solutions can provide a real contrast in your baits and add that extra attraction. Gars are much easily rigged and are simply threaded on the gangs much like pilchard bait.

No matter what dead bait rig you choose, make sure it is rigged straight. If your bait is spinning and not running straight then it has no chance of success. If your troll bait is spinning you are either trolling too quickly or your weighted keel is not dead centred on your bait. It is best to test your baits at the side of the boat before sending them back into the spread and make small adjustments to get them working correctly. For wolf herring a steady pace of 4-6 knots is ideal, while gar can be run at higher speeds at 8-10 knots.

Trolling live baits are also an excellent option and, surprisingly, are much easier to rig then dead baits. Fish like fusiliers, trevally and yakkas are ideal live baits to troll and can be rigged using a single 9/0 circle hook through the head of chin of the live bait. To add extra hooking power a stinger treble can be added to the rig either free swinging or pinned into the back of the live bait. Like wolf herring these need to be slowly trolled so the bait can swim with enough speed to look natural in the water.

Jigging

If trolling is the lazy-style of catching Spanish then jigging is the complete opposite; it takes a lot of hard work and energy but the effort is certainly worth the reward.

Jigging is best described as locating the fish on your sounder then dropping relatively large metal lures over them and cranking them back up as fast and as erratic as possible. This technique requires high speed reels (usually a ratio of 5.7:1 and above) as the secret to success with jigging is speed through the water. It is this single variable which often draws even sulking fish into a strike as it triggers a natural predatory reaction in Spanish mackerel to devour anything that looks injured or fleeing the scene. So when fish shut down and will not take baits, jigging is often the go-to method to draw out a strike.

Two speed reels matched with multi-coloured jigging braid is a good outfit to start with so you can have a combination of high speed for jigging but low retrieves once the fish is hooked. The multi-coloured jigging braid helps with identifying where your jig is when retrieving.

When choosing a jigging rod, go with a specialised jigging rod. Their short fast tapered builds are specifically designed for fast retrieval and use, as well as straight up and down fighting.

Next comes jig choice and there are various different metals out there that will do the job. However, like all lures some require more action than others. Knife jigs and straight line metals, like Lasers and Spaniards are great require the angler to impart action using the rod in short repetitive jigs while constantly retrieving. This method does draw a lot of strikes however it can also draw a lot of energy as well. Other jigs such as Bumpa Bars or Wax Wing jigs, create their own erratic action when retrieved through the water at speed with much less effort from the angler.

No matter what jigs you use it is all a waste of time unless you can find the fish first. This is where your sounder becomes a major player in your success. Finding fish is a good start but being able to decide what looks like a feeding school of mackerel and a cruising school is crucial. To start with, look for fish that are in the top two-thirds of the water column. Fish lying close to the bottom are more than likely sulking and, more importantly, will be hard to draw into a strike as your jig will be past them on the first couple of turns of the reel. Next look for a mixture of bait and fish as this is a sure sign the mackerel are feeding. Finally, if you can get a sounder that is showing big numbers of fish then you have hit the jack pot as a strong concentration of fish will more than likely bring a strike.

Bait fishing

Bait fishing is a common technique used to snare Spanish mackerel. Many are actually caught using rigs more designed for smaller mackerel or other bottom dwelling species, however when targeting them specifically the best method is to float baits around 10ft from the surface.

Live baits work best and simple 9/0 circle hook either through the shoulder or chin of the live bait and drifted out the back of the boat is ideal. Try and keep the float and bait a fair way from the boat so not to spook the fish. A good technique is to keep feeding line out as you wait for a strike. Bait runner reels are ideal in this situation as they allow for line to be fed out and when a strike happens it allows for the fish to get a good purchase on the bait before feeling the pressure of the rod and reel. This will set the circle hook firmly without the need for a strike, which can often pull the hooks free.

Remember when using live bait that some fish like fusiliers have a 25cm legal limit. Dead baits like pilchards and slimes are also ideal especially on ganged hooks. When targeting Spanish mackerel try using a quadruple gang hook rig using two pilchards to create bigger bait.

Popping
I won’t go into popping for Spanish in too much detail as I have covered this in past QFM editions, however it is worth mentioning that surface fishing for Spanish is certainly worth the effort. This is best achieved when the Spanish are thick and sounder evidence has them feeding close to the surface.

Stick baits are the best surface option as poppers tend to be hard for the fish to stay pinned due to the refraction of the water. Surface fishing for Spanish is by far the most exciting as these fish will literally spear full length out of the water in chase of a lure. This is one experience you will never forget!

Secrets out

If you haven’t caught a Spanish mackerel yet then now is a great time to begin putting a plan together. Find out when they run in your area, sniff around for some advice on a few likely locations and begin putting in some time on the water learning how these fish behave. You will be surprised just how simple it can be once you have cracked the pattern and the beauty is that once you have it worked out, you will be catching them every year.

Images

No matter how you fish for macks you need to gang your hooks. The best way is to use a pair of hook opening pliers that allows you to open the eyes of the hook to either join hooks together or by using a swivel.

The author with a typical size inshore Spanish mackerel. The long and skinny profile of this fish gives away the fact it is a male fish. The females are usually much more robust.
Spanish are definitely a target on surface stick baits and poppers as Brad Bell from West Coast Poppers can attest. (Brad Bell Image)

Queenfish by catch in central and northern Queensland is a good sign you are in the right spot for chasing a Spanish mackerel.
This sounder shot shows the perfect scenario for jigging. Fish are stacked up from the bottom layer right through to the middle of the water column. This is ideal as it allows your jig a travel a good distance through the schooled up fish. If the fish are

This sounder shot shows the perfect relationship between bait (small green dots bunched together) and Spanish mackerel feeding below them (long red lines). Find the bait and you will always find the fish.

If you want to get into jigging this selection of metals is a good start. Large metal vibes are good for short rips whilst large bumper bars are ideal for a burn
retrieve. Knife jigs are also good, however, leave your big long ones at home and stick to th

Here you can see a typical keeled rigged using a 6oz TT jighead, however lead chin rigs are also popular. Hooks are joined together using a barrel swivel and the whole rig should be around the length of your bait.

Here is a typical wolf herring rig used for trolling. This method is the simplest way to rig with the weighted keel wired to the head while the hooks are rubber banded to the side of the fish.

If you want to make your gar baits standout try soaking them in food colouring to get your desired colour.
Garfish troll rigs are very simple and use a couple of gang hooks and a weighted bullet head. Using a small length of wire at the front hook is useful for tying around the gar beak to keep the bait straight. The added extra of a hairstyle skirt is also a

This is what you want to see on your sounder whether you are trolling or jigging. The left hand side has a healthy showing of balled up smaller Spanish mackerel with the larger fish leading the pack at the bottom right.
Smaller 10kg models like this one are around 3 or 4 years of age and tend to school up in big numbers. They are also the best eating at this size.

Classic 20kg Spanish mackerel taken on a Bumpa Bar jig. Fish this size are a trophy no matter how you take them.