Take it to the macks

Phil Bennett | April 2006 » Feature Articles / New South Wales / Mid North Coast / South West Rocks /

It’s that time of year again. The mornings are cooling nicely, giving way to balmy days with little wind, the water’s still bath-warm and full of all sorts of goodies.

Yep, it’s Autumn, a time of plenty on the North Coast and certainly the best time of year to target spotted and Spanish mackerel.

The mackerel run is a long-awaited affair on the North Coast. Just like luderick anglers, there’s a band of diehards who chase little else. There could be snapper going crazy under the boat but when it’s mackerel time, it’s mackerel time!

While I’m not dogmatic about mackerel only, I can certainly see the appeal that draws so many anglers in.

Just think about it. How many fish can you think of that average 3kg to 6kg, run like scalded cats and hang around in good numbers for months on end?

There’s nothing that matches the mackerel run for sheer numbers and size and, thanks to a ban on Queensland ring netting of spotties, the numbers seem to be steadily increasing.

I must admit to getting pretty excited when the first fish appear for the season. Usually it’s around early January with dribs and drabs until the main run in late February to May.

Depending on the season, they could show as early as late November and stay on till June, as they did six years ago when they swarmed the coast in outrageous numbers. That seasonal run saw fish right down on the South Coast. Spotties were even caught in Sydney Harbour and way up the Hawkesbury River.

During a ‘normal’ seasonal run spotted and Spanish mackerel seldom head farther south than Point Plomer, just north or Port Macquarie.

METHODS

One of the great things about mackerel is that they’ll respond to a wide variety of methods. You can head to your favourite mackerel grounds with a block of pilchards, some metal lures, a tank full of live slimies or a fly rod and reasonably expect to catch fish on all methods.

Like all fish, however, they do respond better to particular methods, with live slimy mackerel usually being the most productive.

It’s fair to say 90% of mackerel enthusiasts primarily use live slimy mackerel. There’s just something about a struggling slimy that most fish find hard to resist so very few anglers ever head to the mackerel ground without a dozen or so live baits.

The most popular live-bait method is to suspend the bait under a small float or balloon about 30 metres from the boat. With a steady stream of light berley wafting back, mackerel can be drawn for a considerable distance to inspect your offering.

It seems the mackerel cruise up and down the berley trails, seldom staying for any length of time per boat. There will be days you can see the fish (or at least the line of bent rods) as the spotties move along the rows of anchored boats.

I have itchy feet and prefer to slow troll live baits rather than patiently wait at anchor. For sheer economics, anchoring wins hands-down but if you’re like me and would prefer to hunt the fish rather than wait until they find you, slow trolling is certainly an effective and active way to fish.

There’s no great secret to it, just rig up your live slimy mackerel so the first hook (from the swivel) is through the fish’s nostrils. Place the others neatly in the back. (see diagram).

Feed them out 30 or so metres and putt around at walking speed with the reel in gear and the rod in the holder. The rest is up to the fish.

Perhaps the next most popular bait is the humble blue pilchard. Fished whole under a set of gang’s with a short length of light wire, pilchards are pretty effective fish-takers.

Some anglers are most sneaky and will fish pilchard cubes with single hooks (again with light wire) down a berley trail, tempting fish that baulk at a full set of gangs.

Others slowly troll the pilchards whole, wandering the reef systems at a leisurely two knots. All methods work, it’s just some may work better than others, depending on the mood of the fish.

BURNING METAL
Another very successful approach is to use metal lures. There’s a wide range of metal lures that will tempt mackerel but I feel the 30g to 40g ‘slice’ style patterns are perhaps the best. This style of lure is designed to be cranked flat-chat, fluttering only slightly no matter how fast you wind.

This speed is effective in bringing the mackerel undone. Firstly they haven’t got time to analyse the offering before it gets away and, secondly, once grabbed, the sheer speed of the fish sets the hook.

While very few anglers down this way use metal lures, it’s a fairly popular method further north and one that certainly produces fish wherever mackerel are found.

Lately I’ve been targeting them on fly gear. So far it’s proved difficult and frustrating but I have pinned a few nice fish up to 5kg. My meagre success at least proves it’s possible, though the lack of speed produced by the manual retrieve sees a lot of mackerel follow the fly with a bored look on their faces!

When talking artificials and mackerel, we’re really relying on speed to bring many fish unstuck. While flies certainly work, it has to be the most challenging, extremely difficult, frustrating and plain demoralizing way to pull a few fish.

You could try soft plastics but be prepared to replace them after every bite!

Facts

MACKEREL TACKLE

There’s plenty of gear suitable for mackerel fishing, with everything from light spin gear to fly tackle pulling fish.

The most popular seems to be a medium sized baitcasting outfit. Any good reel capable of holding around 300 metres of 6kg to 8kg string should be fine. Spin gear is much the same; pick quality reels with smooth drags and spools that hold around 300 metres of 8kg line.

The most popular type of rod for mackerel is the medium- to fast-tapered 7’ overhead or spin stick. There are far too many models to choose from so you’ll have to call in to your local tackle store and pick a model you like that suits your budget.

You’ll need wire traces to prevent those razor-sharp teeth slashing through your line without you feeling a thing. For spotties single-strand or seven-strand wire around 10kg to 17kg is usually plenty. Try to get away with under half a metre, especially if the fish are shy and the water is clear. Spaniards can chop through this wire like it’s fine cotton, so you should up the ante to 24kg single-or seven-strand in longer lengths.

Hooks around 4/0 in patterns like O’Shaughnessy, Tarpon or suicide are good for the spots. When the Spanish are about go up to 6/0 to 8/0, depending on the size of the bait.

Facts

EAT OR RELEASE

Spotted mackerel are certainly the most prolific of the main mackerel species caught in northern NSW, and they and Spanish mackerel make terrific table fare. Most anglers who head to the mackerel grounds have long fish boxes, usually of fibreglass, and good amounts of ice.

As each fish is landed, it should be gaffed, stunned with a couple of sharp blows to the head while still on the gaff and then bled with a deep slash to the throat area.

Like all fish, if bled and put on ice within minutes of capture mackerel table qualities improve tenfold. There’s nothing worse than leaving such a quality fish out in the baking sun for a whole session, so put them on ice as soon as you can.

Despite their imposing dentistry mackerel can be released without too much trouble if you have a set of Hook-outs or some very long-nosed pliers. You can either remove the hook boatside with the fish in the water or carefully tail-grab it, hoist it onto a wet, soft surface such as a bag or a sheet of foam, throw a wet bag or towel over its head.

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