Port Phillip Bay Bruisers
Andrew Clark | October 2005 » Feature Articles /

The sky started to turn pink as I looked back over Olivers Hill, just south of Frankston. I continued to sharpen my filleting knife as I watched the sunrise, an exciting time of day for snapper fishermen. Then it happened. Boom! One of the outside rods loaded up and the tip edged towards the water. The reel exploded into life. Please, please, please not a ray, I thought to myself. The sound of the reel confirmed what I was hoping for. It started to splutter in fits and starts, then came the head shakes. The sweet sound of a big snapper run.

I grabbed the rod and played the fish back to the boat. He was only lightly hooked in the side of his mouth. Scrambling around, I grabbed the scales and weighed the snapper at 6.5kg – a good start. With the hooks quickly removed I gently eased him back into the water. A couple of gentle pulls on the tail backwards and forwards to move oxygen through his gills. Then, like waking from a sedated slumber, he reignited and high tailed it back to the depths. I stood and peered down for a few seconds as I wiped my hands. Gee I love this stuff!

Snapper season on the eastern side of Port Phillip Bay starts around AFL Grand Final day and runs right through till the end of April or early May. It’s at either end of the season that some big snapper are on offer for recreational anglers. The last few years have seen an amazing run of snapper in the warmer months. Hopefully, this will continue in the coming years.

I’m always amazed to see what some people will spend on boats and accessories and still pull up short when it comes to landing a decent snapper in the bay. Get smart! Remember that snapper decide when and where they feed. Be on the water with the right bait and right equipment at the right time and you’re in with a good chance.

Timing, Location and Conditions

Big snapper can be caught at anytime of the day and in any part of Port Phillip Bay. Most of the good fish however, are caught in that hour or two around sunrise and sunset. To me, dawn is the best time. Last season, every fish I landed over 6kg came in that hour encompassing dawn.

I fish for big snapper close to shore in between 8 and 14m of water. Any of the numerous reefs and areas of broken ground scattered along the eastern side of the bay are good places to start. To find a suitable area, use the zoom function on your sounder and look for variations on the sea floor and the hardness of structure. A GPS is also a good tool, particularly once you’ve established that fish are in an area. You can head back there again and again on subsequent trips. Be aware though that these fish move, staying in the one area for a few days before moving on. Just because a GPS mark has produced recently, doesn’t mean it always will.

Big snapper don’t move around in big schools. They seem to feed in groups of 2 or 3 fish, or as sole scavengers moving into shallow water at night to feed before heading back out to the sanctity of deeper water during the day. Amongst these bigger fish are some more average sized snapper in the 2 to 3kg range, but the ratio between big and small is much better in close than out wide. So if big snapper are your target, play the percentage game and move in close at dawn.

When I fish at dawn I like to be set up, lines in the water, ready to roll about one and a half hours before sunrise. This gives you a chance to get settled without creating too much noise anchoring just as the snapper turn their brains on to ‘feeding mode’. Just sit tight, keep quiet and wait.

Tide changes are another important factor. While not essential, a change in tide running up to sunrise or sunset sweetens the mix. I’ve never found either the high or low to be better than the other; both perform on their day.

Moon phases play a role with new and full moon the best, but my biggest fish last year, one nudging 8kg, came smack bang between the two phases. To me, moon phases are more of an indication rather than a rule for this style of fishing.

What are the best conditions? Well, I don’t fish in rough weather. It’s too uncomfortable and there’s nothing worse than being smashed about inside a plate alloy boat. I just enjoy my fishing too much. On the other hand, after a strong westerly blow, I’m on the water the very next morning. The wind churns up the water and gives these big fish that added sense of security to head inshore to feed. The stirred up water also means there is more food on offer.

Baits

Ask 10 people their opinion on this subject and you’re likely to get 10 different answers. I can only tell you what has worked for me. Number one, without a doubt, is a whole small to medium sized calamari. These are easily caught along the weed beds close to shore. I like to use small squid jigs when collecting squid for bait. The reason for this is that I’m consciously targeting smaller calamari and they seem to take the smaller jigs more readily. If I can’t use the squid I collect in the next 24 hours then I freeze them immediately, either in a vacuum-sealed bag or in a plastic container filler with salt water. This way, their freshness is maintained, which is paramount for big snapper fishing.

Next best are whiting heads, whole large silver whiting and garfish. Avoid buying your baits already frozen if you can by seeing what the local fish markets have on offer. I buy these baits with the mindset that they have to be fresh enough for me to eat. After all, big snapper
don’t get that way by eating frozen bait bought at a service station.

The humble pilchard makes a good standby bait, but generally they aren’t hardy enough. They do, however, make a great berley when cut up into cubes, but more on that later.

**Techniques and Equipment**

I use the same outfits for all snapper fishing in Port Phillip Bay. They’re made up of 7ft Silstar SSL 6-8kg rods matched to Shimano 4500 Baitrunners. My line is 6kg mono, generally Penn 10-X or Suffix. This is just an example of a gear combination that I’ve found to be hardwearing and versatile, but there are any number of rod, reel and line combos available.

In marine waters, each angler is entitled to use up to four rods so if you can make all of your outfits the same then you become more familiar with the tools of the trade. And familiarity sure helps in the heat of battle! Stick to good quality equipment. As my dad always said “buy the best you can afford”.

Rods should be spread out along the stern using a couple of 3 way rod holders. If your rod holders are adjustable then place them in a position level to the water. Remember, they are rod holders not rocket launchers. Your rods won’t fall out. When a fish hits, the line runs straight down and the rod will work like a springer, aiding in the setting of the hooks.

Although I use free spooling reels, I rarely use the function when targeting big reds. I have lost more fish when using the baitrunner mode than I care to remember. All drags on my reels are set to between 1 and 2kg. This is why heavy line isn’t required. It becomes a matter of setting your baits, leaving the reels in gear and letting the fish hook themselves.

At dawn and sunset big snapper feed in an aggressive manner. If they take a fancy to a bait, within a split second they’ll smash it to pieces before speeding off. It’s more effective when your line is tight and ready to be loaded up with pressure at the moment of engagement. Generally, the first you know of a big snapper bite is a rod pointing downwards and a screaming spool. At this stage, if you play it right, it will be ‘game over’.

Often, snapper fishermen talk about fish spitting hooks, but I think this is unlikely. Snapper spit baits, but anglers pull hooks on lightly hooked fish by going too hard. This is why a modest drag setting is employed. If you hook a snapper in the soft tissue of the mouth, a heavy drag will see those hooks ripped out in no time.

Once a rod goes off, let the fish run then start to work him back your way. If he wants to run again then let him. During a fight, a decent red will make 3 or 4 strong runs. Just hold on to the rod and your nerve, and be patient. I’ve never lost a big snapper at the boat; plenty of big gummies, but never a snapper. Playing out a big fish in this manner means that by the time he’s lying on his side next to the boat, he’ll be begging you to get him into the net. I try to release as many fish as I can so it’s always a net and never a gaff.

Terminal tackle is standard and straightforward. I use a 20kg leader of 60cm attached to the main line via a rolling swivel with a running pea sinker. I’ve used a number of different hook sizes and patterns over the years and now use just one. Gamakatsu Octopus, generally in a 6/0. If baits are slightly larger or smaller then the hook size may vary, but this happens rarely.

When fishing in Port Phillip Bay, anglers can use two hooks per line so take advantage of this. For whole calamari I snood the second hook about 20cm above the bottom hook. The bottom hook is stitched through the head and hangs loosely among the tentacles. The top hook is clipped in about 1cm from the top of the hood. This way, the bait looks natural and holds its shape in the water.

For most other baits, including whole fish and fish heads, I use a sliding second hook with a half hitch used to secure the bait above and below the sliding hook. Either way, two hooks work better than one. I find that landed fish are often hooked on that second top hook. This can be the difference between a memorable day on the water or going home empty handed.

**Berley**

Berley is a must. When I arrive at a spot, the first thing in the water after the anchor is the berley pot. I use a combination of chicken pellets well aged in tuna oil, mixed in with some cut up pilchards or other old defrosted bait. While I’m waiting for a strike, I’ll start cubing pilchards, throwing a piece into the water as the previous piece disappears from view. Some people insist that berley attracts pesky little flathead and they’re probably right. But it also brings on roaming snapper that might otherwise not pick up the scent of your baits alone.

In all honesty, flathead are a good indication of the presence of a big red in the area. Often in that hour before dawn I’ve had baits that were being molested by small flatties a few minutes earlier suddenly get left alone. This generally indicates a snapper is in the vicinity as the smaller fish scurry away to avoid becoming part of the food chain. Something like the ‘calm before the storm’. Small pickers, like flathead, are just another part of the snapper barometer.

**Images**