Weedy weeks at Fraser

Phil James | December 2003 » Area Articles / Queensland / Central QLD / Hervey Bay /

A RECENT two-week stint on Fraser Island was one that will go down as our most interesting Fraser holiday for a few reasons – but this time outstanding fishing wasn’t one of them.

It was the September school holidays and the island was very busy. The trip started on the 10.15am sailing of the barge Fraser Venture from River Heads to Woongoolbver Creek. Surprise, surprise! There were actually more private vehicles on board than those of backpackers. On our previous trip to the island, we had the only private vehicle and the barge was full. Backpackers make up a very high proportion of the island’s visitors and are responsible for generating lots of dollars for local business and for government coffers.

The trip across the island was rough and it was good to reach Eurong, but our enthusiasm slumped as we saw the dreaded weed in the inshore waters. On the beach it was evident that the annual migration to Fraser Island was well and truly underway, as scores of vehicles made their way north from Hook Point.

Weather conditions were ideal for the ocean beach, with light north to north-westerly winds. Not so welcome inside Hervey Bay, these winds blow offshore on the ocean beach, calming the seas and make fishing comfortable. However, the weed negated any joy we had for the weather. This brown, furry weed has neutral buoyancy, tending not to float or sink in the water. It has been given some very descriptive names, most not too polite. I can’t recall it ever being as prolonged a problem as it has been in the last couple of years.

Many theories have been proposed about where it comes from and where it goes, and if anyone can throw any light on the subject I’d be very interested. My own records seem to suggest that it is worst in years of drought but this may be a coincidence. We do know that southerly and south-easterly winds tend to replace weed-infested inshore water with clear water and that light winds from any other quarter bring it back in. This is why the earlier part of the year, dominated by south-easters, has been relatively free of weed.

In the first few days we managed to locate a few whiting and bream in a moderately weeded gutter. After each cast it we had to spend a few minutes removing the weed that had been reeled in. For most of the time fishing was impossible. After a couple of days we headed north hoping to find clear water and fish. North of Cathedral Beach there were a few gutters where the weed was concentrated into a band close to the shore. By casting across this band anglers were reaching comparatively weed-free water holding tailor and dart. The sight of anglers removing long ‘ropes’ of weed was common even though fish were coming in.

Further north, the weed extended to Indian Head and beyond to Middle Rock. We took the inland track to the first beach ramp at Orchid Beach, and there it was – clear, weedless water. Between there and Ngkala Rocks anglers were taking plenty of dart and a few tailor. After negotiating the challenging Ngkala Rocks bypass we reached a long gutter lined with 4WDs. Tailor to 3kg and top quality dart were coming in regularly, and fish were so close in to the beach that all family members were able to experience some great fishing. Most of the tailor were being taken on pilchards and a variety of metals while the dart were going for pilchards and pipis.

I experimented with a few plastics and the tailor destroyed every presentation as soon as it hit the water (my diminishing supply of gold and silver flecked grubs is now looking quite sad). Dart weren’t quite as cooperative on most of the plastics I tried but the lime green Rattle Grubwas deadly. There was the potential for huge individual catches but I saw no evidence of anglers showing disrespect for bag limits. The atmosphere was great! From what I understand the action was on throughout the entire day, with the only slow-down right on the bottom of the tide. Most parties came for just a couple of hours before returning to their camps.

The level of traffic negotiating the notorious Ngkala Rocks bypass caused all sorts of minor dramas, much to the delight of observers and the young cheerleaders as drivers charged their vehicles through the dry sandy track. The possibility of meeting a vehicle coming in the opposite direction had to be avoided so unofficial traffic controllers set up signal posts at each end of the track. There were many hold-ups as vehicles went down in the soft sand and needed to be snatched out. The main problems came about with vehicles not being powered sufficiently in the most suitable gear and by tyre pressures being far too high.

The 65km return trip down the island was uneventful if you don’t count all the backpackers’ hire vehicles that went down in the soft sand on the Middle Rocks bypass and at the back of Indian Head. Hire vehicles are always bogging on Fraser Island’s tracks, usually because of overloading, high tyre pressure and inexperience. Fortunately there are usually friendly locals and other experienced drivers on hand to give advice, push and shove and, if necessary, snatch vehicles out. Every time a vehicle goes down it contributes to another rut in the track, contributing to the shocking state of many of the island’s tracks.

With the weed situation no better on our own stretch of beach, we visited Ngkala again a few days later. It was a re-run of our previous visit with families enjoying excellent sport with top quality tailor and dart.

The next day, September 30th, saw the midday opening of the Indian Head to Waddy Point closure. Indian Head was a hive of activity with the troublesome weed being close enough inshore to enable fishing from the outer rocks. Some official looking characters carrying clipboards were suspected to be Fisheries officers making sure no-one jumped the gun. Indian Head certainly turned on the action that afternoon. It was great to see the majority of anglers keeping only severely maimed fish and releasing most.

The following day saw us heading for Ngkala Rocks again but, with the island grapevine working well, we learned that the weed had...
extended almost the entire length of the island and that included the long gutter that had given so many so much great fishing a few days earlier.

We went to northern side of Waddy Point instead, and at least 50 other vehicles were already parked on the beach north of the rocks and most of their occupants were either fishing or preparing to do so. Out at ‘The Wall’, it was almost shoulder-to-shoulder with plenty of good tailor and dart coming in despite the heavily weeded water. This popular fishing platform has depressions which accept sprayed water in heavy conditions, but on this occasion these depressions became filled with tailor blood and rotting weed removed from lines. Much of the blood had been there since the previous day and the stench defied description.

The remainder of the fortnight saw the calm conditions concentrating the dark brown mass along the shoreline. This particular weed doesn’t readily wash ashore but on those three days it was so concentrated that thick masses of it remained on the beach on the receding tide in many places along the eastern beach. The ooze was often hidden by a thin layer of sand and the result was inevitable – from one end of the beach to the other, vehicles were going down!

A few days after we left I heard that much of the weed had cleared from between Poyungan Rocks and Yidney after south-easterly winds had been blowing for a couple of days. The western beach north of Moon Point also has a weed problem, but this is a different kind of weed that arrives with the strong September northerlies. By New Year most of this isn’t a problem.

Because we didn’t fish much during that fortnight we revisited some of the special, isolated places on the island and reflected on just how great this island is that we take so much for granted.

1) Nick Bardsley was happy with this tailor taken at Ngkala Rocks during the September school holidays.

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