WAHOO FRENZY

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Scott Bannerot was amongst a recent foray with a leading charter operation to remote coral atolls far out in the Coral Sea. In this pristine location they encountered a run of wahoo that left even these seasoned anglers breathless with excitement. The lessons they learnt will be of great use to you too.


SUZUKI

It doesn't get much better than this. Imagine you're flying out on a seaplane far over the Coral Sea, way beyond the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef and landing at a deserted, sunken atoll. From there you step aboard an ultra-modern mothership to drop off your gear, heading out in a custom gameboat moments later to seek anything from giant marlin to a who's who of open-ocean trophies. It's a dream come true and until recently places like Kenn, Wreck, Frederick, Marion and Flinders reefs could only be fished in your dreams. The launch of Nomad Sportfishing's mothership operation in 2005 has made fishing these remote locations a reality.

Now in its second full season, Damon Olsen's team at Nomad are discovering a number of emerging patterns, the main theme being that colossal bites of major gamefish species provide unique, rapid-fire testing grounds for the best tackle, lures and techniques on the market – an accelerated learning curve that completely transcends the normal, stately pace of fishing technology development. We're talking about all-out attacks that make a mockery out of any weak link in rod and reel design features, terminal tackle strength and rigging, swimming action and shape, size and color of lures.

Incredible strike rates and elevated average predator size brings each technological detail into the white-hot spotlight of baptism by fire, resulting in warp-speed rates of natural selection. Failed equipment falls by the wayside, lying broken and bent in mangled heaps, and the stuff that works surges to the front line and stays there. We're also doing some things that, to our knowledge, have never been done. We're coming up with new twists that really work – not because we're smarter than anyone else, it's just that we've been thrown in to a unique situation for a sportfishing crew, and it's a case of adapt or be destroyed.

"NEARLY AN HOUR LATER WE'D HAD NINE WAHOO RELEASES AND THREE TIMES THAT NUMBER OF STRIKES."

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

A recent sojourn to Wreck Reef is a prime example. All of you experienced readers know that no matter where you fish, fishing is still fishing – even in remote locations the bite turns on and off in sync with myriad environmental variables, and when it's shut down it can be just as profound as when everything lights up and goes off again.

This was the case for the first three days of the charter to Wreck, a lonely Coral Sea outpost some 200 nautical miles north-east of home port, Hervey Bay. We tossed poppers in search of giant trevally, dropped jigs and trolled our best offerings for dogtooth and wahoo, and scanned the horizon for bird flocks indicating yellowfin tuna. We nabbed a few green jobfish, bluefin trevally, small GTs, red bass and wahoo, but the bite was decidedly off. This charter group had chosen to eschew gameboats and signed up to fish exclusively from 17ft Kevlacat Fly Caster skiffs, so when the breeze came up, Damon moored all four of these at one of the shoals and we used the mothership to give the entire eastern end of the reef complex a real going-over. We found tons of mid-water bait, and towed our best spreads of wahoo and dogtooth morsels, finally nabbing three wahoo near the end of the afternoon. At this point the group was becoming despondent that the big trip they'd all looked forward to for months on end appeared to coincide with a pervasive case of lockjaw at Wreck Reef. If they'd known what was coming next, they would have been grateful for the solitude and rest.

FIRST CONTACT

The best charter skippers almost relish a bit of adversity. A quiet first three days left Damon undaunted. After all, breezy conditions had limited our ability to probe some of the best passes and corners in the skiffs, and we still had half of the 15-mile series of reefs to cover. The orders came down from the bridge to saddle up. By sunrise we had the towing rigs in place and we sipped steaming mugs of coffee as our chef whipped up a hot breakfast. The skiffs knifed along in the wake of mothership *Odyssey*, our bow pointed for the western-most anchorage of Wreck Reef. The stark sand mound of West Cay poked over the horizon, and soon we were unhitching the skiffs as *Odyssey* swung gently on the hook over an expanse of rippling sand bottom, shimmering aqua in the early morning light. The wind had dropped to nothing, and we could all feel something in the air as we loaded tackle and skimmed off on a plane under cloudless blue skies.

I had the privilege of fishing the

week with Chris Yu, Kenny Lee, Simon Powell and my friend David Green, whom I'd met six years earlier in Vava'u, Tonga. I had no idea then that David was an icon of Indo-Pacific sport fishing – you'd never suspect it from his down-to-earth, unassuming manner – but I noticed his quietly conveyed, vast knowledge and masterful fishing expertise right away. Perhaps the most exciting of the many things I learnt that long-ago day in Tonga from David was about these prolific and remote sunken reefs far out in the Coral Sea – places that David and Tim Simpson had been among the first to sportfish in the late '80s aboard Capt Joe Wilkinson's *Seafari*. Neither of us imagined that the next time we'd fish together would be on a trip to one of those very same outposts, aboard a spanking-new deluxe mothership.

Simon had the hot hand with the popper, having bagged a couple of GTs in the early going, and his luck continued with a fat green jobfish, followed by a crushing strike up against the reef, this time a burly red bass that nearly made it back home before Simon pressured him out to the skiff. Chris bagged a bluefin trevally. Meanwhile the VHF crackled with reports of a school of yellowfin and the first couple of wahoo on the other skiffs. We decided to pop out off the edge and check the bluewater action, since the conditions were nearly flat calm and we could literally throw a stone to the drop-off.

SHEER PANDEMONIUM

David quickly had two trolling outfits rigged with his custom giant minnows – loud-colored wooden affairs with a pronounced bib, re-rigged with 500lb split rings and Decoy trebles, on 4m leaders of thin 250lb multi-strand wire leader. Fully 30cm in length, these lures dig down deep and wobble so hard you think you're hooked up until you become accustomed to the action. Multiple slashes and cuts scarred each lure – battle wounds from David's early pioneering efforts to this very same reef some 20 years before. Kenny stood in the back cage, trolling a chartreuse stickbait on his popping rod way back down the middle. Stickbaits are fat cigar-shaped lures with a tow-point on the nose. They have no bib and no built-in action and look like the worst, most unproductive lure you can imagine. They also catch fish like you wouldn't believe!

I was watching the sharp drop from 25 to 80 metres on the color sounder screen while telling a story about last year's trip to this area, when we were catching wahoo to 38kg. My tales were met by a few jokes and sarcastic remarks from my fish-starved anglers. The wisecracks were cut off by two screaming drags, with David's joining the high-pitched chorus the moment he tried to wind in and clear the remaining lure from the spread.

Chris, Kenny and David short-stroked their fish, passing rods over and under in perfect coordination. Groans met the arrival of Chris's fish, a silvery barracuda. Then Kenny dropped his fish, but David's fish took off on a blistering run, and, sure enough, neon-blue bands on a navy background emerged rapidly from the depths. Simon chucked a jig out beyond this fish, dropped it 40m, and got nailed immediately on the retrieve. Chris grabbed his jig rod and expertly flipped the jig out beyond a massive dark torpedo angling in from the direction of Simon's fish, and got whacked on the way down. By the time I released David's fish, Kenny had tossed his stickbait, snapping it erratically, then winding slack, and four wahoo from 20-30kg rushed it from all directions, veering off at the last moment right at the side of the boat. By then David had already dropped his jig, had three strikes, and hooked up on the fourth one. The previous three days of slow action were promptly forgotten!

We released three wahoo on the first flurry, and strung up a number of fish on the jigs. The hunting pack still surrounded us, some cruising right on the surface, others visible at assorted depths in the clear, green-tinted lagoon outflow just at the edge of the drop-off. I quickly rigged a bait rod, tossed in a couple of chunks of skipjack, followed by a juicy strip that smoked blood as it landed. Both Kenny and I flinched as a big wahoo rushed in and grabbed the bait the moment it hit the water, snatching Kenny up against the cage railing with a sharp grunt.

David and Simon each hooked another fish right away in the melee of navy-blue missiles firing into the berley, with Chris cheering everyone on as he waited for an opening. Chris cast a big popper out beyond the fray, and although the wahoo swirled on it and followed, they didn't pounce as we'd been sure they would.

Three releases later they were still hanging with us as we drifted, and once more they'd settled down and were cruising casually past the jigs. I asked Kenny to fire out the stickbait again. I'd recounted a story earlier to my fellow anglers about a wahoo that launched at a stickbait last year, and leapt all of the way *over* the skiff, between me and the angler in the cage. It's not that the guys didn't believe me – it's just difficult getting one's mind around something so amazing. They soon understood what I was talking about when a massive wahoo launched on Kenny's stickbait, arcing high above our heads with the lure crossways in its mouth. Kenny's eyes looked like they'd pop out as he tried frantically to scramble out of the cage and get forward. The toothy missile arced down straight at him amid alarmed shouts, only to miss him by half a metre and smack bodily into the outboard, then race off, snatching Kenny back in to the cage and exploding off on a wild, whitewater surface run. We all roared with excitement.

EMERGING TRUTHS

Nearly an hour later we'd had nine wahoo releases and three times that number of strikes. We'd beat that >

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pack up a bit, and gone back to the troll. David had a quick strike on a shiny silver tuna-shaped minnow we'd named Tina – a strong surge, and then a small blue marlin launched out of a pile of white water, only to toss the lure. Whatever had been suppressing the bite for the previous few days was all over now – the place was going off! All three of the other skiffs were enjoying the same action – overwhelming attacks by large numbers of wahoo, brief interludes of trolling followed by long drifts sight casting and jigging. Like Kenny, the guys working the stick baits were outscoring every other method. You'd never suspect the rather slow, erratic cadence would make wahoo pull the trigger so often – they were swimming past fresh bloody chunks of tuna to eat the things – but the evidence was overwhelming and unequivocal. Not only that, they were quick to pounce on the same lure trolled.

We'd released 14 wahoo by lunch, when we all converged on the nearby mothership for a gourmet banquet. Anglers were beaming from ear to ear, slugging back a few frosty draft beers and swapping happy fishing tales. Soon we were back in the skiffs and planing across calm seas back to the drop-off and were fishing again within 10 minutes. Strong current pushed around the north-western corner of the reef, off the jagged, sharp coralline wall, and collided with the green-tinted flow coming out of the lagoon, forming a distinctive current rip with eddies and whirlpools that extended out of sight to the west. Truly epic numbers of wahoo, arrayed in large, loose aggregations, swarmed up and down the wall, the strike patterns marked on the electronic chart gradually delineating the main clusters of fish. On one strike near the top of a particularly steep section of wall, the fish roared off line on a deep sounding run, only to pull the hooks, and as Chris cranked the lure back in, a large school of rainbow runners came racing back with it. These are classic characteristics of hangouts for dogtooth tuna, almost certainly the identity of Chris' fish. We stopped and jigged the spot with no bites, other than David who hooked an unidentified freight train after dropping a whole live coronation trout Simon had caught on his jig. The fish actually spat the bait whole – the lack of scratches and cuts indicative of a very large groper or cod.

The birds started working hard on several distinct bunches of yellowfin tuna just off the edge as the afternoon sun dropped lower. We idled by and Kenny hooked up on – what else – his chartreuse stick bait, holding part of the pack close enough for Chris to nail a nice school-sized yellowfin on a popper following a series of

ad, frothy strikes. We spotted several gger yellowfin, over 30kg, leaping ear of the water under one pack birds, but we failed to round one . Wahoo continued to attack, nd by now David was using his athead rod to catch them with a nall Rapala on 4m of #7 singlestrand ire trace, getting hits every time on is stealthier gear. We finished the ay exhausted with 18 wahoo, five ellowfin, one blue marlin hook-up, nd assorted other captures (red bass, een jobfish, bluefin trevally, two pecies of coronation trout), all fishing ith light tackle out of a 17ft skiff 200 iles offshore.

RICKS AND TECHNIQUES

he wahoo action continued for nother day, and then began to taper ff on the third – 230-odd releases nd probably 600 strikes later. Capt im Baker's crew drifted off the wahoo nd began hunting for dogtooth una along the northern edge of the eef complex, dropping jigs into bait chools marked on the sounder to aise the packs, then casting stickbaits o elicit strikes from doggies to 25kg. Damon's guys decided to stay with the vahoo and released an even 30 on the econd day at West Cay, joining Tim or the dogtooth fishing on the third lay. Among the dogtooth flurries a 0kg sail charged in and wolfed down you guessed it – a stickbait. Capt d Lester's anglers lost count of their vahoo releases around 11 am, and added a 30-odd kg yellowfin to the nix before lunchtime. We alternated between wahoo and yellowfin tuna under the birds, trolling our way to the nost active flocks, casting a stickbait ar downwind to hook the first fish, hen casting more stickbaits to entice ollowers. Kenny got a 20kg mahi nahi under one set of birds doing this, and Simon added a 32kg yellowfin under another.

We've since improved and refined our stickbait techniques, rigging, hooks, and lure selection, so much o that I'll be dedicating an entire article to the final results next ssue. We've engaged two custom manufacturers, one in Australia and one abroad, to produce the ures exactly to our specifications, and the first batches are out. These vill soon be available for sale at www.nomadsportfishing.com.au.

Rather than get too far ahead of he story, let's backtrack to some of he early themes that got us going n the right direction. The first is hat wahoo, dogtooth, yellowfin and billfish regularly attack much larger prey items than many of the lures normally used to catch them. Bowling pin teasers – specifically the Lulu by Boone – have long been one of my favorites (I'm so attached to Lulu that some people find it disturbing). Lulu's slanted face and fat mid-section cause frothy tail shakes followed by deep, wobbling dives and erratic, lateral darts, punctuated by sudden surface splashes. Gamefish of all descriptions launch themselves at this lure with reckless abandon, knocking big chunks out of her, and I have one with an embedded bill tip that snapped off from the momentum of one banzai charge (as Kenny Lee says, she likes to play rough).

You know how sometimes ideas smack you in the head like a 2x4 piece of lumber? Some years back I asked myself, "Why tow this thing that gets all of these strikes without hooks, especially since many of the deeper attacks go unseen and the fish don't convert to the rest of the spread?". Subsequently I drilled and rigged two Lulus with a belly hook and a tail hook, using 400lb test cable and 12/0 Mustad 7691s, and the results were excellent. Wahoo of all sizes were piling on and hooking up (interestingly, many weren't that big, 12-20 kg, demonstrating the point about the willingness of these predators to slash into prey items many of us consider large. Lulu is about 350mm in length). Then we began trolling them over the dogtooth spots, and in many cases the largest fish of the pack seemed to launch on Lulu (we recently caught 90kg and 70kg doggies on her, in addition to a number in the 40-50 kg range). We've also hooked two blue marlin on her.

We've now learnt that Lulu is really the tip of the iceberg, simply an indicator of broader truths that pioneers like David Green have been flirting with for 20 years and more. One is that premier bluewater gamefish, including billfish, like large, hard-wobbling "giant minnow" or swimming-plug presentations. We found that traditional treble hook and split-ring rigging doesn't stand up well to the punishment — the hardware bends, opens, breaks and loses fish regularly, and seldom successfully hooks and holds billfish. And finally, whether cast or trolled, such lures don't have to be swimming fast to produce stellar results offshore. In fact, a seductive sequence of pauses, dives and wobbles, more like barra fishing than what the conventional offshore wisdom would have us do, seems to frequently outcatch the competition. By the time you've read this our entire next round of experiments will be complete and coming out in the next issue of BlueWater.

HOT TIPS

HOW TO CONVERT LULU FROM TEASER TO LURE

The Lulu by Boone is a proven teaser, but why sacrifice all of those colossal hits by big yellowfin, dogtooth, wahoo and marlin, many of whom then swim off? Fit Lulu out with through-wired hooks as shown below, and you now have a highly effective teaser that will both suck fish into your spread, and catch the ones who can't focus on anything else but Lulu. Lulus should be available at leading offshore tackle suppliers but if you have trouble, you can also get them from www.nomadsportfishing.com.au .

WAHOO GOURMET GRILL

Wahoo are among the tastiest fish that swim. By steaking them as shown here, you'll be able to save every bit of meat possible. Locate the vertebral discs and cut through the joints, rather than through the solid bone.

Any wahoo is great, but try this marinade for something really special. In a large, sealable container add: olive oil, teriyaki sauce, Italian dressing, parsley, ginger, garlic, Jamaican Pickapeppa sauce (or equivalent), a touch of pepper sauce – like Tabasco, and a good dose of fresh lime juice. Stir well (like beating eggs) then add the wahoo, mix thoroughly and marinate for a couple of hours in the fridge – if you can wait.

Grill on medium-low heat only until they are *just* cooked through. Enjoy!

NOMAD SPORTFISHING

All information for booking your own trip to the Coral Sea can be found at www.nomadsportfishing.com.au