

# Coral Sea *Odyssey*

IN A GEOGRAPHIC  
NUTSHELL, THE CORAL  
SEA ISLAND TERRITORIES  
CAN'T BE ANYTHING LESS  
THAN AN AWESOME  
FISHING SPOT.

Warren Steptoe suggests that a Coral Sea adventure may become fly fishing's next frontier.

While pursuit of (personal) new horizons remains perhaps the greatest motivator of fly fishers everywhere—and may it ever be so—in today's world opportunities to live even near the cutting edge come rarely.

It is getting on for 15 years since Dean Butler and Fish Philliskirk first broke dogtooth tuna on fly ground. Often a finalist when the toughest fish on the planet are being discussed, dogtooth are a challenging species to bring boatside on any class of fishing tackle; and especially so given the limitations of a fly rod.

An exclusively Indo Pacific species, dogtooth tuna generally live well offshore and are typically associated with deep water near isolated reef systems; especially where the bottom drops off steeply into deep water. Location location location: by their very nature dogtooth are a difficult fish to access.

While American fly fisher Hal Chittum III has moved things dogtooth along some over the last couple of years, in 2006 you'll still scarcely run out of fingers counting people who have taken a dogtooth tuna on fly.

The potential of remote areas on our own Great Barrier Reef first showed in the IGFA charts in 2003 with Hal's 24.5 kg dogtooth on 10 kg tippet. Admitting he'd "been bit by the bug," Chittum came back the next year to raise the 10 kg tippet class ante to 40 kg. His efforts in 2005 made the front cover of the American magazine *Fly Fishing in Saltwaters* and include a pending record for a 70 kg plus dogtooth on 8 kg tippet.

That surely rates as where the cutting edge in bluewater fly fishing lies at present. It's a spectacular effort in any terms.

Chittum's GBR efforts so far include 5 successive trips out here from the States. 2005 involved a 22 day char-

ter to Osprey Reef, an isolated system separate from the Great Barrier Reef and situated some 100 nautical miles off Lizard Island—a long boat ride from anywhere and a typical dogtooth tuna hotspot. Aussie bluewater fishing writer Dave Granville's *Fly Fishing in Saltwaters* feature about Chittum's 2005 trip commented, "This trip isn't for the faint of heart—or wallet."



Kate Van Gytenbeek caught this green job fish from a berley trail at Kenn Reef.

## THE CORAL SEA ISLAND TERRITORIES

Osprey Reef is but one of several isolated self-contained reef systems located outside the Great Barrier Reef and known officially as 'The Coral Sea Island Territories.' South and east of Osprey are others with at least similar dogtooth tuna potential. These include Marion, Frederick, Flinders, Holmes, Wreck, Cato and Kenn reefs.

Logistically there's good news now. Brisbane based Nomad Sportfishing Adventures first placed clients in this region, which quickly proved to be perhaps THE most dogtooth ridden place on the planet, in 2005. Nomad's 80-foot mothership *Odyssey* will again be safely ensconced in a sheltered reef lagoon out in the Coral Sea Island Territories nearly 300 nautical miles off the Queensland coast from September to December 2006. So for the first time ever, access to a genuine dogtooth tuna hotspot is easy.

No more drawn out travel arrangements, long boat rides, dodgy airports, or the fragile politics sometimes experienced elsewhere in the dogtooth's range. Clients fly out of Hervey Bay's modern airport in a turbo-prop Cessna Caravan floatplane

in addition to the usual crew. *Odyssey* plus two 11-metre game fishers, and three 6-metre dories (used for fishing otherwise inaccessible lagoons, channels and reef edges) comprises Nomad Sportfishing's set-up in the Coral Sea.

In 2005, most of Nomad's clientele were not fly fishers—as indeed most of them probably won't be in 2006 either. This is partly because Damon Olsen, the man behind Nomad Sportfishing, is quite a global leading light in deep water jigging and popper fishing for the infamous GT's (giant trevally). So most Nomad Sportfishing clients fly out to *Odyssey* to sweat over jig sticks and popper rods, although Damon himself is also an enthusiastic fly fisherman. In 2005 the fly fishing few included expatriate Aussie Randall Bryett and his American wife Kate Van Gytenbeek.

### THE FLY FISHING CONNECTION

Those names might ring a bell. Kate's dad Peter Van Gytenbeek brought *Fly Fishing in Saltwaters* to us, ably assisted by Kate, until his eventual retirement and the title's passing over to World Publications. Randall, a sometime charter skipper, met Kate at the



Sight fishing for bluefin trevally is a bonus.

While Damon and crew were busy with a film crew from American television show *Spanish Fly* we, along with Ben Thrower, a fly fishing mate of Damon's, and sometimes crew member Scott Bannerot, enjoyed several days of fantastic fly fishing.

When not needed during filming one day, Scott offered to take Randall out in one of the dories for a shot at a dogtooth on fly. Amongst other things, Scott, before putting down roots in Australia, was a Florida Keys fly fishing guide. And to get to the point of a rapidly becoming convoluted story, poor Kate was left to the (dubious) devices of Ben and me while Scott and Randall went hunting a Kenn Reef dogtooth.

We had a wonderful day chasing smaller GT's, reefies, job fish, red bass and those incredibly beautiful bluefin trevally—almost enough reason to fly fish the Coral Sea in themselves—



Nomad's luxury mothership anchored in the lagoon at Ken Reef in the Coral Sea.

which lands in the reef lagoon beside *Odyssey*. This after a spectacular two and a half hour flight over Fraser Island, the Capricorn Bunker Group and assorted picturesque reef wonders.

*Odyssey* is an aluminium catamaran built in Cairns (she's big sister to Greg Brisbane's *Tropic Paradise*) and commissioned mid 2005. She's a fully air-conditioned state-of-the-art luxury vessel whose complement includes a chef, a hostess and an engineer in

Sunshine Coast Flyfishing Expo a decade ago and the rest, as they say, is history.

Nowadays Randall and Kate operate the 'American Australian Fishing Connection', bringing Americans out here to enjoy our fishing including—obviously as the story unfolds—Nomad Sportfishing's new Coral Sea operation. All these apparently loose ends should connect when I tell you that Randall and Kate were aboard *Odyssey* with the writer last year.



A bluefin from flats around Observatory Cay on Kenn Reef.

# Coral Sea Odyssey . . . continued



Prospecting the reef flats on Kenn Reef for bluefin and gold spot trevally.



Dogtooth on fly are a team effort—Scott and Randall with their rod-breaking fish.

although we can't go there yet if I'm ever to get around to telling you that Randall, with considerable contribution from Scott, was mightily successful.

At 22 kg Randall's dogtooth is a capture of global significance belittled not one bit to my mind by being disqualified from IGFA recognition because his rod gave up the ghost in the closing stages of an epic confrontation. For people interested in getting up close and personal with bluewater fly fishing's cutting edge, Randall's achievement raises two tantalising

issues. Firstly, compared to fish taken on deepwater jigging gear Randall's fish was a relatively small one, and secondly, this fish came easily enough to indicate that a dogtooth on fly is within the reach of every fly fisher with the means to avail themselves of Nomad Sportfishing's services.

And yes Nomad are offering fly-fishing specific packages, being well aware of difficulties involved when disparate disciplines are put aboard the same proverbial boat. How close anyone wants to get to a dogtooth on fly is entirely up to them now!

## CORAL SEA OPPORTUNITIES

In a geographic nutshell, the Coral Sea Island Territories can't be anything less than an awesome fishing spot. To bluewater fly fishers this translates to prospects with hard to get a shot at species such as wahoo and billfish.

Billfish? In 2005, Nomad found black, blue and striped marlin, sailfish and short billed spearfish out here in the Coral Sea.

After a single season Damon readily admits they are far short of realising the potential of this new destination. We were sharing a watch while he and crew ferried *Odyssey* back to Hervey Bay as their season closed, when Damon confided that it seemed

every time they'd opened one fishing door out there, they found several others.

"It's a bit frustrating really," he quipped, "no way there's time to get around even some of 'em. Still the fishing we've encountered while practically bumbling around has left no-one complaining."

And in addition to the bluewater steak knives there's fishing on the reefs. Our picture-spread features images of this aspect simply because a certain fly fisherman cum photographer couldn't put a lens cap over constant exposure to poetic visions of an absolute tropical fly fishing paradise.

As a working professional my assignments were more about the burgeoning market in deepwater jigging and 'popper tossing' for GT's. Fly fishing while not at all an afterthought because Nomad Sportfishing caters for it, was not really a focus at the time. More something Ben, Kate, Randall, and I did to stay out of the *Spanish Fly* film crew's way.

It leads me to say that if coral trout, job fish, red bass and those exquisite bluefin trevally, amongst others, aren't sufficient motivation in themselves to come out here, you'd be missing some of the best experiences the Coral Sea has to offer to spend the entire time in paradise being beaten up by dogtooth, blitzed by wahoo, and bored waiting for a billfish . . .

For more information about fly fishing in the Coral Sea Island Territories visit the Nomad Sportfishing website [www.nomadsportfishing.com.au](http://www.nomadsportfishing.com.au) or call (07) 3311 5012.



A floatplane provides convenient access to the mothership.