

Bluewater madness

EXTREME Wahoo!

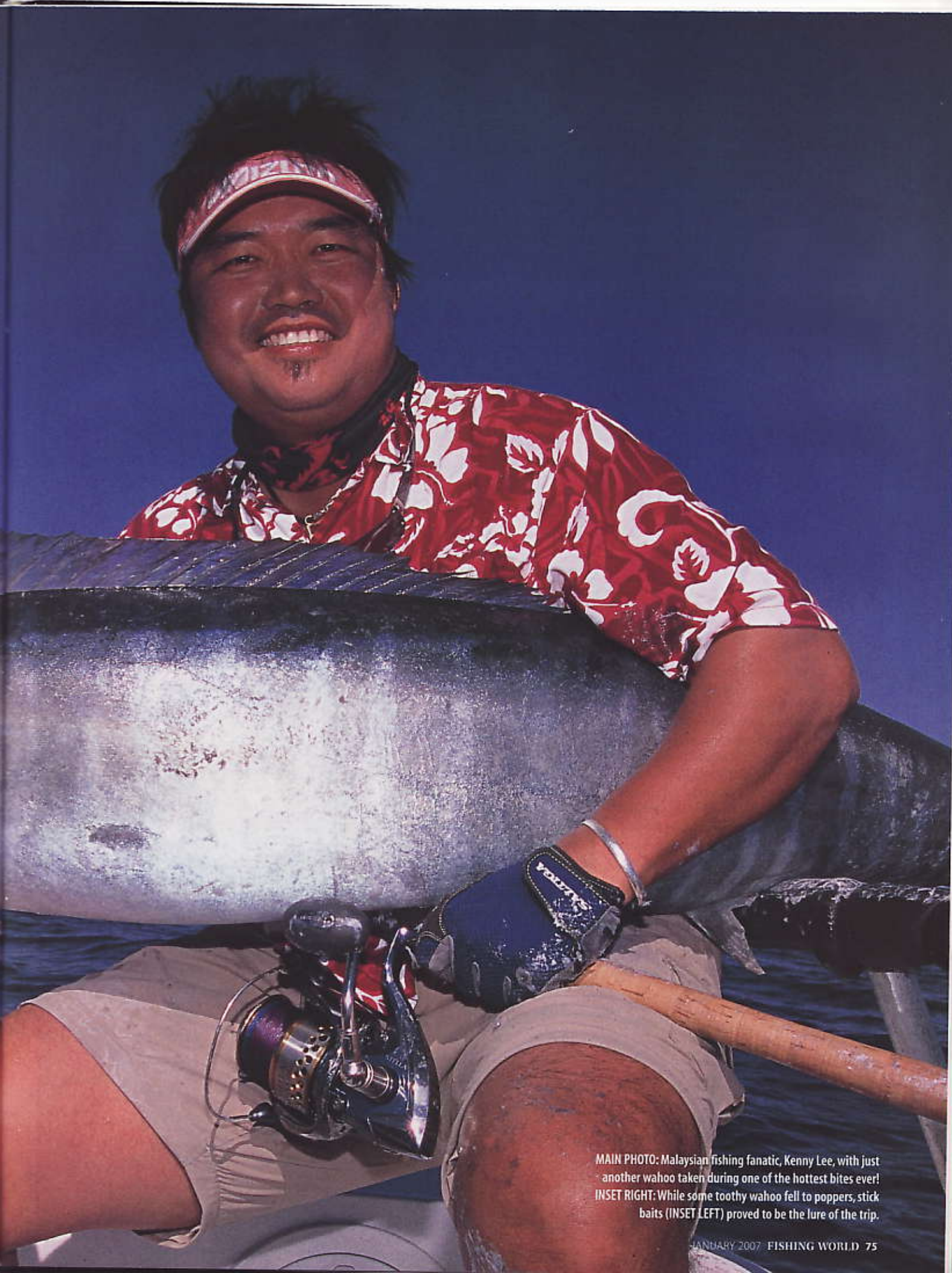
Ever dreamt about being surrounded by schools of massive, hungry wahoo? Well, DAVID GREEN lived the dream and survived some insane action to tell a tale that will probably never be repeated in sportfishing history.

If you're a fellow travelling angler, there have probably been experiences in your watery journeys that are hard to repeat or describe. That's part of the reason that fishing remote places is so attractive. I recently journeyed far out into the atolls of the Coral Sea aboard Nomad Charters (see article in December issue). On the last few days of this trip, on the drop off to the west of the inner end of Wreck Reef, we found an aggregation of wahoo slowly cruising around like big purple striped torpedoes in a patch of water about two kms long.

In that small patch of water there were probably more than 10,000 adult wahoo. There wasn't much bait, the sea was calm, and massive wahoo slowly idled about just under the surface. Until this point, the wahoo fishing had been strangely quiet. A day prior we had trolled for six hours across reefs normally loaded with toothy monsters, and had only caught two wahoo from about five hits.

We stumbled onto the motherlode when





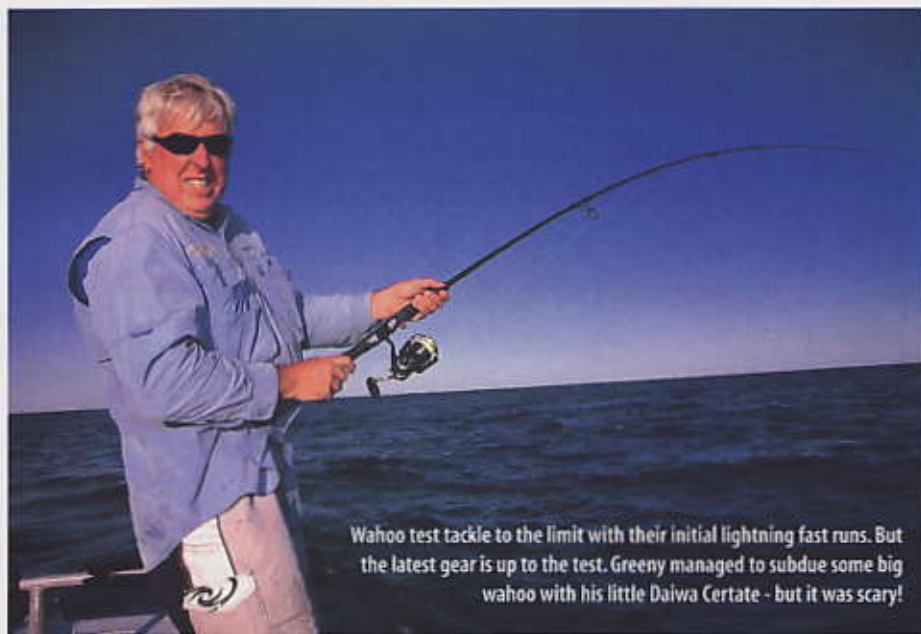
MAIN PHOTO: Malaysian fishing fanatic, Kenny Lee, with just another wahoo taken during one of the hottest bites ever!
INSET RIGHT: While some toothy wahoo fell to poppers, stick baits (**INSET LEFT**) proved to be the lure of the trip.

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we trolled out to the current edge after a morning throwing poppers around the lagoons near West Island. A large trolled bibless minnow took the bite, and ripped off a football field of line before being brought to the boat on 24kg game gear. We needed a fish for food, and wahoo were scarce and tasty, so that particular fish was gaffed and brought in the boat.

other dories a kilometre or so north found the other end of the aggregation, and the radio chatter between the deckies was sharp and excited.

There aren't many opportunities in fishing where you can sight cast to a big wahoo and twitch poppers or stick baits in front of their noses. If you wanted to do that, the best way would be to troll a



Wahoo test tackle to the limit with their initial lightning fast runs. But the latest gear is up to the test. Greeny managed to subdue some big wahoo with his little Daiwa Certate - but it was scary!

Weighed later, it went 35 kilos, and was a good representative of the schools we were about to encounter.

Our guide Scott put the troll lures back in and we soon had another hit. As the second fish was being played, several more came in and were swimming around the boat curiously watching us. Scott fed out a handful of tuna pieces to berley the fish, and in seconds a few fish became a dozen, then 20. The troll lines went away and the jig rods and popper rods came out. While we found this patch of fish, the

spread of teasers and then switch the fish to the cast lure. This would probably consume days of effort to get one or two casts away. Over the next two days, we had thousands of opportunities to throw a lure to a wahoo cruising under the surface. The fishing was spectacular, probably unrepeatable, and at times very scary as airborne wahoo crashed into outboards, foredecks or sailed up and over. Looking eyeball to eyeball at close to 40 kilos of wahoo less than a metre from your face is something I won't forget.



A spectacular shot of a big 'hoo smashing a stick bait.

Our first stick bait encounter came courtesy of Kenny Lee. With a large Orion Stick Bait rigged on his GT rod, he cast it near a cruising purple wahoo that seemed to be half asleep. About four metres from the boat the fish suddenly exploded, rocketing into the air with Kenny's lure strapped to its face. It was six metres in the sky and incoming! More interestingly, Kenny was in the rear casting cage, which is great for stability, but hard to sidestep left or right. The fish missed him by a metre before slamming head first into the outboard cowling. I think it then bit him off. Kenny's eyes were like saucers and everyone on board had five seconds of open-mouthed silence before collapsing in laughter.

The water was about 60 to 70m deep on the wahoo patch, with a slight current eddy at the back of West Island, the inner most atoll of the Wreck Reef complex. It was hard to work out why just about every wahoo in the entire chain of reefs was



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congregated here. While there was a bit of bait, it seemed no different to the other areas of the reef that had stacks of bait but few wahoo. Perhaps it was a spawning aggregation. Most of the fish we spotted were almost stationary, swimming just under the surface, and they fed on tuna cubes very slowly and deliberately as they swam next to the boat. A splashing popper or stick bait or jig detonated them into hunting mode, and they were easy to fire up, lighting up instantly with iridescent purple bands. Just about every

fish was more than 20 kilos, most were around 30 kilos and a few monsters were better than 40.

Line capacity proved to be a bit of a problem, even on the big Stellas and Saltigas full of 80-pound braid. This would competently catch any single wahoo, but a common problem was hooking a screamer that would rip off around 150 to 200ms of line under heavy drag, and then the hooks would pull. A couple of turns of the handle and a fresh new wahoo would hook up, removing the rest of the spool. The secret


to this dilemma, as a few of the crew found out, is to have a very good spool knot and hang on hard. In most cases you'll get a few turns and be back in business.

The big Orion stick baits were the best lure of this trip. These big lumps had bugger all action but responded to rod twitching and had a head up, bum down attitude that sent wahoo and yellowfin into attacking frenzies. Even sailfish ate them. With a pair of big Owner trebles on super strong rings, they were lethal. The wahoo either slammed them on the top or leapt clear of the water, landing on the lure on descent. The most dangerous attack was the rocket from underneath, the type Kenny hooked as described above. It was clear that we had to have some "workplace health and safety" guidelines early in the trip, or someone was going to wear a 30 kilo toothed missile clear in the face. The rules were that stick baits and poppers were to finish their retrieves well clear of the front or back of the boat, and the last bit of the retrieve was to be slow with no twitching. Despite this, we had another couple of near misses.

Watching a wahoo eat a lure next to the boat is fascinating. On a jig or popper they zoomed about, and when they bit the lure and felt the hooks they actually stopped still. They shook their heads, turned on the purple neon stripes, and when the pressure of the line made the hooks sting them, all you would see was a blur of bubbles like a torpedo trail. Most times the other wahoo in the school would follow the hooked fish. Curiously, a few of the wahoo lit up down one side only, with purple bands down one side of the body and a dull grey on the other.

Oceanic white tipped sharks proved a problem when big wahoo went deep. These aggressive sharks ate several fish that were probably over 40 kilos at the end of long fights on threadline tackle. A pack of sharks working together generally demolished the lure as well as the fish. Releasing tired wahoo at the boat was also technically tricky, with a small lip gaff the best method. Most swam off fairly strongly, but the sharks probably attacked some of the fish. Good releases powered off from the boats with tiger stripes still glowing.

At the end of the first wahoo day, Kenny nearly killed us again. In his tackle box was a rather unique stick bait from an exclusive tackle emporium in Singapore. According to Kenny, this was an Aladdin's cave of fabulous and expensive tackle. The lures from that shop were all hand



C&R wahoo can be an exciting - and potentially dangerous - business.

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Fisho's advertising manager, Chris Yu, managed to wrangle this toothy speedster while working from a casting cage which is a special feature of the Nomad Charters' fishing dories.

painted works of art, and this stick bait was a cutie. Painted in orange, white and black to imitate very accurately a clown fish, it was appropriately called Nemo. It even had a smiling face. Nemo died a spectacular death. The sun was setting in a big orange ball, we'd all caught so many wahoo our arms ached, and the sea was glassy. Scott was tidying up the boat prior to heading back to the mother ship. Kenny had a "last cast". We were a fair way inshore of the wahoo seam, and for some reason he had cranked the drag of

his Stella down to GT pressure, about 15 kilos. Nemo was twitching his way back to the boat, when three metres from the rod tip the still ambience was shattered by a monstrous wahoo in the sky with Nemo in his razor sharp teeth. It's a weird experience looking upwards at a fish! Nemo's nemesis crashed back in half a metre from the outboard, hit top speed and Kenny's 80-pound braid cracked like a rifle shot. Too big a fish on too short a lease with too much drag. But it was bloody spectacular to watch! Finding that Nemo will prove very difficult. He was last seen in the custody of a large and angry wahoo travelling at 30 knots at the western end of Wreck Reef!

Tackle testing

With so many co-operative wahoo in the area, it was time to do a bit of serious tackle testing. Over the past year I've come to be a big fan of Daiwa Certate threadlines. On the 2500 model I've caught lots of big barra to over 25 kilos. Prior to this trip I bought a 3500 HD Custom, the next model up. This held about 250m of thin 15-kilo braid. This reel can pull nine kilos of drag. I cranked the drag down, rigged up the terminals and fed a pretty Rapala X Rap into the wake. It was like taking a small car to the drag races. Five minutes later the top shot of 150m of braid screamed off the reel in about 10 seconds, and the reel was performing flawlessly. I caught four from four on the Certate with the biggest about 28 kilos. I'm sure this reel was never designed for this sort of work, but this rather extreme test showed me that the 3500 Certate is an even bigger



ABOVE & LEFT: Don't expect your lures to stay in pristine condition after they come in contact with the business end of a wahoo!

ball buster than its little brother.

The general pattern of our wahoo sessions was to troll the area for a few minutes until the seam of purple gold was found when the troll lure screamed off. After a while we trolled the stick baits on the big popper rods for even more bites. As soon as a wahoo was found, his 10 or so mates would appear around the boat, and we began casting. All four dories followed this routine.

Between the four dories in a couple of days between 200 and 300 wahoo were landed from over a thousand bites. Most were caught casting lures to fish sighted cruising under the surface. It was an extraordinary fishing session, and we all realised that we had been a part of a fishing trip unlikely to be repeated in our collective fishing lifetimes. Perhaps we had stumbled on to a spawning aggregation, possibly there was bait present in quantities we couldn't spot on our sounders, or perhaps it was part of an underwater migration. I've fished Wreck Reef many times and caught stacks of wahoo around West Island, but I've never seen anything as red hot and sustained as this wahoo bite.

As mentioned last issue, Damon Olsen's Nomad Charters is a brilliant operation. If you want to catch a few or a lot of wahoo I'd suggest looking up his website www.nomadcharters.com.au.

I think it would be unreasonable to expect the numbers of wahoo we encountered, as it seemed a once in a lifetime event, but if the fishing was a tenth as good, you'll catch a stack. I've currently got my mate Rod Jones working on a new Stick Bait design and I can't wait to get another crack at casting to free swimming giant wahoo.

David Green fished Wreck Reef courtesy of Nomad Charters.