



Shoalwater 2009 Trip Report

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"Smashed at Shoalwater", "Smoked in Two Seconds", "The Popper Graveyard" – these were among the titles I considered for the trip report to Shoalwater 2008. Instead, I have decided to leave it untitled and simply let the trip report and photos speak for themselves.

This year, eight keen customers joined Damon and his guides from Nomad Sportfishing for a week of fishing. The eight of us comprised Peter Lowe, Mick Cunningham, Chris Harrison, Malcolm Crane, Max Suthern and his son Patrick, Scott Hillier from Creek to Coast (and his cameraman Dean) and yours truly. Missing from our group to Shoalwater this year was Steve (Shoalwater) Kakavas who had last minute work commitments arise and George (Rod Destroyer) Pang who is studying for his medical specialisation. It's nice having George along as he is a medical emergency specialist just in case you get bitten by a fish! Hopefully, we'll see both these gentlemen next year.

The first week at Shoalwater traditionally is the week Damon and the guides fish with the customers and this year was no exception. For the rest of the year, they devote all their efforts to getting their customers onto fish so a very pleasant change for them, no doubt.

While the primary target at Shoalwater is GTs, this year we all went equipped for light sports fishing as a result of the experience we had from last year. As I wrote in my 2007 trip report, I found the light sports fishing at Shoalwater to be as good as anything I have ever experienced anywhere. Did this prove to be a great move!

We were picked up early at Yeppoon Harbour on Saturday, 2 February by the Odyssey as per last year for the journey up to Shoalwater.

Unlike last year where we continued all the way to Island Head Creek on the first day, the Odyssey stopped off at a bay some eight miles short of Island Head Creek about 2.30pm to get in a couple of hours fishing before nightfall.

I shared a dory with Damon, Scott and his cameraman Dean and we encountered action on the very first cast.



Rugged country at Shoalwater

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I was testing a new prototype popper made by Brisbane lure craftsman, Chris Young and my first cast was struck by a GT!

Unfortunately, it missed the hooks. Damon, however, hooked up within seconds and in very short time, landed a nice GT about 20kgs – what a start to the trip! I landed a fish soon after on Chris' prototype popper and a short time after that, Scotty hooked a very big fish. He was palming the spool ferociously but could not stop the fish taking line. As the fish was heading directly back towards a bommie, I leaned over to help him lock up with the result being an explosive parting of the 130lb braid.



First fish of the trip for me!

I've never popped 130lb in a straight pull before so I was somewhat shocked by the result – it wasn't the last time for the trip!

A couple of other fish were landed that evening which made for a promising start to the trip. I had been quite concerned due to the amount of rain that Central Queensland had been getting since Christmas.

The next day, we all headed out early to fish the area and to head up towards Island Head Creek which was where we had actually anchored the first night of the previous year. While we encountered a few fish in the morning, we just couldn't get one into the boat. I experienced my first complete wipe-out for the trip being smoked by a big fish which I could not prevent from getting back into cover. From time of hook-up to being cut off, I think it would have barely been two to three seconds. So much for 130lb braid if you can't stop the fish. Can't say I'm not used to it.....

After a relatively quiet period fishing for GTs, we opted to drift around casting soft plastics. We caught heaps of reefies before I landed a very nice golden trevally on my baitcaster – it took some fifteen to twenty minutes to land on a light outfit.



Amazing plastics action at Shoalwater!



Another trout!

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Late in the morning, we received a call over the radio from Jason Preece (Jason is truly the King of Plastics – if you can catch half as many fish while fishing with him, you're doing really well!), who had Malcolm and Chris in his dory. What they reported simply sounded too good to be true. While they had not encountered any significant big GT activity, they said that the areas they were fishing (Strong Tide Passage – the entrance to Shoalwater Bay) had gone mad with queenfish, small GTs, mixed reef fish etc. It was a fish every cast – if you could land it! Well, with that, the other three dories all shot up immediately to Strong Tide Passage.

We found that Jason was not exaggerating and for the next three hours, we encountered light sports fishing the likes of which I have never encountered anywhere. I've been to numerous spots in an awful lot of places like the Northern Territory, North Queensland, Western Australia and the Pacific but I have never experienced fishing like this.



A nice bludger (the fish, that is!)

We were fishing about a kilometre away from the nearest dory but every dory was encountering the same action. It was just insane – every time we dropped a lure (soft plastic, plug, anything!) into the water, a queenfish or trevally or tuna or reefie would grab it. The session was absolute pandemonium and culminated with Scotty being spooled on a Twinpower 6000 with 50lb braid in a matter of seconds.

I cannot deny this gave me great joy! It's always fun seeing someone else get spooled as long as it isn't me. We very reluctantly left the action as the lure of a big GT was too much. Actually, during the session, we saw a number of big GTs hanging below the queenies and small GTs but we could not entice them to take a big popper – although one very big fish did try to take my little Squidgie plastic. That would have been interesting if I hooked up!

We had to head back first to the Odyssey as Scotty's cameraman Dean needed more batteries.

On the way back, I desperately wanted to fish the rocks at the entrance to Island Head Creek but we needed to get Dean his batteries first. As we drove past, I looked longingly at the rocks as I just knew what was going to happen.



Sure enough, by the time we returned to the rocks, Jason's dory had returned to that spot and he had landed a stunning fish. Malcolm then had

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the very interesting experience of having two big GTs hooked up at the same time on the same lure. Unfortunately, he didn't land either. Aarrggghh! - I tell you, Scotty Hillier owes me one for this!

Anyway, we fished the area without a great deal of luck as we just couldn't get the fish to hook up. The evening finished though with Damon hooking a great fish on his last cast of the day. After an amazingly tough battle, he landed a GT of some 30kgs which fought completely out of proportion to its size. I had every expectation of seeing a 40kg+ fish and was shocked when I grabbed the leader and got a good look at the fish.



Jason's great capture at Island head Creek

Anyway, a great finish to an amazing day.

The next morning, the Odyssey started the 20 mile trip to High Peak island where we had encountered some amazing action the year before. At High Peak, we all got into the dories with great expectations and headed out. We encountered some action early in the day before the heavens absolutely opened up. The rain was so heavy we could barely see twenty metres in front of us.

We did encounter a few fish in the day but just didn't have much luck with hook-ups although Scotty did manage to get smoked by a very nice fish. The problem with my experience from the previous day on light tackle was I found it extremely difficult to concentrate of GTs when they were hard to find because every time you looked at the sounder, there was bait

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everywhere! I finally couldn't take it anymore and dropped a plastic down. A beautiful coral trout grabbed it immediately and for the next half hour before we moved, I had a great session on reefies. Not happy moving!



Malcolm's stunning capture at High Peak

We returned to the Odyssey to find that Jason, Malcolm and Chris had an terrific day on GTs landing a number of very nice fish. They had gotten their fish primarily around High Peak and at a spot that had really produced the previous year called Low Rock. In fact, we found all the other dories had better luck than we did on that day. Peter Lowe landed a beautiful Spaniard during the day on a soft plastic.



Peter/Mick's capture of a Spaniard on a plastic!



A nice GT on a prototype popper

One of the highlights for me on this day though wasn't even a capture. It was that Malcolm somehow managed to get himself bitten by a big GT. I've been telling everyone that he put his hand into its mouth to see whether it would bite him and it obliged. The real story is he was of course

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trying to unhook the fish but why let that get in the way of a good story! The day wasn't quite over for me as I managed to fill a bucket with delicious calamari that evening although I better give Peter Lowe some credit for catching some as well otherwise he might get offended! What I can say is that Yo-Zuri jigs are not cheap but boy, do they work well. It was a real fun way to finish the day.

The next day, Tuesday 5th, Damon decided to move to an island group (the Duke Islands) which we hadn't fished in previous years.

We sure travelled a long way that day visiting a number of islands. On this day, I continued to fish with Damon and Mick Cunningham joined us in the dory. This was a great day with us landing a number of very nice GTs although all three of us, Damon Mick and myself, were seriously smoked during the day. Damon had an absolutely enormous fish take his popper barely five metres from the dory in about three metres of water – the result was inevitable considering the area was covered in bommies.



Damon with a beauty from the Duke Islands

Mick was absolutely blown away in mid-afternoon by a huge fish that took his popper barely ten metres from the boat. He had a look of absolute horror on his face when another fish repeated the treatment soon after!

The poor fellow just couldn't win with his drag wound up around 18kg but the GTs made short work of him.

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The scenery at Shoalwater – it's hard to concentrate on the fishing sometimes!

I can't even remember the names of all the islands we visited that day but it included Allandale, Marble, Hunter, Wild Duck etc – too many to mention.

We had earlier in the day identified a "must-fish" area when the tide turned not far from where the Odyssey was anchored. The area comprised of ribbons of bommies covering a big area.

As we approached the area, we were called over the radio by Tim Baker, another of the Nomad guides who reported he had extracted a massive fish from that very area.



Tim and his super capture – the best to date at Shoalwater

We arrived barely five minutes after he released the fish! Both Damon and I were gnashing our teeth about this although Tim deserved to be congratulated for extracting a fish of such size from the spot. This fish would have been past the magical three figures and was an amazing capture for the area. This fish was and remains the biggest fish captured by anyone on a Nomad charter in Shoalwater. We'll see what we can do to break this next year!

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Chris with a great fish



Peter with his best effort of the week

Right at the end of the day, we decided on a few last casts at a spot we had identified earlier in the day. I had a really good feeling about this spot and sure enough, my first cast was nailed by a huge fish. I gave it everything I had but the fish just got closer and closer to getting back into the bommie so I did the only thing I could which was to lock up solid on the 130lb braid.



An idyllic anchorage for the Odyssey in the Duke Islands

The braid parted about two inches in front of the spool and that was that. So much for 130lb braid (I think I've said this already!). We returned to the Odyssey again find that the dory of Jason, Malcolm and Chris had another wonderful day landing a number of very impressive fish.

Noone fished off the back of the Odyssey that night – I think we were all too tired!

The next morning (Wednesday 6th), we took the 20 mile trip in the Odyssey to the Percy group of islands. The Percy group last year was where I was absolutely obliterated so I was looking forward to going back for revenge (yeah right!). On this day, I fished again with Damon and Peter Lowe joined us.

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Chris with another beauty from Jason's dory

We did manage to land a number of fish on this day but it was hard work on this day with an unpredictable current. In the afternoon, we managed to find some current flowing and lo and behold, we got amongst the fish!



Damon onto another good one – check out the scenery in the background!

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Peter hooked the best fish of the day with a monster taking his popper right next to the boat.

Unfortunately, it was just too close and with no stretch whatsoever in the braid and a tight drag, his 130lb braid parted like cotton thread.

All the dories got among the fish but the best quality fish were again landed by Jason's dory.



Yours truly locked up!

Thursday 7th was our last full day. I was again with Damon and Mick Cunningham joined us on the day. We went out this day to a group of islands around the Percys which had really produced for us last year and this year was no exception. Dory 1 really got into them this day!

Damon landed a stunning fish which was almost jet black in colour which left me very envious. I've been after a jet black fish for years but I've simply accepted that I'm jinxed when it comes to these.



Damon's catch of the week – I want one like this!

I had one of those very frustrating days being smoked twice by big fish and having a number of strikes without the fish hooking up.

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Early in the day, I was smoked on my heaviest outfit which was 170lb braid on a Carpenter SP78UHL. The fish ran away from me and then doubled back and that was the end of my very expensive FCL Ebipop.....



Mick with his best catch for the week

Mick landed a very nice fish from a very shallow spot which was covered in bommies. I was standing next to him and I still can't understand how on earth he managed to extract the fish from that area without being cut off. The fish left him almost completely exhausted and all he could manage for the photo was a grimace!

We returned to the Odyssey to find most of the other dories had less successful days on GTs. The main issue for GTs was current – or lack thereof. The fish were there and we had a number show themselves but they just were not as active without the strong current we were so used to at Shoalwater. They had however, some wonderful catches again on light tackle.



Jason with a gorgeous tuskfish – on plastics again! If I caught it, it would have ended up on a plate

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In the late afternoon, Damon and I went out for a plastics session. In about half hour, I think he caught some six to eight fish comprising mainly coral trout and a nice bludger in the 4 – 5kg range.

Yours truly caught nothing – a sad reflection on my ability with plastics!



A beautiful twilight scene from the Odyssey on our last night

Friday 8th was the day we left. We had a few hours in the morning prior to the floatplane and again, while the guys who focussed on light tackle had great sessions, we didn't have any luck on the GT front.

We managed to raise a few fish and in fact, Damon hooked up on his first cast of the morning but without anyone else in the boat who could drive it (yes, just me and I can't drive a boat!), he couldn't hold the fish.

As the morning wore on, the exertions of the trip caught up with me and I could barely lift my arms to cast. I admit it was almost a relief for me to get back to the Odyssey.

The floatplane arrived early in the afternoon and although exhausted, we all sadly bid goodbye to the Odyssey. For myself, Malcolm and Chris, it's only two months to Bugatti and I for one can't wait!

SUMMARY

Fishing Results

I think Malcolm Crane would be difficult to beat as the most successful fisherman in terms of quality of GTs caught at Shoalwater this year although I think as per usual, Damon caught the most fish. "He who casts best catches the most GTs" sums it up. If you need casting lessons on heavy GT gear, Damon is the man to speak to. Malcolm just goes quietly about his own way but always ends up among the top fishos on a trip.

I "only" got smoked six times this year. I'm not sure who was the "most smoked" fisherman although I think Mick Cunningham would give that title a run. He was intent on keeping Jai poppers in business and every evening, he seemed to be restocking!

I'm not sure on the overall numbers of fish captured but it was lots! We caught GTs, spaniards, shark mackerel, golden trevally, bludgers, tuna and all sorts of reef fish too many to mention – fishing with plastics at Shoalwater is like looking through a kaleidoscope.

Territory/Terrain

This is just some of the most beautiful country you could ever hope to fish. The scenery has to be seen to be believed and as I reported last year, it is barely touched. I am sure there were areas we fished which no-one has ever fished before.

In terms of terrain – one word and that is "brutal". A lot of the areas we fish are shallow with murderous rock structures. Often, you're a goner in two seconds – that is, the fish will have you smoked before you barely know it. There are areas there which we fished where you have an excellent chance on a big fish but it is tough country overall and you need to come prepared.

Equipment

This year, we were considerably better prepared for the terrain and fish and the majority of us went out with 130lb and even 170lb braid! There is no doubt that the heavier line contributed to the better quality of fish that were caught this year but everyone of us still experienced monumental wipe-outs where we were simply smashed in seconds.

In terms of lures, Shoalwater to me personally is more of a popper rather than stickbait location. That said, among the stickbaits, the Orion Bigfoots and Nomad Uluas and Wahoos work well there. For poppers, there was a real mix but the Orions again proved successful, particularly in the Fraser Pop model. Another popper that is popular with the Nomad guides and many customers is a big mouthed popper called a Jai which is available on the Odyssey.

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I tested a few prototype poppers for a Brisbane-based lure craftsman, Chris Young and found one model in particular to be excellent. It produces a great pop and is easy to work. Hopefully, Chris will get this to the market at some point.

Most of us are now using singles off the tail and either Baker rigged singles or trebles off the belly. The Baker rig has really gotten some traction now with the guides and I'm a convert myself. It offers all the security of a single hook but more "hooking" capability.

Fishing Available

The GT fishing goes without saying but last year, I wrote about the potential of the place for light sports fishing. Well, it realised all of that potential and more. People talk about going to places like the NT and Weipa for light sports fishing. Well, I've been to an awful lot of these places and Shoalwater is incomparable. The guys even managed to land a huge Spaniard on a small soft plastic this year. This doesn't mention the innumerable times we were just destroyed on the light tackle by the bottom denizens of the reef.

To be fair and perfectly objective, we did not find the GT fishing this year to be as hot as last year or at least, it did not appear to be although I think we caught just as many if not more fish this year.

Last year, we encountered schools of marauding fish everywhere. This year, it was more a case of single fish although we still did see multiple fish at some locations. I think much of this can be attributed to the current where we found a much bigger movement last year than this year. The GTs encountered this year ranged from babies on plastics to frightening monsters which were unstoppable on 170lb braid. This is one location where you have every chance of encountering a 70kg+ fish. Whether you can land it or not is your problem!

The Nomad Crew

Top class as always. I don't need to say much more as you need only read my previous trip reports to know my views. One mention I will make and that is while the food has always been good, these days it is just ridiculous. Chef Rob is absolute top class and every dinner is virtually a gourmet feast.

Would I go again?

Well, this is the second year for me at Shoalwater and I'm already booked for 2009! If you'd like more information on my experiences at Shoalwater or simply want to have a chat on GT popping, please feel free to contact me at klkh2002@hotmail.com