

The Boys' Big Winter Trip North '06



we weren't doing anything wrong yet we were experiencing the worst session of softbait fishing all year. With our tail between our legs we retreated back to the entrance.

Fortunately, that proved to be a good move; the area around the north head was quite fishy. There was some irony that it was also glassy calm where we fished. Shane caught a really nice trevally while my crew got on to the snapper. We have now found, on a number of occasions, that as the light reduces the snapper move up the water column and away from structure. We started to catch snapper by casting into the open water of the channel.

The other boat was low on fuel and decided to head home while we went for one last shot. Bonze was keen to have a go just below the light in the entrance. It was a good call; we caught a couple of fish on our first few casts. What happened next though has given me nightmares ever since. Bonze hooked up once again, big time. This fish made the one he lost in the morning seem insignificant.

There's over 100 metres of Fireline on each of our spinning reels. In deep water that's heaps as we can sit right above a fish if we need to. This snapper was different; it went at a rate I've seldom seen and we were actually going to be spooled. There are only three things you can do in that situation, wait and hope the fish turns, lock up, or chase it. I waited as long as I dared, but in the end we just had to give chase. The fish went directly in shore and we felt more confident. Bonze gained a bit of line then the fish took off again. We managed to shorten things up but our fish had found the bottom, yet it still took

line but we were sure we could get it clear of the obstruction. The water was deep, fortunate, because I had the boat pirouetting less than two metres off the shore. However the realisation was dawning that we weren't going to get this fish.

If I was gutted after the first loss, we were heartbroken after this one. We heard of an eighteen pound snapper caught in the same spot a few days later. I can tell you that the fish we hooked would have pulled a fish of that size backwards. We had a few more casts but we had lost our edge after that.

I've thought about it many times since and I'm not sure I'd use the same tactics again. Pulling 100m of braid is going to hurt even the biggest snapper. While we were a lot closer to the shore than that, on the angle it was further. We'd lost well

over 50m before we chased the fish. Next time I'd wait until nearly all the line was gone. With 6lb braid breaking at well over 20lbs, and with the Dropshot rods able to take some serious punishment, I probably panicked a little too early.

We headed for home, stopping only to hook a tow rope on 'Casino Royale'. Mark and James will have to sort their partnership out a bit better so that each knows whether the other has topped up the fuel tank...

Scallop and bacon kebabs for the entrée. Meat and more liquid refreshments for the main. May the boys' trips away never change...

Day Two

The contrast between morning one and morning two was vast. There was no wind and the conditions were gorgeous. Some things don't change though; the boys weren't in a rush to get out of bed, (it wasn't like a day of marlin fishing), and they weren't going anywhere before another big feed of bacon and eggs.

We split up. Bonze and I took the Surtees off to the Cavalis ahead of the others. There was no wind at all and we arrived in no time. The first reef we cast to looked pretty good. It took a while but Bonze finally hooked another screamer. Unfortunately the results were the same. He was getting worried. Half an hour later the other boat arrived and Mark joined us again.

We spent the morning casting the shorelines but we caught only the occasional fish. Bonze finally got the monkey off his back but overall the results were disappointing. It wasn't us, the fish just weren't in close. And can you blame them? There is fornicating to do at that time of year... Both boats planned to meet up for lunch but before we did, I spotted a piece of country I wanted to cast to.

I'm developing a theory. On a number of occasions now, I have cast to areas that you wouldn't expect to hold fish. In each case the water has been shallow, two metres or less, there have been conspicuous sand patches and there have been groups of rock in association with weed. These are spots you could never fish with conventional tackle without spending most of your time snagged and re-rigging. Yet there are plenty of snapper in these areas, even in the middle of the day. The first cast hooked a snapper and a second soon followed. We caught several fish before breaking for lunch. I think I'm on to something.

It was so calm that we elected to raft the two boats together, break out the lunch and refreshments and plan the afternoon assault. What happened that afternoon all started because one of the boys left a softbait drifting along the bottom. When a snapper ate it, it seemed like a good reason to put a second rod out. When both rods loaded up with snapper, it was all on! What followed was one of the best snapper sessions I've ever had. Every fish was caught on a softbait with both



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Tuned for an excellent haul of scallops

Gulps and Foodsource baits catching good fish. At times we had up to four snapper hooked simultaneously. It probably would have been five but I was on the camera. If ever you want to see why this is such a great sport, you need only have witnessed our afternoon. It was fantastic fun and, the fish bins were filling rapidly.

The area we worked was north of the Rainbow Warrior on a flat sandy bottom. We drifted slowly, fishing the baits near the bottom. Most of the strikes came when the bait was falling or sitting still after dropping. Chartruese was the most successful colour. We made multiple passes, motoring back up-current before rafting up and repeating the exercise. We cranked an Eagles concert up on the Majestic DVD player, found some cool drinks and life was good.

With the snapper situation looking good, I suggested we try a couple of new spots for scallops. Both were an unmitigated disaster so we were back drifting for more snapper within an hour and a half. The biggest snapper was well into imperial double figures. We



ABOVE LEFT: Scallops featured heavily on the menu... **ABOVE:** Mark Gleeson accounted for the biggest fish, taken casting Gulps around the rocks. It weighed 8kgs and featured on the cover of our last issue.

continued our last drift until we were right back to the rocks. It was impossible to resist a few more casts around the fringes. It was still hard going but we did add another couple of snapper to the bin.

It was a beautiful calm run home. Both crews were ecstatic. After a long filleting session we poured the rums and settled down to a great feed of fresh snapper fillets. It was another long night...

Day Three

There's nothing like the anticipation of a great day's fishing; when you know where the fish are and it coincides with the perfect forecast it's a mouth-watering prospect. So why I had to kick the boys out of bed is one of life's mysteries. It's not like any of them drink to excess so that wasn't an explanation. The beds were pretty comfortable so maybe that's it.

Actually we had the camp to ourselves, one of the advantages in visiting during the winter. We had two units this time, each had a separate bedroom as well as kitchen facilities, gas cooker and a full sized fridge/freezer. As usual, things were perfectly clean. While the evenings ended with several moreporks calling, the mornings started with dozens of quail working their way across the lawn. I enjoyed my early morning coffee while the boys slept.

After bacon and eggs and refuelling we headed out. Mark took Shane diving for crays, while we headed off for scallops. We tried a new spot in the harbour and it was a cracker... A much cleaner bottom and a higher proportion of big scallops saw us with our sixty in the tank in short order.

We headed off to the Cavallis again and fished a few spots on the way. The results weren't spectacular. Nor was the return from our diver. Crayfish was off the menu.

The morning was spent working much of the likely looking territory through to the far side of the group. We caught

fish but again they were well spread. Casino Royale was the hot boat and Mark fronted up with the best fish of the trip early in the afternoon. Both boats spread out and worked new spots, with a plan to meet at the previous day's hot spot for another drifting session late in the day. We tried deepwater without success before arriving back at one of the passes for another wash session. Bonze nailed a nice snapper and we were feeling pretty good as we continued to add more fish to the bin. Then the call came from the other boat that they had a cover shot on board. We didn't believe them at all. Gamesmanship and disinformation are part of the game. Let the record reflect that the cover of issue 34 of this august journal is proof that Mark Gleeson did indeed learn his lessons well, and was able to cast a Gulp Swimming Mullet accurately into the right spot and wrest an 8kg snapper from amongst the rocks. It certainly was his day. Good on him.

The drift fishing was almost as good as the day before. We found the fish holding in a tighter group close to some reef structure about half a mile from the spot. Shorter drifts saw us nail plenty, lose plenty and know we would have a few bags of fillets to take home with us. We fished our way home arriving back in the harbour to a spectacular sunset. It was a great day.

Day Four

Ground Hog Day – kicked the boys out of bed. Fueled up and cooked the bacon and eggs. There was a change of plan after that; Mark had to deliver a new autopilot to a customer while he was in the area. The customer involved kindly gave us his best 'puka spot, where he'd taken a three figure fish a week or so earlier. Everyone geared up for big fish in 200m.

We changed the crews again. Mark and



THIS PHOTO: That boy Bonze finally came right and started to account for some good fish.

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Bonze went to catch a tank of livies while James, Shane and I caught the scallops for the day. Then we headed out. Unfortunately the further we went the stronger the easterly became. It got to better than 15 knots, and while the Surtees was still up for it, albeit with lots of water over the top, it wasn't a sensible thing to do in the smaller Senator. We stopped for a jig on Ruahine Reef.

Shane would have to be one of the most skilled practitioners of the long jig technique around. It's a pleasure to watch him fishing them well. It came as no surprise that he hooked up and the reel started to unload with menace. Unfortunately it became another 'big fish that we lost'. It sure was a trip for it. Across the way there were seriously loaded rods on 'Casino Royale'. The boys were fishing livebaits but had forgotten the gaff. We stuck around long enough to find out that the hoped for big king or 'puka was just a bloody big shark. We ignored all the bent rods on their boat after that. They had a lot of fun catching sharks.

Shane added a big porae to his collection of things caught on Zest jigs before we decided it was just too windy for the job. We spent the rest of the day wash fishing around Stephenson's Island and along the shore between Taupo Bay and Whangaroa. We continued our mixed results although this time the blame was placed squarely on the difficult conditions. The pin was pulled early and we went home where we cooked more scallop and bacon kebabs, snapper with lemon pepper, ham steaks, hashbrowns, a few vegetables and a bit of salad because we are health conscious. The day wasn't a complete write-off...

Day Five

Thoughts of an early start before the long drive home were dashed by more wind. The beauty of fishing at Whangaroa though is that there is usually shelter somewhere. We found it on another scallop bed. With everyone piled into the Surtees, we motored up to a slightly different part of the bed, threw Shane over the side to have a dive, then took a couple of runs with the Kev's dredge while we waited. It didn't take long to get twenty scallops each to take home.

And that was the end of our trip. It was too windy for any more casting sessions. After another big feed, a shucking session and a few more coffees, we hit the road. It was another great trip, the company was fantastic, the fishing, even with the frustrating conditions, didn't disappoint and once again the Whangaroa Motor Camp proved to be an ideal base. I highly recommend you book it for your own winter break. Particularly if you like peace, quiet and good fishing!

I have a feeling that we will be back for our '07 boys' summer trip north.

What we learnt...

Snapper proved to be thin in numbers inshore in October. That wasn't unique to Whangaroa, that's standard fare around much of the accessible northern coastline at that time of year. As we have found to be consistent, the bigger fish are always the most aggressive and casting to the right areas will still draw them out. While casting is an addictive game, and it's hard to drag yourself away from it, drifting on the sand proved to be the more effective method during this trip. I've marked the places where we found fish on the chart printed (above, below, to the side). We drifted using jig heads and tails. In the shallow water, say under 15m or so, they will out-fish the heavier Captain Rig. There were a lot of barracoutta around, and while we did hook a few, we pretty much avoided them by keeping the tails close to the bottom.

The shallow water/sand patches/weed-covered rocks scenario has fired every time we've tried it. I can't wait to put some time into casting small, light heads into some of these places. I reckon we will experience snapper nailing baits in sight right on the surface, which sounds like damn good fun.

There was no particularly outstanding tail pattern or colour during the week. The usual Gulp Swimming Mulletts (in chartreuse and glow) and Jerk Shads (in nuclear chicken and lime tiger shades) accounted

for most of the fish. The Foodsource tails proved to be very effective when fished on the bottom. In fact the biggest snapper caught drifting were on the Foodsource products. The most consistent though were the Gulp Chartreuse Jerk Shad tails. These are the ones in a red packet which are made from a slightly softer compound. You will see these in some shops although they won't be a standard line for Pure Fishing. If you spot any for sale, grab them.

We had a boat full of other products to play with as well. None of them were fish-scented tails though, and with the casting being hard we elected to stick to the known performance of the Berkley Gulps and Foodsource baits. Two of the products we took showed real promise; the Atomic baits have the best feel and action of any I have seen so far. When the snapper move in closer, in numbers, I have no doubt they will more than hold their own. Atomic also have a spray-on fish attractant to use in conjunction with their baits.

The other interesting tail comes from Bozos. Certainly the most amusing name we've heard for a product, they have some unique features and there is a lot of work behind their development. The very first cast I made with one was eaten although I missed the strike. We will be using more of them in future. I do have to state that I have no confidence in the garlic scent they use. I really can't see how that fits our fishing. The tails have a great action due to the 'hinge' arrangement they have, which is going to make them succeed, not the scent.

No head style particularly stood out. All caught fish. The Bozos heads were very good. They are a painted model, something you will see more of as new players come to the market and try to find their own ground. I'm not convinced the paint makes a difference; it certainly doesn't detract from the performance but I'm yet to be convinced it enhances it. The bottom line is that these are exceptionally well priced heads and we didn't manage to break a single hook. They have a permanent place in my tackle box.

Finally, we proved, once again, that Kev makes the best scallop dredges in the country. It's been worth every cent I spent...



We stayed at the Whangaroa Motor Camp as paying guests. As we found at our last visit, the place is clean basic and with everything we need for a fishing holiday. Its proximity to both the ramp and fuel makes it an ideal base and there are plenty of options in the harbour we have yet to explore. Even when the weather slows things there is plenty to do.

Phone and Fax: 09 405 0306
www.whangaroa.tripod.com
Email: DYLEEWhangaroa@xtra.co.nz