



Bruce Duncan

Winter fishing

WITH the wind trying to rip the roof off the house and the log fire with half the Kaiangaroa Forest stuffed in it, most fishermen will now be looking at the weather map on the television and getting grumpy.

Whenever I see the first signs of a big depression coming across the Tasman, particularly from up Noumea way it really gets my adrenalin pumping. Most people will look at the tightly compressed isobars and cringe at the thought of all that shitty weather about to hit the coast. Fortunately most of these depressions fall apart before they get to the coast but even then, if there were strong enough winds they could push a big swell down on us that would really fire up the fishing.

Some of the greatest fishing I have ever experienced was as soon as it was safe to get out on the water after Cyclone Bola had beaten up the coast for over a week. The instant our first bait went down (right on the slack water) it was nailed and we did not land a fish of less than 2 kg with the biggest being released at over 15 kg.


Once, on holiday up at our bach on the Northland coast, a huge ground swell had been running for a couple of days so we decided once it was safe to head out and target some big snapper so we could get them smoked for the locals. We could not nail any fish apart from



huge fish of which we only took five but they weighed over 10 kilos each. Storm fishing can be awesome and a chance of a lifetime to catch your first big fish.

What you first must realise is that snapper, despite appearing to be hardy, are really big wimps when it comes to a beating. As they live out on the clean open sand as well as around kelpy reefs and shorelines, a really big swell stirs up the bottom so badly it makes it hard on their gills and eyes that they will not be able to safely feed. So when the snapper sense the imminent arrival of a storm they go on a big feeding frenzy and then head for shelter to ride out the storm. Fish are very sensitive to their surroundings and I have often experienced a huge turn around in the feeding pattern when the wind has swung round to the southeast. A southeast wind is a bitterly cold wind in winter and it is this chill factor that affects them – like us they get lethargic and go off their food.

The major factor in storm fishing is safety and being prepared for all events. I would strongly advise that you have a couple of boats targetting the same area and always tell somebody where you are going to

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and when you will be back. **Then stick to your game plan.**

Anchoring the boat safely in both deep and shallow water is a must so you have to bear in mind a couple of factors. Firstly – if a big swell is running and you don't let a heap more (at least 100% extra) anchor warp out you can run the risk of having the bow of the boat pulled under or you will find your anchor keeps dragging. By paying out the extra warp it acts like a big spring allowing for the boat to lift and ride the swells in a gentle fashion rather than pulling up hard on the anchor. If you do drag, because of the extra warp you have a better angle to retrieve the anchor from, with less risk of running over it with your propeller. Always remember - no fish is worth risking your life or your boat.

Like all fishing trips you must know the area that you are going to target well as in these conditions you don't want to be on unfamiliar ground. If it is a deep slow moving depression a big ground swell can be on the coast before the clouds or wind indicate the imminent weather. This is where the planning comes into play by listening to the forecasts and ringing your mates around the coast to see what they are experiencing. It is the ground swell that is the signal for the fish to feed and very often there is little or no wind for up to twelve hours prior to the storm front - this can be quite a spooky feeling and is where the term 'the calm before the storm' comes from. The use of berley is imperative at this point to get the fish into the target zone of your baits. As time is of the essence I tend to use big baits and find that whole koheru butterflied work particularly well. Often due to the aggression of so many fish trying to get as much food in as quickly as possible it pays, if using squid and pilchards, to hook an extra one just on the exposed barb. This extra bait obviously gets ripped off quickly but you find that the bait below it gets a solid hook up and not ripped apart.

When it comes to fishing the back end of the storms it pays to wait for at least twelve hours after the storm has passed. This will give the fish time to come out from their shelter and onto the bite. The effect of the

big ground swell on reefs and shoreline is massive with huge amounts of seaweed being ripped off the rocks. As well as this, the kina, limpets and crabs that can't get out of the way of the storm get dislodged and smashed about creating one huge smorgasbord for the snapper to feed on. This amount of food puts snapper in a feeding frenzy like you have never experienced before so big strong baits are the go.

Because of the amount of dislodged seaweed and debris swirling about you will find pilchards will not stay long on the hooks before getting ripped off. Do not waste your time with berley, as it will make no difference to the fish in these conditions. Big strong baits of kahawai or whole koheru rigged with keeper hooks stay on best. With the size of these baits you may not even need a sinker to get them down. The surge will quickly snag your gear if you use your normal size sinkers so it is best if you do need weight to get down, to use only a ¼ oz weight. Always cast these big baits as far back from the boat as possible and slowly let the surge take your bait down. Most fish will grab the bait before it hits the bottom and will be really aggressive on the bite; I have actually seen a rod pulled out of an angler's hand by a huge fish in these conditions.

You must keep in touch with your bait. it will get tangled up in the loose seaweed floating about. Check the baits regularly and toss them out at different angles and distances from the stern to cover your bases. The key to landing fish in the stirred up, seaweed-strewn waters is to always keep your rod tip high with a lot of load on the rod. This lifts the fish's head and keeps them from getting hung up in the kelp.

If you ever get to experience these types of conditions you will be amazed at the number and size of the fish you will catch. I have seen mates get so fired up that they forget that the fish in the bin are big so its not necessary to take a limit. You also need to be very wary that the boat doesn't drag and that you have a bale-out plan if it does turn to custard. Play it safe and remember that there are old fishermen and bold fishermen but no old, bold fishermen.



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