



Cairns delivers a cracker season

The 2011 Cairns Giant Black Marlin season delivered one of the best runs of big fish in years. Kelly Fallon spent 70 days on the Reef working aboard one of the leading charter boats and reports on what went on amid the thick of the action.

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The fine line between light-tackle and heavy-tackle marlin fishing in north Queensland is often blurred. September is the transition month, but a distinct lack of small billfish in the waters off Townsville and Cairns in recent years has pushed the professional charter fleet to start their heavy-tackle seasons earlier than ever.

Once again this year, by the last week of September most boats were already hooking big fish. While in general September can be a good month for small fish in numbers, this year some monsters also showed up nice and early, like the fish Capt Ross Finlayson on *Top Shot* encountered on September 20.

With Japanese fly-fisherman Susumu Ishikawa on board for his 12th year challenging the IGFA world record for black marlin on 10kg tippet (currently 220lb), they raised a big fish in the spread and were able to switch it on to his fly right at the back of the boat. Capt Ross said that it's very rare to get jumps out of the big fish on light fly tackle, but this one did, giving eight or 10 big jumps, which allowed him the perfect opportunity to gauge her size. He put the fish at a massive 1100lb.

Under IGFA flyfishing rules, an angler is allowed a shock tippet (protective leader connected to the fly) of no more than 12 inches (30.48cm), which must then be followed by a line-class tippet of at



Peter Twiner, deckie aboard *Top Shot*, takes a wrap and braces himself in the corner for hand-to-fish battle with yet another explosive giant black marlin.

“No other destination records at least two grander black marlin every week of the season.”

Ben Bright struggles to control a wild fish at Kekoa's transom.

least 15 inches (38.1cm). Susumu fought his giant for a gruelling three-hour battle before his fragile 10kg tippet succumbed. Perhaps he'll get his record next season.

WHERE THEY WERE

Generally, the best fishing in early October is towards the northern end of the Reef. The 2011 season was no exception and really fired for the Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic commencing on October 1. From the outset, most boats in the fleet were fishing the northern grounds, including off the edge of Number 10 Ribbon Reef, east of Lizard Island. Fortunately, this was where the bulk of the fish were, with well over half of the marlin released during the tournament caught on Number 10 Ribbon or further north. In fact, by my count, there were more than 100 black marlin released in the vicinity of Number 10 Ribbon during the first two weeks of October. So, by the third week of the month, if you weren't fishing at Number 10 Ribbon, you were wishing you were!

But by the end of October the fish had moved on. So abrupt was their departure I can name the exact date – October 29 – which is the last day I have a fish recorded being released on that part of the Reef.

However, the professional fleet is very mobile, with operators for the most part offering extended live-aboard charters. Flights in and out were rearranged where necessary

and the boats turned south. There was a week of steady fishing in the middle grounds (Number 1 Ribbon and Lena Reef in particular) before the same dirty water that shut down the top of the Reef pushed through there as well. Then the bite went completely south and the fleet spent most of the remaining season fishing at Linden Bank, as they did in 2010.

The fishing was great on the Bank, with lots of big fish caught for the entire month of November. Capt Jared Weir on *Shaka* enjoyed a particularly good run late in the month, with five from nine strikes, including one over 1000lb and another pretty close to it one day. He then weighed a fish of 1097lb for the same angler, Chris Morris, the very next day.

Unless your name is Capt Daniel Carlson, the grounds off Jenny Louise Shoal and Euston Light did not really fire at all in 2011. *Little Audrey* was the exception to the rule, spending their season's last couple of trips off the Light. In three days fishing they caught several big fish on those grounds, including three that Capt Dan reported at over 1000lb.

The much anticipated offshore tuna-aggregation was a no show in 2011. The longliners were catching lots of tuna, but were too far out wide for the marlin fleet to venture there. As the black marlin cleared out at the end of November, fishing wide for blue marlin came into play.

All season the longliners had encountered plenty of big blue marlin out wide (in previous years, 90 per cent of the marlin they encountered would be blacks).

On the morning of the 2nd of November, Capt Ross Finlayson and his team aboard *Top Shot* were in port (in this case Cooktown) making final preparations for a five-day trip when he received word that one his clients was still stuck on the tarmac in Darwin. The other angler was already in Cooktown, having driven up the day before with his family, including his 85-year-old mother-in-law, Connie Laurie, who owns three boats and often fishes solo in her 30-footer off the Gold Coast. Capt Ross decided that he'd rather be out doing some type of fishing than waste a day in port and so they made the decision to head out for a day trip.

Connie literally jumped at the chance to fish for a giant black marlin, staking her claim as first in the chair. After the baits were set, it took just a couple of passes before Connie was hooked to a fish estimated at 850lb! Ross said that when he saw the size of the fish as it greyhounded down-sea, at one stage tail-wrapping itself as it surfed down the swell, he thought they were going to be in a bit of a trouble. Fortunately, the fish stayed on the surface, making it easier for Connie. Ross also said the big female had four smaller males





escorting her throughout the fight. She was released in great condition after an intense 15-minute fight. Connie's only regret was that the fight hadn't lasted longer! She is one tough senior angler!

NEW FACES

Once again many veterans returned to fish the Reef in 2011, such as Candace and Jay Meyer who fished the Reef for perhaps the 20th year on board *Square Bear* with Capt Craig 'Sparra' Denham. There were also a number of new faces. Many captains were buoyed by the number of European visitors to the Reef this year, in particular because of the decline in the number of guests from the USA (due to the GFC and a strong Australian dollar).

A number of private boats

(including *Pebble Mouse* – a custom-built aluminium cruiser from Western Australia) joined the 30-odd professional charter-boat fleet in 2011. Two others ventured from overseas to fish the season. *Mea Culpa*, a US-based, 138-foot custom mega-gameboat, built in New Zealand, has been fishing all over the world in the past few years (New Zealand, Vanautu, Fiji, Samoa, French Polynesia and the US) and joined the party to fish the Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic. Another impressive super yacht, *Valkyrie*, returned to Australian waters as they have for most seasons since 2005. They enjoyed a particularly good late season out wide. On their final trip, they released four marlin to 500lb (two blues and two blacks) on the seamount off Cairns before heading off to fish New Zealand and the Whanganella Banks.



Above: With ferocious power, the massive, thrashing bulk of a big black marlin tears the head from a 15lb scaly mackerel skipbait.

Gold Coast angler Connie Laurie is an adventurous 85-year-old who jumped at the chance to battle an 850lb black, which she released 15 minutes later saying that she wished the fight had lasted longer!



These mackerel tuna seem like a ridiculously large bait until you see them slip like a small pill down the cavernous throat of a giant black marlin off Cairns.



BIG FISH

Overall, I recorded over 30 grander black marlin releases in 2011, as well as three more that were weighed. Captured on November 23, Capt Daniel Carlson's black marlin on *Little Audrey* weighed 1038lb; Capt Jared Weir on *Shaka* weighed a 1097lb black on November 25; and Capt Tim Richardson's *Tradition* weighed the biggest of the season at 1103lb, caught on October 7th.

There is no other destination in the world that records at least two grander black marlin releases every week of the season, let alone recording multiple double 1000lb-black-marlin releases in a single day on a single boat. To my knowledge, this spectacular achievement occurred three times off Cairns during the 2011 season.

Canberran angler Dave McPherson made up for an unsuccessful trip to the Reef in 2010 when he returned for a four-day solo trip aboard *Viking II* with Capt Bill Billson. He released two fish over 1000lb on the final day of his trip on October 1st (the second of which Bill put at well over 1200lb). On November 16, Capt Dean Beech on *Castille III* released three from eight strikes, including two estimated at 1050lb and 1150lb for his first-time marlin anglers from South Australia. And on November 21st, Capt Daniel Carson on *Little Audrey* put his anglers from the Dominican Republic on to three fish, including two that he estimated at 1000lb and 1050lb on the very first day of their charter.

As always, in addition to every big fish caught, there were quite a few

more that got away. On a day in late November, Capt Tim Dean on *Calypso* reported having the biggest marlin he's ever seen come up for a look at his baits (and he's seen some big fish!). He'd just put the lines in at Onyx Reef on the way out from Cairns when he saw a dark shape looming up behind a bait. At first he thought it was a school of fish so big was the shape underwater. But soon it became clear that it was a giant marlin when it ate a big skipbait. The line came tight, Tim held his breath, and then the bait pulled right back out of its enormous mouth. Tim steered the boat around again and this time it engulfed a skipping tuna out the back on the centre-rigger. Frustratingly, again the bait pulled from the cavernous mouth as the line came tight. Try as he might, Tim couldn't raise it again. He said that this monster was not the only experience he had with giants in 2011. He released two granders, both estimated at 1100lb, and agreed that 2011 was right up there as one of his best years for huge fish.

RETURN TO GLORY

Capt Bob Jones on *Iceman*, a 27-year veteran of the Cairns season, commented that his 2011 season was 500 per cent better than those of the past few years. While Bob himself admits that's a slight fisherman's exaggeration, it is fair to say it was indeed a much better year, most certainly the best since 2006.

While the numbers of big female fish fulfilled the dreams of many anglers, Bob was also enthusiastic about the appearance of good numbers of smaller male fish as well. As Bob pointed out, this is noteworthy as the season should lead to a good spawning season, and increase the number of fish for the future.

Fishing success can be fickle – but sometimes the elements all align and you find yourself consistently in the right place at the right time. During the 2011 season the shining light seemed to be focused on Capt Luke Fallon and the charter boat



Keko, which was indeed fortunate for me as Luke is my husband. We enjoyed perhaps the very best the season had to offer – with both big and small marlin. On eight different occasions we released four marlin in a single day – practically unheard of in recent years, where more than two fish was considered a particularly good day. In addition, *Keko* also scored several triple-headers, including one spectacular day of fishing on November 25, which included a black of more than 1000lb.

BLUE MARLIN MISSION

In early December the team were joined on board by Bevan Williams from Tasmania. Despite losing both of his legs in an accident several years before, Bevan was on a mission to achieve his long-time goal of a catching a marlin. With two previous journeys canned because of bad weather, and the conditions of the first two days not ideal either, Capt Luke made the decision to head wide in search a blue marlin in the vicinity of Holmes Reef, which is close to 115 miles offshore. Bevan spent the bulk of the eight-hour trip out strapped into the gamechair waiting patiently for a bite.

The next morning the entire boat rose early in order to get to the hot-spot where Luke had found blues the week prior. Bevan was once again strapped into the chair

at 6am, but this time the wait was short. A crashing strike took the stinger lure just on 6:30am. Bevan was straight on to his very first marlin. He used a modified fighting-chair arrangement – the footrest was removed and the rod strapped to the chair rather than the angler. This allowed Bevan to put his upper body to work and bring the estimated 200lb fish boatside in less than 10 minutes.

On deck, Ben Bright and Braden Byrne briefly pulled the blue marlin on board so that Bevan could see his fish. From his position in the chair, Bevan couldn't see the fish while it was beside the boat on the other side of the gunnel. It was then released for a very ecstatic angler. That wasn't it for the day though, with another blue and a black marlin added within

the hour. That afternoon, the team headed back into the edge – mission accomplished!

NOWHERE BETTER

Of course, as Capt Ross Finlayson commented, there were also periods of tough fishing during the 2011 Cairns season, but when the fishing was good, it was excellent. And as many veterans will be quick to point out, even in its worst year, the reefs off Cairns are still the best grounds in the world to catch a giant black marlin – and always will be!

If you haven't yet put Cairns on your list of must-fish destinations, do it now. The Great Barrier Reef between Cairns and Lizard Island is like no other marlin fishery in the world – and it will come alive again with giants appearing from September this year... 🐟



Above: Capt Ross Finlayson thunders *Top Shot* backwards in pursuit of a hot black.

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When boats head wide off the reef, as many do late in the season, particularly when a tuna aggregation is nearby, they often encounter blue marlin, like this one caught aboard *Keko*.