

CAIRNS TURNS ON THE GIANTS



The extraordinarily good season for giant black marlin off Cairns last year produced a world record and some of the best fishing, both in terms of size and numbers of fish, ever experienced. Veteran Cairns skipper Laurie Wright describes how the action went down.

THE BLACK MARLIN SEASON OF 2014

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"On the left, big fish!" Wouldn't I love a few dollars for every time anglers and crew heard that shouted down from the bridge or tower this past heavy-tackle season in Cairns.

For hundreds of years the black marlin, *Istiompax indica*, have been migrating to the waters outside the Great Barrier Reef off Cairns. This occurs annually during the months of September through December, and can be consistently relied upon to produce some of the largest black marlin in the world.

Those anglers fortunate enough to fish Cairns during October and November of the 2014 season found some of the best fishing for really big marlin ever experienced. And while there were plenty of really huge fish on offer, skippers were also excited to see a good mix of mid-range fish in the 200 to 300kg range.

What amazed the seasoned skippers time and time again was the number of days with multiple really big fish. Aboard *Calypso*, Texan angler Edward Zidd and team released four over 360kg in a day off Number 4 Ribbon Reef. Paul and Sharon Poulter aboard *Think Big* also released three over 360kg off Number 10 Ribbon, while *Kekoa* released two over 400kg on two separate occasions. Capt Brett Goetze aboard *Amokura* caught his angler Frank Padoin two over 360kg plus another over 200kg on the first day of the Lizard Island tournament, and also had a six-fish day outside the tournament for angler Graham McCloy.





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This consistent big-fish bite ranged pretty much from Number 3 Ribbon Reef through to the top of Number 10, with the latter producing the best fishing right through the season.

Although the prime southern grounds of Linden Bank, Spur Reef and Jenny Louise Shoal did produce, the bite was not as consistent. Even at the end of November, when the fishing usually migrates down to the waters outside of Cairns, the fishing remained patchy, although the boats that ventured wide out of the reef did find a few black marlin along with the occasional blue marlin.

A SPECIAL SEASON

As usual, a couple of boats experienced a particularly standout season. This was certainly the case for Capt Ross Finlayson and his crew, Andy Dow and Jay Housman, aboard *Topshot*. They had a blinder. Ross caught 85 fish for the season, with 20 being over 360kg, another seven between about 320 and 360kg, plus quite a few mid-range fish caught early in the season.

Topshot and their Japanese angler, Tomonori Omi, ran away with the Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic for the third year in a row, tagging 15 marlin during the week. Capping off an already great season, Ross and his crew

then helped Stephanie Osgood Choate catch her 504kg (1111 pound) black marlin off Number 10 Ribbon, for a pending women's world record on 24kg tackle. I was fortunate to be part of the team for this capture and witness a very professional crew at work (see the article in *BlueWater* issue 107). Stephanie's father, Tim Choate, also released one of the biggest fish that Ross and I have ever seen after decades in the business. It was certainly a happy family fishing trip.

Capt Corey Hard, aboard the magnificent Assegai Marine boat *Askari*, with crew Daniel Cline and Rhys Younan-Wise, also had a top year, and was in Corey's own words, "My best season ever". Corey and crew caught 92 fish, with an unbelievable 61 released in one 24-day period. Corey said that 30 per cent of his fish were over 320kg.

The beautiful 23m Garlington *Dreamin On*, skippered by Capt Randy Hodgekiss, was back on the reef again this year and mothershipped to *Emerald Lady* for 30 days along with *Askari* and *Levante*. This coincided with the good bite period and the big boat caught its share of big fish.

Capt Alan 'Tiger' Geale has seen his fair share of good fishing on the GBR over many years and commented that this year was "One of the best". Tiger



was running the private boat *Athaldo* for Lachie and Janice Eggins, and of the 36 fish they caught for the season, Tiger said that 12 were over 400kg, with six of those over the magic 'grander' figure. That's fishing as good as any you could wish for.

LIZARD ISLAND CLASSIC

The 28th Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic was held from 11 to 18 October. The normally beautiful Lizard Island resort suffered substantial damage from Cyclone Ita last April and was subsequently closed for a rebuild. As a result the tournament venue was moved to Cooktown. This made for a busy time at the docks in town but Jim, Anne and Kristen Williams ensured everything ran smoothly.

There were 21 boats participating in the tournament and as is usual in a tournament some boats led the way from the get-go, while others just could not take a trick. Capt Ross Finlayson aboard *Topshot* proved to be the man to watch yet again. A few other boats were in the running for most of the tournament, with Ashley Wallis and the Bertarelli Foundation team aboard *Kalira* fishing off No.9 Ribbon doing quite well on the first couple of days, as was Brett Goetze's team aboard *Amokura*.

Down at No.4 Ribbon, Capt Daniel Carlson's team aboard *Little Audrey* was slowly plugging away and tagging a few blacks, but right beside them Capt Tim Dean aboard *Calypso* was having little success and had to be content with being a spectator for a change. Tim finally got the bite from a big fish for angler Phil McCloy only to break the leader after two hours. Meanwhile, up at No.10 Capt Finlayson remained in the lead, with Tomonori catching fish every day, including a couple that Ross recorded as 999 pounds (453kg). Many seasoned captains are reluctant to call a fish a 'grander' unless it can be proved by weighing it.

It was the sixth day that saw the *Topshot* team propelled to the lead with six tags for the day, eventually taking out the top honours of Champion Boat and Champion Male Angler for the third consecutive year. Runner-up was Phil Webster's team aboard *Little Audrey* with 13 tags. Sarah Jackson, fishing on Steve Ahlers' 13m O'Brien *Hellraiser*, took out Champion Lady with six tags, narrowly beating Janice Eggins aboard *Athaldo* with five tags.

This year the Bertarelli Foundation sponsored 21 expensive satellite tags as part of the IGFA Great Marlin Race, with most being deployed by the participating boats. It was great to see the Cooktown community

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Capt Tom Francis on *Ultimate Lady*, the 27m wave-piercing catamaran from New Zealand, enjoyed some great action wide off the reef, although here they are hooked-up just off Number 10 Ribbon Reef, to the east of Lizard Island.

Capt Bill Billson of *Viking II* enjoyed an excellent season, releasing a number of very large black marlin for his clients. Bill said one of them was the largest black of his long career, which was released at sunset with the boat almost in the waves on the reef.

get right behind the tournament. The tournament will return to Lizard Island in 2015 and runs from 17 to 24 October.

LOTS OF HUGE FISH

Capt Luke Fallon, who has fished the reef longer than most and has seen some pretty awesome fishing, described this season as "Unreal - one of the best", with 61 fish in total, 20 of which were estimated at more than 320kg, and 17 of those estimated at more than 360kg. Luke said throughout much of the season that if he didn't get a bite from a big fish one day, he was confident he would get one the next.

Two of Luke's anglers had a great day during the Lizard Island tournament, with Alex Kaiko and Brian Lueke each catching a fish over 400kg on the same day. Jason 'Hass' Hassett, who has fished with Luke and his wife, Kelly, for the past seven years, had a top day, catching a fish over 400kg, as well as one that Luke called right on 1000 pounds (453kg). Hass followed it up later in the trip with a 320kg fish and another grander.

Capt Chris 'Sharkey' Miles aboard *Levante* also reported a very consistent season, catching 15 fish over 320kg, including a 506.6kg (1117-pounder) weighed for US angler Gary Primm, and another of 509.8kg (1124 pounds). Likewise, Capt Darren 'Biggles' Haydon, fishing at Escape Reef, weighed a 515.28kg (1136-pounder) for angler John Patterson. Biggles was stuck down at the bottom of the marlin grounds for a few weeks and was disappointed that he'd missed some of the good bite at the top, but still managed to catch 40 fish for his season. It just goes to prove that a good experienced captain will find their anglers fish even when things are tough.

Capt Tim Richardson also had a great year with 45 fish, including 10 over 360kg and three that he called granders for anglers Brady Wild, David McCallum and Greg Seel. Brady experienced great fishing, catching

eight in three days, with three of them over 360kg. Greg caught 17 blacks in nine days, with five estimated at more than 360kg. Tim's crew were visiting from overseas, with Paco Vela and Garrett Penley witnessing some amazing fishing. Garrett's father, Greg, chartered me for a number of years during the 1980s and Garrett was happy to experience the fishing his father probably bored him about as a youngster.

Another regular to the reef at this time of year was Capt Tim Dean on *Calypso*, who caught 48 marlin, including 15 over 360kg. I was fortunate to run *Calypso* for the first four days of the season, catching six fish, three of which were more than 320kg, including a very big fish for Victorian angler Jason Benbow.

MULTIPLE GRANDERS

The other usual suspects who also had a gangbuster of a season were Capt Bobby Jones aboard *Iceman*, Capt Daniel McCarthy aboard *Moana 111*, Capt Bill Billson aboard *Viking 11* and Capt Hayden Bell aboard *Kanahoe*.

One of Hayden's anglers, Alfred Wagner from Germany, who has been coming to the GBR for 32 years, had his best-ever trip this season. Alfred caught 21 black marlin in nine days, including two fish weighed at 512.5kg (1130 pounds) and 470.37kg (1037 pounds), along with another seven estimated at more than 320kg, including two right up there around the grander mark.

Capt Bill Billson released the biggest fish of his long career this season. The angler was the IGFA Rep from Mexico and his fish struck late in the afternoon and then spent the entire battle hard-up against the reef edge in heavy seas. Bill said that when they took hold of the leader the bow of *Viking II* was almost in the waves crashing against the coral. Bill was reluctant to put a figure on the size of the beast, but said it was easily his biggest ever. For a captain with many granders to his credit, that means it was a remarkably huge fish!

Capt Brad Craft aboard *Castille 111* found some quality fish at the bottom of the marlin grounds while everyone else struggled. Capt Daniel Carlson aboard *Little Audrey* also had a good season, as well as being runner-up in the Lizard Island Black Marlin Classic.

The 27m New Zealand wave-piercing catamaran *Ultimate Lady* with Capt Tom Francis at the wheel made the voyage across the Tasman for the first time since 2009, and from all reports had some pretty exciting fishing. The crew spent considerable time just wide of No.10 Ribbon Reef and were rewarded with some good-sized fish.

A good team of anglers came out from the US with Marlin University in early November, fishing aboard *Iceman*, *Bounty Hunter* and *Kanahoe*, and mothershipping to the *Boss*. Guest instructors were Marlin magazine editor Dave Ferrell and Cairns and IGFA Hall of Famer Capt Peter B Wright. It was great to see Peter back on the reef passing on his wealth of knowledge to the anglers and crew on the boats.

On one particularly good day of fishing, Capt Biggles Haydon aboard *Bounty Hunter* caught four from seven bites around the 320kg mark. Capt Bobby Jones' team aboard *Iceman* released a very nice one, while Capt Hayden Bell aboard *Kanahoe* scored his team two releases from three strikes. Capt Peter B reported that they got some nice fish early in the trip, but it did slow down later on.

It isn't possible within the confines of this article to mention all the boats and their captures, and I apologise for that. The reports appear to be consistent right across the fleet this season, further cementing Cairns' reputation as the big-fish capital of the world.

LOTS OF TUNA

Fishing for smaller pelagics, to use as baits for the marlin, was as good as ever this year, with skippers reporting no problems catching bait - as can sometimes happen. One popular marlin baitfish that



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Cairns turns on the giants



Above: Askari had a great season, with Capt Corey Hard calling it his best ever after releasing 92 fish, of which 30 per cent were thought to weigh more than 320kg.

Above right: Capt Alex Johnson caught this yellowfin, estimated at more than 100kg, while taking Broadbill wide of the reef to look for big marlin around the offshore tuna schools.

was good to see turn up again in all the traditional spots was the mackerel tuna. It has been several years since they have been found off Cairns in such good numbers.

Yellowfin tuna were also abundant, with good schools of feeding fish seen just wide of the reef every time someone ventured out from the edge. Aboard *Broadbill*, Alex Johnson caught a yellowfin estimated at more than 100kg, together with a bunch of large bigeye tuna. This availability of food may also have been a contributing factor to the large numbers of big marlin this year.

Was 2014 the best black marlin season ever? Probably not. But for any angler, captain or crew who has fished less than 25 years, it certainly rates up there as possibly the best, and it definitely was for really big fish.

My records show that 1980 and 1982 were as good as 2014 for big fish, with Number 10 Ribbon Reef once again being the best producer of those big girls. I recall one day on No.10 with 13 boats in sight and everyone was either hooked-up, just releasing a fish or just getting a bite – and all were really big fish.

Why then are some years better than others for numbers and size of fish? I asked renowned scientist and *BlueWater* contributor Dr Julian Pepperell, who said that several environmental factors can influence



fish availability, with water temperature in the 26 to 26.5°C range being ideal for black marlin. This was exactly the water temperature range along No.10 for most of the season.

If the ideal water temperature coincides with the half-moon periods of the moon phase there can be a significant increase in catch rates. From a study on the annual availability of black marlin in the Cairns area based on charterboat logbooks conducted by the CSIRO and Dr Pepperell in the late 1990s, it was found that a 1°C decrease or increase in water temperature may reduce catch rates between 30 to 40 per cent.

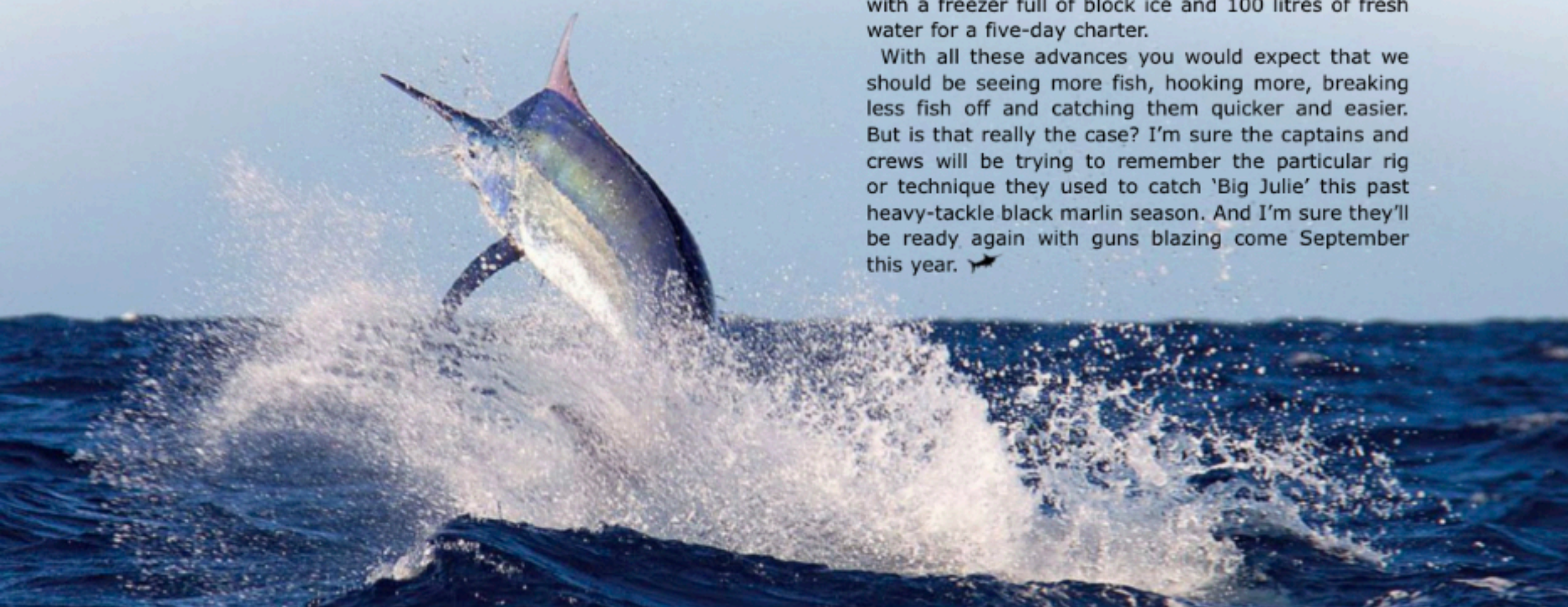
MODERN CHANGES

Other than environmental conditions, which vary from year to year, what else has changed since the 1970s and early '80s? Advances in technology such as GPS, CHIRP sounders and sonar have made it easier to identify baitfish and marlin and we can now stay exactly on the spot, no matter how strong the current or how big the seas are.

Reels are so much better these days, with smoother drags and more reliable mechanisms. Rods are much the same except for better rollers to prevent line friction, especially on the tip rollers. The use of circle hooks has greatly improved hook-up and capture rates for those that have figured out the technique – which I'll be detailing in an upcoming issue of *BlueWater*.

Boats have definitely become a lot faster, bigger and more comfortable, with all the mod-cons such as air-conditioning, ice makers and water makers now the norm. Modern technology means no more going to sea with a freezer full of block ice and 100 litres of fresh water for a five-day charter.

With all these advances you would expect that we should be seeing more fish, hooking more, breaking less fish off and catching them quicker and easier. But is that really the case? I'm sure the captains and crews will be trying to remember the particular rig or technique they used to catch 'Big Julie' this past heavy-tackle black marlin season. And I'm sure they'll be ready again with guns blazing come September this year. 🐟



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