

THE CAIRNS

GIANT BLACK MARLIN SEASON 2010

As if tackling a black marlin of over 1000lb is not challenging enough, the crews and anglers that fished the 2010 giant black marlin season off Cairns had to endure some particularly difficult seas as well. However, as Kelly Fallon details, the rewards were worth the salt spray and the 'hanging on'. Where else in the world could you catch several fish to well over 1100lb in a single day?

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Each year, captains, crew and anglers from all over the world congregate in far north Queensland for the opportunity to fish the most plentiful aggregation of giant black marlin in the world. The season runs from September through to December along the 150-mile stretch of reef between Cairns and Lizard Island.

Because of the limited season, few boats are based in Cairns year-round. However, once September rolls around, the numbers swell daily as captains and crews venture up from the south and steer their charges through the leads to Cairns harbour. The early season is a time for catch-ups and introductions to the new members of the professional charter fleet.

The 2010 season saw a few new additions to the Cairns charter fleet, most notably, if I may say so, the very boat that I rode on all season – the brand-new *Kekoa*. This vessel is the first O'Brien 56 and spent its shakedown season on the reef, coming through with flying colours. With the rough weather that the fleet endured for most of the season, there were many other boats looking on with envy and wishing they had the comfort of the 56.

Another newcomer to the Reef this season was the 57ft *Assegai*, *Amokura*, which was recently returned to Australia from NZ by the new owners. Capt Chris Jolly, who is more familiar with the waters off central NSW, made his first trip north on the boat. He enjoyed some exceptional fishing, with two grander black marlin in short succession. Chris was learning the Cairns ropes from a couple of veterans in the way of Colin 'Wombat' Grimes on deck, and my father, Capt Jim Dalling, on the bridge. Jim recently retired from running *Reel Chase*, but made a couple of cameo appearances during the season to share some knowledge. He enjoyed some big fish himself – including three blacks over 950lb in four days!

BIG FISH IN THE SOUTH

Every year there are things that especially stand out in comparison to previous seasons. This year, the key words were 'big' and 'south'. From the end of October, the best fishing was consistently reported from Linden Bank, so many in the fleet spent a lot of time in that area, at the southern end of the reef where we normally fish. One skipper who particularly favoured this area was Capt Darren 'Biggles' Haydon. Biggles was at the helm of a new rig, 'upgrading' to the 49ft *Riviera Allure* this year. To the best of my knowledge, he never left the Bank all season, finding good fish the entire time!

As for the 'big', you know the saying: "If you're not catching a lot of fish, at least let them be big." Well, this year they certainly were. While in past years, you could expect two or three big marlin out of every 10 fish or so, this year it seemed that almost every second fish was a big one – and having a great run of luck in the big-fish stakes was Capt Tim Richardson on his boat *Tradition*. Tim reported big fish after big fish and converted a couple of marlin novices into 1000lb Club members, including George Kristas from the Gold Coast, who straight off the bat in early October, released one of 1000lb.

Likewise, Capt Hayden Bell on *Release* saw plenty of big fish again this season, and even left his usual haunt at Number 10 Ribbon Reef to join the crowd down on Linden Bank. Hayden weighed a fish of 1027lb on November 2, then a few days later, let one go he called even bigger! Fishing alongside Hayden on that trip was Capt Craig 'Sparra' Denham at the wheel of the newly refurbished *Square Bear*.

Square Bear is now green and happily missing the smoke trail behind her to which we'd become accustomed. Because of the refurbishments, Sparra joined the season late, but it wasn't too long until he found the fish. On one very memorable day, with his





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partner in the boat, Greg Sims, and his partner in life, Tara Thompson, they released four black marlin, including an 800-pounder and one that Sparra put up there at about 1100lb!

One of the smallest boats in the fleet, the 41ft *Cool Runnings*, based out of Yorkey’s Knob, enjoyed the close-to-home fishing at the southern end of the marlin strip. On one early season trip, Capt Troy Dallman put owner John Clayden on to his first grander black marlin. It was only his second time in the chair!

Rob Bonser’s *Pirate* is even smaller again at 34ft, but Rob also enjoyed some great fishing in the south, running up to the grounds from Cairns. On one trip with the previously regular Cairns deckie Gavin ‘Groover’ New on deck, they put their lady angler on to her first marlin, a fabulous fish released at a whopping 850lb.

The Port Douglas-based members of the fleet were also able to take advantage of the hot fishing on the southern reefs. Capt Brett Thomas on *Gorilla* spent most of his time ex-Port, along the bottom Ribbons. The results of their 2010 fishing further exemplified the ‘big’ in

2010. Precisely 50 per cent of the marlin they released this season exceeded 600lb!

Capt Tim Ryan, newly in charge of the Port Douglas-based *Joe Joe*, spent a lot of this season enjoying the other splendours of the reef – namely snorkelling and bottom fishing – but still found time to get some big fish. They released three in one two-day trip, including two big fish of 700 and 800lb.

CHALLENGING WEATHER!

As you may have gathered already, there was some ordinary weather around this season. If you were off the Cairns reefs any time in October, you probably experienced it first-hand. It was especially windy during

the Lizard Island competition when boats were ‘treated’ to day after day of 25 to ‘scary-knot’ winds.

One standout night during the Lizard tournament saw boats dragging anchors in the usually calm anchorages behind Number 3, Number 5 and Number 10 Ribbon Reefs. Those that made the decision to return to the island the previous evening were very lucky indeed, and probably got some sleep. My captain, like many others, made his bed in the helm chair, until I sent him downstairs to his bunk at 5am.

Capt Trent Visscher on *Iona* was one captain who endured a sleepless night, having to reset his anchor in the minefield of reef bommies behind Number 10 Ribbon Reef not

once, but twice in the dark! Although, to his kudos and that of his lady angler, Sue Ahlers, they put the lack of sleep behind them, and in very trying conditions, tagged one of the very few fish released on the next day of competition.

One who enjoyed the absolute pick of the weather – on what seemed to be the only calm day in October – also made the most of the fishing. Capt Tim Dean on his boat *Calypso*, filming an episode of *iFish* with





Paul Worsteling, released a fish that he put at over the 1000lb mark. If you've seen the episode on TV, you'll know that they shot some awesome above and below the surface footage on an absolutely stunning day. We wish every day was just like that!

INTO NOVEMBER

As we came into November, the weather eased as expected (for a brief period, anyway) and we really started to enjoy the calmness, while fishing in proximity to one another. By that stage of the season, most boats were fishing Linden Bank. One afternoon, my camera caught the tail-end of a double-header, with Capt Ross Finlayson on the 43 O'Brien *Top Shot* releasing one of them right beside us. As our boat turned, we saw another 43 O'Brien

hooked-up. This time it was Capt Ian Ford at the wheel of the similarly named, and similar looking, *Hot Shot*. He chased down a nice fish for his lady angler.

For most, the fishing was very much a 'one day hot, one day not' affair. Nonetheless, when it was your turn, it could be exceptionally good. The team on *Top Shot* caught an 850lb black and then, only five minutes later, followed that with a 900lb black! Capt Jared Weir on *Shaka* started one such day with an early bite, releasing a nice fish of 900lb before he'd done much more than leave his anchorage at Opal Reef. He quickly followed that with an even bigger fish that he called well over the grander mark. That was a good day, even for Cairns! Likewise, Capt Bill Billson on his

46ft Woodnutt *Viking II* ended a string of quiet days with a ripper, releasing three blacks of 400, 800 and 1000lb.

Capt Ashley Wallis on *Karlira* staked his spot at Spur Reef, just south of Linden Bank, where he released a number of nice fish, including one that he called 1050lb. On the same day, he caught three blacks from four strikes. As the season progressed, Ashley found more big fish on that spot, and was last seen still trolling circles and waiting for another go at 'the beast'. Capt Brad Craft on *Reelistic* also had success at Spur Reef. Brad released three on one day late in October and then, a couple of days later on the same spot, they released another huge fish that he called: "The biggest fish I've ever seen."

SHARKY'S BEAST

On October 31, Capt Chris 'Sharky' Miles on *Sea Baby IV* caught the first grander weighed during the 2010 season. It stretched the scales to 1177lb. He also raised another big fish nearby.

Our very own 'Mouth from the South', Capt Peter B Wright, has been a distinctive feature on the reef for many years (in fact, since the beginning!), but he did not make it to Australia in 2010. The crews have certainly missed him and his distinctive drawl on the radio, but were perhaps feeling just a little bit cheered by hearing the broad southern drawl of Capt Randy Hodgekiss aboard *Dreamin' On*.

"Every week of our season, we saw or caught big marlin – and that's what it's all about!"
– Capt Luke Fallon.

Another long-term Cairns skipper, the ever-consistent Capt Bob Jones, kept under the radar for most of the early season, but steered his boat *Iceman* to the south in mid-November when it became clear that it was the place to be.

Capt Dan McCarthy on *Moana III* had some good fishing at the top of the Ribbons. Before the bite went south, he released three in a day to 950lb off Number 10. Perhaps he was haunting the spot where, during the Lizard Island Tournament, he'd found the 1100-pounder for Andrey Grigoriev.

A couple of days later, another regular at Number 10 this year, Capt Ross McCubbin at the helm of *Cjig* (the 48 Riviera Express, formerly *Fascination IV*), released one he called a conservative 950lb-plus.

Lizard Island Resort's boat *Fascination* is almost tethered to its home base (known as 'The Rock') and cannot venture far, but this did not stop Capt Craig Newbold from catching his second grander of the season. He almost had the entire Number 10 Ribbon Reef to himself once the fleet had moved to the south.

On *Iona 2*, Capt Adam Jordan ventured away from the crowded 'Bus Stop' at Linden Bank and found a new big-fish haunt at Lena Reef. He pulled a big fish from there in October and returned in November to give it another shot



“This year it seemed that almost every second fish was a big one!”



– and it worked! Following a two-hour battle, he released a 1000lb fish for his US angler.

By late November, the good weather had again disappeared and as the rain-squalls came through, the winds picked up. Even Capt Daniel Carlson, on one of the biggest boats in the fleet, *Little Audrey*, couldn't convince his guests to brave the weather. The day after releasing four marlin from five strikes, they made a token appearance on the grounds, before retreating to the relative comfort of the anchorage behind Opal Reef.

Castille III's owner, Mark Ripper, also endured a run of bad weather. Twice he ventured north to spend time with his family and Capt Dean Beach on the reef, but his two weeks could very well have been the two windiest weeks of the entire year.

Like others, Sunshine Coast husband and wife team Rene and Ian Walker, on their Riviera 51 *Phantom*, made the most of the bad weather. It was only their second year on the reef, so when the weather was too rough to fish the front, they spent a lot of time harassing the plentiful sport and bottom fish behind the reef.

THE TUNA RUN OUT WIDE

When I compiled this report in late November – to meet the printing

deadline – there was still a lot of life left in the 2010 season. At that time of year, members of the fleet often wander out wide, searching for marlin hunting the tuna aggregations that feed on the annual spawning run of lantern fish.

During the 2010 season, Capt Corey Hard on *Askari* had already 'been there and done that'. He'd ventured out wide to Bougainville and Flora reefs, 100 nautical miles from shore, before the weather turned sour again. They experienced their best fishing out there over a seamount where the marlin were indeed congregating. Over a couple of days, he released six blacks from eight strikes, in sizes to 700lb. If the weather allowed, there were many more boats planning to head out wide, as the season continued into December.

Overall, it was another great season on the GBR. Although the numbers of small fish were not as high as in recent years, there were good numbers of quality big fish instead – which is why you fish Cairns. As Capt Luke Fallon pointed out: “Anyone who spent a week on the reef during 2010 has had their shot, no matter which boat they fished on. Every week of our season, we saw or caught big marlin – and that's what it's all about!” 🐟

