



Hooked on snapper sensations

Every serious angler puts their first big snapper catch high in the trophy cabinet of memories.

As we reported in the Autumn 2002 edition of Southern Fisheries, big schools of snapper were once in abundance in Gulf St Vincent. "Old hands" associate their decline with the advent of prawn trawling in the gulf from the 1970s. They say the prawning by-catch of baby squid and crabs impacted on the snapper's natural food chain to the extent that big schools of the fish no longer ventured up the gulf to traditional grounds.

The snapper fishery, particularly in Gulf St Vincent, remains very much in the doldrums. However, the introduction of closures in August and November is at least giving breeding fish the chance to do what comes naturally without human threat over two crucial spawning periods each year.

Management of the snapper fishery is under review to ensure future generations of fishers have a chance to experience the thrill of catching one of these trophy fish.

There are very strict limitations on the size, bag and boat limits of snapper. While snapper are scarcer than they were 20 years ago, opportunities still exist for people to catch a big specimen.

One thing is certain about snapper. They are creatures of habit. And, all things being equal, they will frequent the same places at the same time each year, just as generations of fish have done before them ... albeit, in less numbers than in the past.

Keeping accurate and detailed records of your catch - particularly dates, times, tides and bait - are crucial for successful snapper angling.

In this special report, Southern Fisheries features snapper fishing tips from two people who know a lot about this form of sports fishing - Scott Webb, who is recognised as one of the State's most accomplished young anglers, and veteran fisher and commentator, Bruce Harris.

Scott Webb is a firm believer that you are only as good as the people who teach you how to fish. And he had some excellent tutors as a young member of the Southern Districts Angling Club.

He caught his first big snapper off Black Point in Gulf St Vincent at the age of 16, and was instantly "hooked" by the adrenalin rush of a big red on the line.

Over the years, Scott has found many productive grounds on natural and artificial reefs in Gulf St Vincent and Spencer Gulf.

"If you have a GPS, you can return with some precision to the places that have been productive in the past," he said.

"But that's only the beginning of the story. If the snapper are in a particular spot, they may only bite for one hour in twenty four, and then perhaps only on a particular bait, and at a particular stage of the tide.

"That's why an understanding of the fish and its habits through accurate records is so important.

"The information I always collect includes the date, the high or low tide (both depth and time of day), GPS marks, the time the fish was caught, the bait, any berley I was

using and any additional comments that I think may be useful."

An example of Scott's records might be as follows:

Date: 12 March 1996

GPS Marks: (I'm sure you'll understand if I keep this information to myself!)

Tide: 2.81 metres (1825 hours)

Time caught: Fish were biting from 1700 to 2015

Bait: Half pilchard

Berley: Prawns, crushed blue crabs, pilchards and tuna oil

Comments: Sunset at 1839 hours, 5 knot northeasterly wind, lots of sea lice, 12lb snapper lost at gaff

Catch: 4 snapper (12, 10, 5 and 5 lbs).

Scott said: "I've enjoyed some great snapper fishing in Gulf St Vincent from September through April, bearing in mind there are now split closures in August and November which aim to reduce fishing effort.

"In this period, I've caught some nice fish up to 12 kg off Port Vincent, Black Point and Ardrossan.

"There are also some excellent snapper grounds in the natural ledges and contours of the Orontes Bank, Tapley's Shoal,



Marion Reef, off Cape Jervis and the north coast of Kangaroo Island.

"Off the metropolitan coast, people have had some success at the Glenelg Barge and Glenelg Tyre Reef, but I have not fished these grounds very often.

"The upper Spencer Gulf is also renowned for its snapper fishing, along with grounds around Port Victoria and out from Corny Point."

Scott recommends a running rig for snapper fishing, using 20lb braided line with easy slide


sinkers to change weights simply and quickly.

"I prefer size 6/0 tarpon hooks and bait of whole tommy ruff or King George whiting heads, berleying up with tuna pieces or whiting frames in a berley bomb suspended about a metre off the bottom.

"One of the most important things about snapper fishing at night is to remain quiet, and keep direct light i.e. torches out of the water especially if fishing in shallow water (less than 10 metres).

Photo by Scott Webb

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Silence is a key to snapper success

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"I personally fish a spot for up to two hours, and if there is no action I pack it in, always keeping records of what you have done and where. Information about where you haven't caught fish can be as useful as where you have.

"If fishing with a rod, have the drag set. When using tommyies or King George whiting heads big fish will usually hit the bait hard and run, while smaller snapper tend to bite like King George whiting.

"If you hook a big snapper, it will instantly run for cover in a rocky area or artificial reef, so it is important to steer the fish away from spots that can get you snagged or busted off.

"While playing the fish, let the rod do the work by pumping and winding the reel - pumping and winding - as the snapper tires.

"Once the fish comes to the surface, you can use a gaff or a landing net. Sometimes I like to catch and release fish and, in situations like this, I don't use a gaff.

"If you are going to release a fish, once you have removed the hook, support it in the water for a few minutes by placing one hand under its head and belly, and with the other hand holding its tail move it backwards and forwards to force water over its gills.

"It is terrible to see someone land a big fish and release it only to see it float away belly-up. If I'm catching snapper for release, I use only one hook instead of ganged or snooded hooks because it will cause less damage to the fish.

"Remember though that where there are snapper, there will also be sharks. It is common for sharks to attack a hooked snapper and follow it to the surface. Be mindful of sharks, but don't let it put you off snapper fishing.

"If you do want to keep a snapper, kill it straight away by inserting a sharp knife straight into the depression above the eye socket. The knife will enter the brain and kill the fish



A standard rig of two hooks and a heavy sinker

quickly. Then place the fish on ice to keep it in prime condition.

"If you are going to fillet the snapper, leave the scales on and skin it instead. This removes the skin and the scales at the same time. If freezing the fillets, the scales will also help to prevent freezer 'burn' on the flesh. Once the fish has thawed out, you can skin the fillet, removing the skin and scales prior to cooking.

"When cooking, cut the fillets into presentable chunks and cook them in oil. However, it is important not to overcook snapper as it can go dry.

"There is enormous enjoyment in snapper fishing, not only in the catch, but also in the eating. My bottom line for great snapper experiences is to rely on your records and pay attention to detail."



Make sure you keep your reels in good working order, or pay the penalty

Study and understand the tell-tale signs

Bruce Harris agrees it is every angler's ambition to catch a snapper. But while some do, most don't.

"There are a number of reasons why people do not succeed in snapper fishing," Bruce said. "The first and most common reason is that they don't know the migrating pattern.

"This can start in late September in the southern parts of Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent, with the fish reaching their breeding areas in November, although some believe they spawn right into January.

"It is important to remember the closures that operate in August and November in all waters of the State.

"Snapper moving up the gulfs are generally in huge schools with an average fish weight of between 5kg and 8kg. They follow food such as prawns, crabs, baby squid and young red mullet, although this food source is not as plentiful as it used to be.

"The snapper generally follow the deep water channels until they reach areas like Port Hughes in Spencer Gulf and Outer Harbour in Gulf St Vincent, where they move closer to shore.

"They are moving all the time and the trick is to hold them in one spot long enough to catch a feed. Along with the migrating fish are bigger and older resident fish that hang around rocky outcrops. Different techniques are



Fishing the high tide for Big Reds

required to catch the smaller migrating fish and the larger resident snapper.

"For migrating snapper, I recommend you use fresh fish fillets, squid or pilchards. I think fresh bait is best because the migrating snapper, which are young and agile, feed on smaller fish.

"The big daddy snapper feed mainly on the carcasses of dead creatures such as squid and cuttlefish, particularly in the northern waters of both gulfs.

"The big snapper will also move in close to shore after a big storm to feed on fish offal being washed ashore by wave action.

"To catch these big fish, you should use old and smelly bait because this is their usual food source.

"In most cases, big reds up to 15kg will bite around the change of the high tides at night, and occasionally in the daylight hours. I like to use a running rig with a sliding bean sinker about 50 cm between two hooks up to 8/0 in size.

"If the fish grabs the bait and makes a furious run, it is likely to be taking the bait away from other fish in the vicinity. This tells you there is a school on the bottom. If the fish just takes the bait without running, it is usually a sign that it is a loner. In either case, strike hard because snapper have very hard mouths.

"To find migrating snapper, try trolling with a heavy snook line with 50 number one barrel sinkers spaced about 30 cm apart. Have a lighter trace of about seven metres with ganged 3/0 limerick hooks.

"Bait the hooks with a full side of fresh tommy ruff, mackerel or garfish. A large fillet of fresh snook will also do the trick.

"Use a very slow troll so the bait is near the bottom, and have baited rods or handlines ready for action. If you hook a snapper on the troll line, do not bring it straight into the boat. Snapper are very protective

and will not leave the injured fish.

"Once you have hooked into the school, anchor or drift, making sure you keep the original hooked fish in the water for some time. Use a minimum 15 kg line with a trace and sinker rigged with 4/0 hooks for rods and 6/0 hooks for hand lines.

"Be aware that sharks will pick up distress signals from hooked fish and they can appear very quickly once you start catching snapper."

Bruce lists grounds off Port Augusta, Whyalla, Price, Port Wakefield, Streaky Bay, Thevenard and the Banks Group of Islands as his favourite snapper grounds, particularly for big reds.

"The best time to go for these big fish is from February through to April fishing from the high tide, especially on still, quiet nights," he said.

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