

The LORD of the KINGS

CONQUERING
KIWI LAND
PART 3



Brendan Coote with – amazingly – one of the smaller fish we caught on day one!

X OCEAN BLUE ADVENTURES

Modern Fishing is proud to see some of the amazing fishing the world has to offer with Ocean Blue Adventures. The team at Ocean Blue has slaved away, aiming to provide Aussie anglers with amazing international fishing, and their proficiency and slickness in all their areas of operation demonstrates their hard work and dedication to their clients. Give them a call to organise your next dream trip.

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Words & Photos Jack Scrine

An emerging top-water kingy fishery in New Zealand's beautiful North Island saw the Modern Fishing team once again racing across the Tasman to do battle

AS NEW ZEALAND'S rolling green fields dotted with sheep and craggy mountain peaks came into view after hours of looking down at nothing but water, I shifted in my seat excitedly. Only two weeks earlier, Nick Janzen and I had been travelling around the country's South Island in search of big brown trout, and as our plane's wheels kissed the tarmac of Rotorua's International Airport, I felt like I'd arrived home. For the Aussie angler, there's no shame in being a bit of a traitor and admitting that Kiwiland is paradise.

Alongside David Noble of Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures, and a host of Ocean Blue Adventures Club members, I felt a little daunted by the altogether different class of fish we were to be chasing on this latest overseas

"If you asked me to count how many kingfish we landed over the four days, I could only hazard a guess at 300"

sojourn. The type of fish that would eat my pb 6lb brown trout for an entrée, were they unlucky enough to share the same saline environment.

"Make sure you're fit and bulked up – you'll be hauling in 20kg-plus hoodlum kingfish for four straight days!"

David's words from months before echoed in my ears as I sheepishly looked down at my pot belly and nervously squeezed my bicepless arms on the bus from Rotorua to Tauranga. I could hear the broad-shouldered, surface-lure-smashing yellowtail kingfish chuckling mercilessly already. They had been working out.

Top digs

When you're on a serious fishing trip, abroad or otherwise, accommodation is rarely of great concern. A simple bed on which to rest a tired body at the end of every day is often all that's required – and sometimes, all that's provided! It was with relief and some excitement that the Sebel Trinity Wharf hotel turned out to be one of the more comfortable and convenient I've stayed in on a fishing trip. Located right on the harbour with wharf access for pick-up and drop-off each day, and only five minutes from the centre of the vibrant touristy town centre of Tauranga, fishing and frivolity were mere minutes away. The nightlife was a far cry from the sometimes deserted country towns

of the South Island we'd travelled through, and some of the younger single guys on the trip noted that the Bay of Plenty must not only have received its name on account of the hot fishing. The married anglers' views have been stricken from the record.

On the night before we hit the water, our hotel rooms resembled tackle stores. Stocky jiggling sticks and powerful, long stickbaiting rods bristled along every wall, and rolls of jigs and piles of surface lures formed small mountains on beds. Spools of heavy leader unfurled in every direction, heavy trebles, singles and split rings rattled in containers like maracas. The excitement in the air was palpable and the anticipation hummed through the room as if being transmitted from an enormous vibrating mobile phone.

Before dinner and a couple of local ales were consumed, we were paid a visit by our head skipper and Aussie expat, Mark Armistead. Mark is at the forefront of an emerging fishery in the North Island's Bay of Plenty, and he and Ocean Blue Adventures are combining to bring Australians across the ditch to get a slice of it. Friendly and enthusiastic, Mark's the perfect guy to fish alongside, whether you're a beginner or an expert. Don't be fooled by his light-hearted cheery personality – this guy's a machine. The type of freak who can jig in 200m of water all day without raising a sweat.

Mark talked us through the days of fishing that were to come. Like excited schoolkids receiving instructions from a teacher before an excursion to Dreamworld, we attentively listened to Mark's description of the days ahead and what they would entail: huge schools of kingfish launching themselves at poppers and stickbaits before screaming off at warp speed. Locked drags, explosive visual strikes and aching backs and burning biceps.

Scratching the surface

The seven anglers were divided among two boats that offered heaps of room from which to fish – even with all anglers casting heavy stickbaits. Mark was at the helm of one, while the equally skilled, bloody hilarious and born-and-bred kiwi Colin Tecofsky

Frenzied kahawai and trevally bust-ups were everywhere.

The author managed a bit of time off the camera to instantly nail a PB king.



These kings know how to put a bend in a snapper rod!



Sydney angler and tackle guru Wahyu shows off another proud capture.



MODERN fishing

AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER FISHING MAGAZINE

Yellowtail kingfish



FISHING AT A **QUANTUM** LEVEL

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Casting large stickbaits requires serious loading of these heavy rods. Left: Colin's boat celebrates the successful landing of a solid king while we watch on from Mark's.

X TAURANGA TACKLE TIPS

BY MARK ARMISTEAD

When it comes to chasing big NZ kingfish, preparation is very important. These fish grow to huge proportions and will test your gear to its limits. These fish respond to a wide variety of methods including jigging, live-baiting, soft plastics and surface lures and it pays to come prepared for all the different fishing techniques.

For jigging, keep the rods short and powerful, for the Bay of Plenty aim for rods that will cover a range of jigs from 300-500g. Reels are going to be a personal choice, but aim for something capable of handling at least 60lb braid (preferably 80lb). Hopefully it will hold around 250m, just in case you end up jigging in the deep stuff. If your ultimate destination is the Three Kings or Ranfurly Banks, simply upgrade the gear to handle a minimum of 80-100lb braid.

Targeting kingfish on light soft-plastic gear is a lot of fun but expect to lose more fish than you will ever land. I use mainly 6-12kg outfits with 20lb braid.

Surface lures have become all the rage here in NZ and justifiably so – the fish are hitting the lures hard and the strikes are spectacular. Long rods are essential for casting, they should be at least 7' and up to 8' in length. Good stickbaiting rods should have a forgiving tip section. This allows for better casting and also works the stickbaits better. If possible, I would bring two different outfits, one heavy capable of handling 80lb braid – this one can also be used to throw around lighter poppers – and the other one lighter, in the 60lb-braid bracket. I recently had Japanese pro angler and owner of Carpenter, Kenji Konishi, on board testing his new Blue Chaser rods. These are designed for kingfish and will be hard to beat when casting stickbaits.

Bring with you a range of jigs in weights from 200-500g and loads of stickbaits. On some days all stickbaits work well, but my favourites are, in no particular order: Carpenter, Falcon, Orion and Angel Freak lures. Throw in some spare braid and leader material in weights from 100-150lb for the heavy stuff and 20-40lb for the soft plastics. If you are on a charter, check whether or not they have gear available to hire and, more importantly, ask what type of gear it is. Nothing is worse than turning up to find the "high-end" gear available is not adequate for the job.

took charge of the other. Colin is an expert soft-plastic fisherman – snapper across the Bay tremble at the sound of his vessel, *Legal Action*, motoring their way for a drift.

He's a riot, too. He had us doubled over with laughter at his stories and

"As a Sydney angler, a trip like this carries an inherent problem: I may never be satisfied with the fishing in Sydney again!"

jokes all week. Parental guidance and viewer discretion is advised.

Mark is the stickbait master, but both of these guys know what they're doing in all forms of productive local fishing methods, and are way ahead of most of the local pack in terms of methods and results. In fact, during the four days we fished the fertile kingfish grounds of the Bay of Plenty, we noticed only a handful of boats giving the top-water action a go, while we enjoyed constant success with the surface lures the boys have helped pioneer in the region.

I was never in any doubt about the class of kingfish we were to encounter with Mark and Colin at the helm, but what made this trip something special was the sheer number of fish.

As we pulled up around wheeling birds and sporadic bust-ups, fellow angler Justin Ayres sent a massive stickbait rocketing skyward from one side of the boat, while Brendan Coote lobbed out another from the other. Being used to fishing for kings in Sydney, I was fully expecting to have to be patient and

wait for a hook-up. As I rested, camera in hand, excited screams from both anglers had me running from gunwale to gunwale in a frenzy of clicking shutters. Packs of kingfish rose on both lures as they splash-danced their way back to the boat. The gang of hoodlums on Brendan's lure narrowly missed the hooks after several enormous surface strikes, while Justin's reel began howling like Janis Joplin. A fat 15kg kingfish came to the boat after a short but brutal fight, and the trend had been set. Brendan cast his stickbait out again, once the high-fives and laddish hooting and hollering subsided, and landed his first king of the trip several minutes later. The trend had been set.

What followed throughout the trip has since become a blur. If you asked me to count how many kingfish we landed over the four days, I could only hazard a guess at 300. The number of 20kg-plus fish would surely have been in the dozens. Next time I'll take a belt to notch as we go, but you get the idea.

We divided and conquered throughout the trip, switching boats and skippers each day to ensure we got a flavour of everything both vessels and guides had to offer, as well as allowing us the opportunity to get to know one another better and recycle the same tall fishing yarns and tales of woe and glory many times.

I'm not a GT-popping expert. In fact, this type of big-lure-hurling was something pretty new to me.

It was interesting to talk to the mix of guys on board about it, however. Being Ocean Blue Adventures Club members, many of the boys had done tropical GT trips to various parts of

the world. GT-popping is definitely right up there with the most brutal, expensive, painful and exciting fishing on earth, and what confirmed this latest Ocean Blue venture as something special was the affirmation from some of these GT-junkies that this fishing matched and surpassed their favourite source of adrenaline.

Another great advantage this fishery when measured against GT stickbaiting is the lack of razor-sharp bommies being cast to. Generally, casting blindly from either side of the boat can raise kingfish, so accuracy is not as important as when aiming at distant structure, and your chances of getting dusted instantly are next to zero.

Notably popular stickbaits included those from Angel Tackle, Carpenter and Orion, but these fish weren't too fussy. See skipper Mark Armistead's advice on the previous page for more information on the gear and lures he recommends for this trip. It was interesting to note that Victorian Andrew Pennisi was the only one of us to land a fish on a popper all week – for some reason the kings weren't going as ballistic for the big bloopers as they were for the swaying stickbaits. Every lure has its day in the Bay of Plenty, however.

X KIA ORA

Modern Fishing flew to and from Kiwiland for the second time in as many weeks with Air New Zealand. Offering great service and entertainment at good prices and with a sense of humour, we thoroughly recommend you travel with them during your trans-Tasman Ocean Blue experience.

Give them a call on 13 24 76, or visit www.airnewzealand.com.au.

Wahyu collects another fat king on his great range of Angel Tackle stickbaits.



X ANGEL TACKLE

Sydney local and fishing guru Wahyu Kusumanjaya has been working on his own range of stickbaits and poppers that made a big impression during our trip. Three models are for sale at the moment, and they range in size from big-GT destroyers to hoodlum kingfish lollies. These custom-made and meticulously tested and finished lures are a testament to what a switched-on and innovative angler Wahyu is. A nicer guy to fish with, you'll be hard-pressed to find.

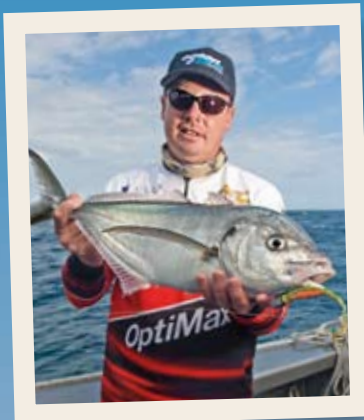
Skipper Mark and Wahyu have been in close correspondence since the trip, and all indications are Wahyu's lures are still doing the damage on NZ's hoodlums!

Angel Tackle, visit www.angeltackle.com, or write to info@angeltackle.com.

It's hard to believe this kahawai was hooked – in the mouth – on such a massive stickbait, but it happened!



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stupidly big lures. We caught one on a 400g jig and another on a huge stickbait – a far cry from the 5-10g metal slices I'm used to having to finesse these tough little nuggets with. Silver trevally schools also balled-up and provided great sport, going even harder pound-for-pound than the kahawai.

These three species not only allowed us to use lighter line and lures, but gave us some inshore options for when the

Main: Skipper Mark helps a weary Brendan cradle this nice 12-kegger.

Above: Silver trevally of huge proportions were heaps of fun on the light stuff.

offshore weather was proving a little stomach-turning.

About halfway through the trip, Dave suggested we take up a light-tackle (20lb line or less) challenge, so we began using the outfits with which we'd been fishing for salmon, snapper and trevally, targeted the same massive kingfish we'd previously been arming

“And because nearly all fish are released to fight another day, you can be assured this fishery is in safe hands”

ourselves with 80lb braid and seriously powerful outfits to land!

There's a rumour going around that Kiwi kingfish don't fight as hard as ours. Let me be the first to quash it. True, we managed some stupid, stupid captures with the light gear – Dave was crowned light-tackle champion with an estimated 18kg fish, while Colin and Newcastle angler Peter Childs both caught fish that would have nudged 15kg on the humble snapper sticks – and while you wouldn't have a hope in hell with such light gear on our east coast, the answer doesn't lie in Kiwi kingfish strength. Water depth is key – not only were the majority of our fish



Colin's vessel, *Legal Action*, is so roomy and comfortable you sometimes forget you're fishing five anglers at once from it!



This monster was taken on the last cast of the day.



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PRO TIPS



PLENTIFUL ADVICE

- Take more stickbaits than poppers – the NZ kingfish seem to prefer their subtlety.
- Pack clothing for all weather conditions. It can go from bloody cold to warm and vice versa in the North Island.
- Barracouta are a pain over here – they destroy jigs (take plenty!) and can inflict a very painful bite (ask Mark!).
- All split rings and hooks must be upgraded and all barbs must be crushed. Catch and release is preferred on this trip, and crushed barbs aid in this. It's also much safer on a boat full of anglers casting huge lures!
- Single hooks are great alternatives to trebles, but may throw out the action of some lures. Ask Mark to tinker with your lure while on the water – he's a stickbait genius.
- Don't just pack the heavy stuff – great light-tackle sportfishing is available on everything from silver trevally to the same huge kings you will catch on the heavy gear. Expect to lose a few fish, though!



This fish inflicted some serious pain on Justin late on the first day.

hooked very high in the water column on warp-speed-retrieved plastics, they also often had more than 100m of water to swim through before hitting the bottom to complete the famous kingy smoking! Just ask Dave, who fought his 18-kegger for more than an hour on silly string, if it was easy!


We also got the saltwater fly rod out and hooked a couple of rats, and at one stage I gave a 2500-size spin reel loaded with 10lb braid a go. Got smoked.

Get going

As a Sydney angler, a trip like this carries an inherent problem: I may never be satisfied with the fishing in Sydney again! As good as our kingfishery is, the image of huge schools of 20-30kg fish smashing the surface to froth can't escape my mind, and that kind of action is simply not on offer here – not regularly, anyway! The species is the same, the proportion and the numbers are completely different.

Don't let that stop you though – not only is New Zealand cheap to fly to, the exchange rate is excellent and the packages Ocean Blue offer to get you over there are surprisingly cheap. In the same time it would take you to drive a few hours up or down the coast to chase big fish, you could have cleared customs and be on the bus from Rotorua Airport to The Sebel, waiting for

the boys to pick you up from the jetty and get you into some real kingfish.

And because nearly all fish are released to fight another day and Mark, Colin and Ocean Blue are pioneering the amazing market for this fishery, you can be assured it's in safe hands, and will only continue to get better! 



Snapper weren't as ferocious as the kings at the time of year we visited the Bay, but several fat specimens like this one were landed.

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