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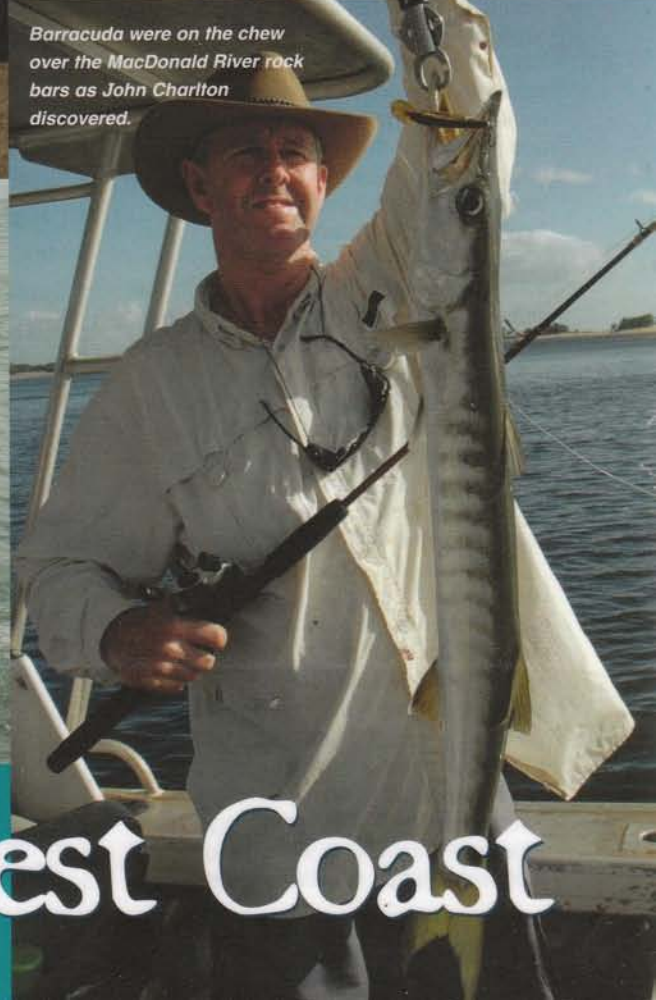
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Joe Spencer with a great 82 cm barramundi he caught in a small tidal creek.



John Charlton with a nice Golden trevally, of typical size that were caught about the anchovy bait schools.



Barracuda were on the chew over the MacDonald River rock bars as John Charlton discovered.

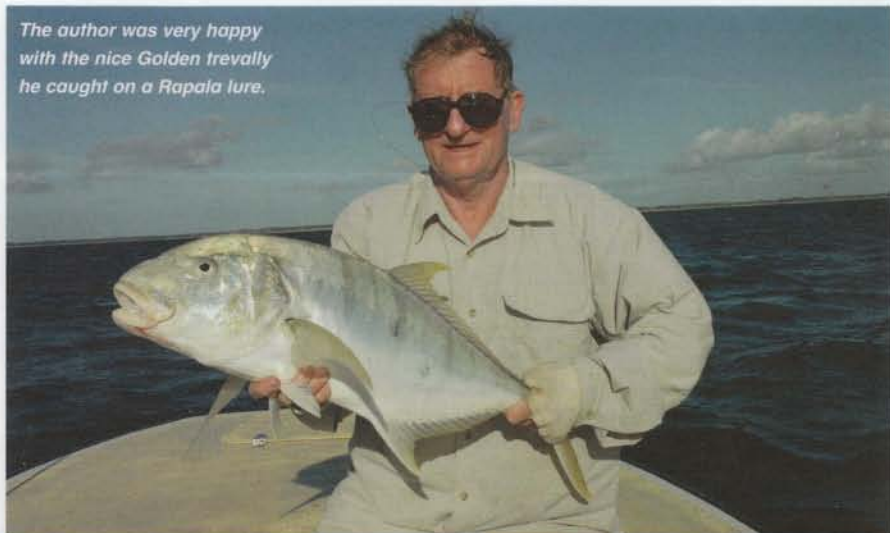


This family did not have a good morning fishing the Jardine River.

Fishing the West Coast

Dick Eussen is certainly no stranger to Top End fishing. In this issue he tackles some hard pulling species around the mighty Jardine River.

The author was very happy with the nice Golden trevally he caught on a Rapala lure.



John Charlton caught this Golden trevally on a Halco Scorpion.

I flew from Cairns into Bamaga's Jackie Jackie airport with the Cape's own airline, Regional Pacific, the flight taking about one and a half hours, a vast improvement over the sixteen or more hours by road.

There are five villages north of the Jardine River. Umagico, Injinooc, and New Mapoon are home to mainland Aboriginal people, while Bamaga and Seisia are mainly Torres Strait Islander and Anglo-Australian communities. Bamaga is the main administration center for the region, though each community has its own infrastructure.

A cul-de-sac in Seisia is known as the 'Fish Bowl', because it houses several resident guided fishing operators. They are a friendly bunch and get along with each other, which is pleasing considering some of the petty attitudes that exist elsewhere. I was a guest of John Charlton, owner operator of John Charlton's Cape York Adventures. He soon had me in touch with the other operators in the fish bowl and others in the region, who combined in planning some great fishing adventures for me.

Cyclone Ingrid had dumped an all-

time April record of rain on the coast and all roads north were closed, though repairs were underway. Many operators depend on taking self-drive people out, though fly-ins are also very popular, especially since the Tip accommodation has now three and four star ratings.

The lack of self-drive fishers worked for me, as there were seats available from all operators. My first trip was an afternoon outing with a local angler, Joe Spencer. Joe lived on a cattle station at Temple Bay for much of his life. He has a 7.1 m Stinger Longboat, powered by a 60 hp Yamaha.



Joe Spencer and Paul Charlton are stretched on Golden trevally.



Paul Charlton had his hands full with this hungry Golden trevally.

With some juggling of weight distribution we were away, with *Island Runner* settling down nicely on the moderate waves. We soon left the much slower *Stinger* behind in our wake. Near the Jardine River, we met a family who had been fishing the river. They reckon they had a poor morning.

Tea-coloured water was pumping from the river and out to sea for about 20km before being dispersed. The Jardine River is the largest perennial stream in Queensland and the water it pumps out in the wet season would fill Sydney Harbour several times in a day. Born in the wet desert of the heath and sand dune country on the east coast of the Cape, the Jardine is one of seven west coast streams that rise from what is officially the wettest place in Australia. The Seven Rivers country streams – Jardine, Crystal Creek, Doughboy, Ducie, MacDonald, Jackson, and Skardon, stretch as far south as Port Musgrave. Most are permanent, though a couple dry out during extremely dry seasons.

The tide was low as we boated through the narrow channel that separates Crab Island and the mainland. Crab Island is the largest Flat-back turtle breeding ground in the world, and home to many crocodiles that prey on them. In the peak-breeding month of July, over 450 turtles lay their eggs on the beaches nightly.

The number one entrance to Crystal Creek has a large bar on it that makes entering the creek difficult at certain tide heights. Number two is a little better. Both channels, which run through the Jardine swamps, have excellent barramundi and jack fishing. As I had fished them three years ago with Warren, we continued south.

We had lunch off Vrilya Point, a rocky outcrop that juts into the Gulf of Carpentaria. The rocky foreshore has fringing reefs and large oyster beds. We lured, catching some undersize coral trout, and bragging size trevally. When Warren's boat hove into view, we headed south again and later passed by the mouth of the Doughboy River.

The west coast is very flat, apart from a few low sand dunes, while the vegetation is mostly casuarinas, with patches of mangroves that mark small tidal gutters. Little changes inland with much of the country being heath land and open monsoon forest, with a few small isolated patches of monsoon rainforest.

Relatively spared by the southeast trade winds that make fishing hell on the east coast for much of the year, the Gulf of Carpentaria's eastern inshore waters along the Cape York Peninsula are calm for about 2 km out to sea. Guides and locals fish inside the calm zone for most of the year.

Bait Balls: There was little wind and the inshore sea was flat and calm. We were continually looking for sea birds, but were relatively unsuccessful until we reached the MacDonald River. A myriad of terns – little, whiskered, and the odd white-winged – and dozens of Great Frigate birds were creating havoc along the beach. We headed for the melee and found six large bait balls under attack from the air and below.

Ominous dark shapes hung below the bait balls, suddenly rising to scatter a ball, which would snake out and reform. Frigate birds hovered over the balls, feeding on fish forced to the surface by those below it, while the terns swooped down without mercy to decimate more of the anchovies, or whitebait, as they are also known.

It was an incredible scene of mayhem and murder, one seldom experienced in the wild at such close range. One little bait ball was separated from a main ball and was literally gobbled up by a school of golden trevally that surrounded it. The trevally ate their way into the centre of the ball until they all met together with mouths touching and no more anchovies remained. The few that managed to escape from the gulping mouths were taken by the diving terns and the hovering frigate birds. This was wildlife murder and mayhem as only Mother Nature can illustrate.

Rays and sharks raced under the balls, scattering them only to reform, and renewing their attacks. Some of the sharks were four metres long and tore the balls apart with deadly intent.

We were witnessing a rare natural spectacle, but we did not linger long over it before our lures sailed into the fray. We soon found that if a lure was dragged through a ball, it was attacked when the anchovies split apart. Triple hook ups on golden trevally up to 7 kg on baitcasting gear is great fun and for an hour or more, we enjoyed great sportfishing that only ended when the anchovies escaped onto the MacDonald River sandbars on a rising tide.

Paul Charlton with a barracuda he caught on a rock bar in the MacDonald River.



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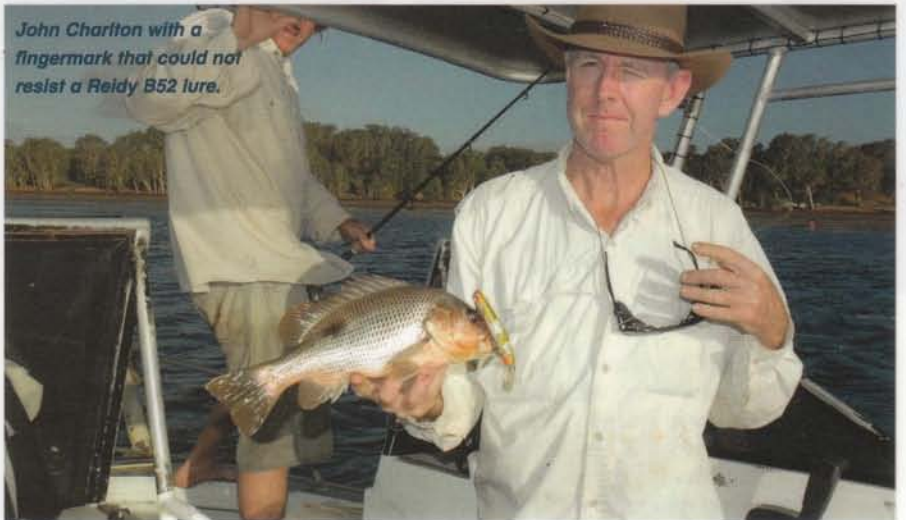
Airlines: Regional Pacific Airlines. Ph: (07) 4040 1400. Fax: (07) 4034 9258. Visit: www.regionalpacific.com.au or email: reservations@regionalpacific.com.au

Accommodation is arranged through your chosen guided fishing operator if requested.

In the coming days, I saw the anchovies move into the local rivers, where they banked up along the shores and in the shallows, while rock and snags were like cloud shadows for the myriad of bait that hung about them. The phenomenon of such bait masses is caused when warm seawater moves out of an estuary and is replaced by colder upstream brackish and freshwater that forces the anchovies into the warmer sea where it comes under attack from hungry predators. Yet in the coming days, I did not see any more bait balls forming. Being witness to such an amazing spectacle was one of the events that will linger in our memories.

Warren and Alan passed us with cheery waves, but instead of catching

John Charlton with a fingermark that could not resist a Reidy B52 lure.



up, we moved across the sand bars of the MacDonald River and inside the estuary with the tide. Several rock bars were very fishy and we caught many barracuda, fingermark, trevally, cod, and mangrove jack, before the tide became too high and the fish moved away from the rocks upstream.

The barracuda were particularly ferocious and attacked hooked fish with deadly intent. I had a nice trevally on, when a two-metre barracuda chopped it in half. I quickly dropped the head - which was still attached to the lure - back. The cuda charged it and I was on, but was busted off when the line made contact with the oyster shell covered rocks that surrounded us.

Heading Home: By late afternoon, we gave it away and turned to Warren's hidden base camp on a remote inlet. The location is a secret to protect it from lowlifes. It was almost dark by the time the gear was unloaded.

Later, sitting around a warm campfire with a cold beer in hand, we regaled in the events of the day, especially the bait balls and the wonderful fishing they had provided. John and Paul headed back to Seisia the next day but I stayed on in the camp as Warren had planned to take me fishing in the MacDonald River, some distance away. But that is another story.

tbf