

Marlin on the Flats

Marlin are normally associated with teaser spreads and deep blue water, not sight-fishing on the flats!

Nat Bromhead lifts the lid on some remarkable sight-casting to marlin on the flats at Fraser Island.

Ask one hundred fly fishers what they consider the pinnacle of the sport and I bet you'll have at least 95 of them respond with sight-casting. There is simply no better thrill than quietly stalking your prey, waiting for the perfect moment, casting, hopefully hooking and then possibly even landing the fish. The further into the process you go, the more challenges are added to the equation. Wind, cloud, tides, bait, angler ability, flightiness of the fish . . . the list is long, wide-ranging and frustrating.

But occasionally the planets align and it all works out.

Over recent years, a few fortunate anglers have been seeing black marlin come into relatively shallow water (often as little as six feet) on the flats of northern Fraser Island in Queensland.

As a charter operator in the area, my clients have had a number of opportunities to make casts at these supreme sportfish. But until recently we have had little success in hooking, let alone staying connected, to these beasts of the flats.

EYE OPENERS

Seeing the first one with my own eyes was a breathtaking experience. It was two years ago with Antony Tingsley, a keen saltwater fly fisherman from the UK, aboard. While idling along the northern flat in 4 to 5 feet of water looking for golden trevally, we watched in awe as a long dark shape gently swam towards us from the south.

As I yelled, "Barracuda coming in, get ready at 10 o'clock," Anthony spun around and readied for a shot

with his 2/0 Clouser. The fish quickly closed in, exposing the tip of its tail above the water. At that moment we realised that it was in fact a black marlin of around 40 to 45 kg.

It looked closely at the fly on a first, then a second presentation but clearly wasn't tempted. As we followed the fish for subsequent casts, fumbling and shaking, I rigged a 12-weight with a heavy leader and larger fly. Sadly by the time the line was on the deck, our time was up. The fish, tired of our attention, turned for the safety of deeper water.

A couple of weeks later I found myself in a New York state-of-mind for a couple of days with two anglers from the Big Apple. One of them was John Albanalp, a very competent and experienced angler; he has been just

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Jono Shales is one of a very small band of swoffers who can claim to have hooked and landed a marlin on fly while sight-fishing on the flats!

Jono's second marlin needed a bit of personal attention before swimming away.



lb! It was caught by local angler James Otto fishing with Justin Nye, a very experienced life-long resident of Hervey Bay. On the same day Justin cast to another fish of similar size and had a Clouser crushed in its jaws—being the sportsman he is, he handed 17-year-old James the rod and told him it was his shot. The fish measured seven and a half old-fashioned feet and was James' third fish caught on a fly-rod!

While being absolutely thrilled for the young blokes, I couldn't help but draw parallels between their sensational capture and that youngster taking us by storm in the casting competition. These young guys were quietly going about their business and landed

what is most likely the first black marlin sight-cast on the flats anywhere on the planet. A truly outstanding achievement.

Two days prior to this capture, Peter White from Sydney was aboard my boat and had a shot (with a small Clouser) at a black of around 15 kg. I rang to tell him that one had finally been caught and while very happy for the anglers he went quite sulky and then asked about next year's availability.

THE PLANETS ALIGN

Fortunately, the following week presented us with good weather and we were seeing more marlin come into

WITHIN AN HOUR THE FIRST FISH SWAM UP THE FLAT TOWARDS US. ON THE SECOND CAST OF THE DAY JONO HOOKED HIS FIRST MARLIN - A FISH OF AROUND 25KG.

about everywhere and seen it all. I recounted the marlin story to him as we headed the 35 miles up the bay one morning, including the line about them swimming along with their tails breaking the water. I don't think he believed a word of it. "Yeah right, tailing marlin on the flats, they'd stand out from the 'bones' wouldn't they," he said with his classic New York drawl. We all had a good laugh together and I was all the more determined to 'show them the money.'

Unfortunately I couldn't prove the 'tailing marlin on the flats' to him but he and his good friend Tom did manage a sensational longtail tuna each,

both fish sight-cast in the shallows from the poled skiff.

RECENT EVENTS

Last summer we saw more small blacks in the shallows and always had a 12-weight rigged and ready with a suitable fly should the opportunity arise. Again we had more shots but never got the hookup—we came close a few times but for various reasons it just didn't work out.

Over the first few months of summer 2006/07 clients aboard my boat had 10 or 11 good shots at various black marlin that we were again seeing up on the flats. Numbers seemed

to be well up on previous years and it seemed almost daily that I would arrive home and miserably inform my wife of yet another failed shot. We were obviously getting closer, but not quite there. In one memorable situation that springs to mind, a marlin raced in on a well-presented fly that for some reason was involuntarily pulled from the water a split second before being eaten. Another angler fell into a false casting coma, unable to drop the fly on a teased up fish that eventually got bored and swam away. A very wise line from Graeme Williams was repeated (again): "I am the presenter of opportunities."

YOUNG GUNS

A few years ago at a Fly Show in Melbourne there was a fly casting competition and as you'd expect the usual faces and names were right up there in the distance stakes. A few minutes before the winner was announced the compare asked over the PA if there were any more takers. With some comments and encouragement from his family, a shy giant of 15 or 16 embarrassingly and begrudgingly walked out of the crowd and took his place behind the line. The champs didn't take too much notice, chatting amongst themselves, until the youngster blasted about 115 feet with his first warm up cast.

A similar situation occurred recently in Hervey Bay. In the weeks prior to Christmas I was amazed to hear about a fly-caught black marlin taken on the local flats that weighed just over 100



Frank Concilia hooked-up to his first flats marlin.

Marlin on the Flats . . . continued



Gently towing the marlin alongside before release.

the northern bay. The planets were again close to being aligned and, as it happened, Jono Shales from Sydney was scheduled to arrive for a three-day charter.

Jono has been fly fishing since age 6 and I would rate him as one of the better all-round fly anglers in the country. He also exhibits some sort of amazing rapport with fish—the lucky bugger; wherever he is they tend to be as well.

I took Jono up to the area where we'd been seeing the best numbers of blacks and we basically staked out a small section of flat, focussing on one area rather than looking over the lot. Within an hour the first fish swam up the flat towards us. On the second cast of the day Jono hooked his first marlin—a fish of around 25 kilos. As the line cleared and the fish took to the air 15 or 20 times over the first minute there was absolute jubilation aboard. I had been keeping Jono aware of our progress (or lack thereof) over the recent months, so he was well aware of how special this first hook-up was.

The fish fought hard but was subdued within 6 or 7 minutes and led

boatside. After quick photographs it was swum beside the boat, travelling at about 8 knots, before swimming away well.

I must say that I kind of slackened off after that. The first fish of the day is always the hardest, and this one was the highlight of the past five years—the pressure really eased after that.

Same time next day we were back in the area and, as if on cue, at roughly the same stage of the tide another fish swam down the flat towards us. Again Jono was lined up and made a beautiful 60-foot cast to lead the fish with the fly. He followed instructions perfectly, giving three short strips, and again the fly was inhaled. Jono looked more excited with his second than he did with the first. This fish jumped 2 or 3 times as it embarked on a massive 200–250 metre run. Initially Jono said he'd rather 'dead boat' (not chase) the fish but he changed his mind as it looked like it wasn't going to ever stop running.

Again the fish was landed; the 6/0 Gamakatsu SL12S was firmly embedded in the bill, about halfway up, and this, we figure, is why the fish didn't jump as much as the first.

There was obviously jubilation all-round, and while we celebrated the sky slowly filled with cloud, the breeze came up, and the planets started slipping out of alignment.

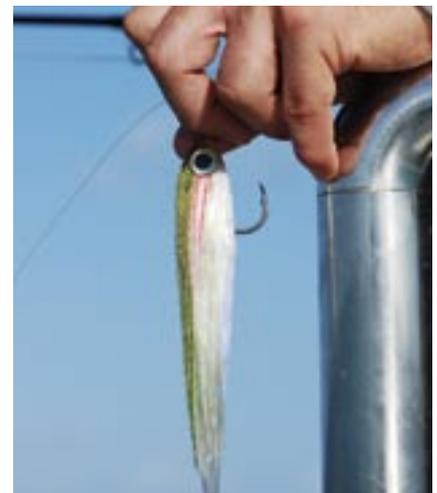
TROUT TO MARLIN

A few days later Frank Concilia from Melbourne was booked for a charter—it was to be my last for the year and judging by the forecast I planned a close-range day and probably a half-day at that.

Heading across the bay we were surprised to see that the Bureau had got it wrong: there was no wind, no chop and not much cloud. I offered Frank the options, estimating a 30% chance of seeing a marlin on the flats, and he jumped at the opportunity. We changed course and an hour and a half later were again on the grounds. We looked for an hour, possibly two, and sure enough as the tide dropped away we saw a marlin of 25 to 30 kg swimming toward the boat.

Frank, usually a trouty, wielding a solid 10-weight rod and tandem 6/0 fly, made the cast of the day and led the fish perfectly with the fly. He followed the 'strip, stop, stop, wait, strip, stop' style instructions perfectly and hooked the fish as if it was just another rainbow. Then, as the reality set in, I doubt I've ever seen an angler as excited to be connected to a fish. Frank did everything right and had the fish beside the boat within 5 or 6 minutes. I was amazed by his presence of mind, ability to follow instructions and lack of 'trout strike'. I asked him about this and very calmly he said: "I lift-strike trout and strip-strike in the salt." **FI**

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This 6/0 Trey Combs Flashy Profile Fly in olive over pearl caught Frank's marlin and one of Jono's.