

Australian Fly Fishing
Exmouth with Craig 2008
By Reid Miller

“There’s a snake up there.” Craig said rather nonchalantly. “Up where?” I exclaimed, as I jumped. And I wanted an answer before I came down. Now, let me put this in a bit of context. It was dark. This was the end of our first day in Exmouth, at the far northwest tip of Australia. We were walking downtown on a sidewalk along the biggest and best lit street in town, which meant there were a few, rather dim streetlights on a very wide spacing. Australia is famous for its many species of deadly poisonous snakes. Up here, there are king browns, death adders, etc. It is so hot and dry in the summer on the Exmouth peninsula that snakes come out only at night. Our fishing guide had lived there for many years and couldn’t remember ever seeing one in town.

“Up ahead on the sidewalk, past the streetlight,” Craig calmly replied. I strained my eyes and could finally make out in the dim glow of the streetlight a rather vague wiggly object scooting off onto the grass, headed toward the community swimming pool. It was too dark to identify it. My son Craig has good eyes, much better than mine. I am afraid to think how many snakes I might have seen on our several trips to Australia, if I had his eyes! On the way back to our hotel, he spotted the same snake in nearly the same spot. We gave it a wide berth. I think it was trying to cross the street to the high school, even though school was not in session.

We had been on our own this day, after arriving at Learmonth Airport about noon on a Skywest jet from Perth. Since Learmonth is also an RAAF base, it is the only commercial airport I remember where photographs are “Not Allowed”. Budget had a rental car waiting for us, which we drove north 30 km to Exmouth, stopping to glass some raptors on the way. Exmouth is on the east or gulf side of a long peninsula separating the Gulf of Exmouth from the Indian Ocean to the west.

My mate Rohan at the Bluewater Morley fishing store in Perth had given me detailed directions on where we could drive and walk to fish from shore on the ocean side of the peninsula, inside the Ningaloo Reef. The guide I had arranged a couple days fishing with had agreed to loan us a 9 wt outfit, which we had arranged to pick up at the Bluewater Exmouth store. We had a map from the Budget lady and found the shop with no difficulty. There we met Ben, who worked for our guide-service owner on his days off from Bluewater. He would be our actual guide the following two days. He suggested it might be a bit windy to fish the reef side today, suggesting instead an area north of town on the gulf side. Ben also indicated that our timing was excellent, the weather finally coming good for the next few days – starting tomorrow.

Next, we checked into the Potshot Hotel, where we had a room on the ground floor of a two-story, motel-type building. We dropped some of our stuff and drove 40 km around the North Cape to investigate the Ningaloo Reef and Cape Range National Park. It was indeed too windy for fishing, but we had some good birding at the hide on Mangrove Bay, as well as nice swimming in the warm, blue, protected waters of Turquoise Bay. These are both refuge zones, explaining why we weren’t trying to fish in these relatively calm spots. We did see a five foot shark swimming near the submerged mangroves just outside Mangrove Bay.

On the return, we checked out the fishing spot Ben had recommended at Bundegi. I rigged my 10 wt outfit. Craig used the borrowed 9 wt rod, which had been completely rigged, ready for a fly to be tied on. The tide was still high and the sun too low in the late afternoon for good spotting, telling us that this was not optimum timing. However, we saw an occasional swirl, and there were turtles and small sharks plying the flats, so we waded out to give it a try. As it turned out, you could wade a long ways, as there were sandy flats, interspersed with slightly submerged coral reefs. Craig ventured out further than I did and hooked up briefly with two fish, but they quickly got off. He had no idea what they were. Two other fishermen arrived and waded out from the rocky point just south of us, which defines the northern boundary of a big sanctuary zone. They threw big poppers on spinning gear for a few minutes, obviously targeting Trevally or other big predator fish, but with no success. “Very quiet,” they told us as they packed up to leave.

It was getting late, and we didn’t want to miss dinner, so we headed for the hotel. We got showers, drinks and dinner, before our night walk to check out the town. There were few other people around, summer not being

the tourist season. Exmouth is a winter getaway spot for Perth-siders. In fact, we were quite lucky that it was cooler than in Perth the days we were up there, but it could have been really hot. The water was perfect temperature for wading.

I had fished the salt at Exmouth once before, for two glorious days in November, 2002, during which I felt like I was the only guided fly fisher in all of Western Australia. This had been my first serious saltwater fly fishing, and I had a great time catching Trevally and Queenfish in the southern end of the Gulf of Exmouth. I even caught one 17 kg Golden Trevally that would beat the current state record, easily the biggest fish I have ever caught. My guide for that trip had rather mysteriously disappeared in the meantime, but I found a new Exmouth fly fishing guide on the web (True Blue Bones, Brett and Simone Wolf, www.truebluebonefish.com.au) and got us signed up for a couple days while Craig would be in Perth.

The Wolfs used to run a trout fishing business in Tasmania, but they had sold it and moved to Exmouth during the past year. From what I could gather from the web site, responses to my e-mails, and from friends in the Saltwater Flyrodders club in Perth (<http://www.saltwaterflyrodders.com>), Brett and Simone's business seemed to be on the up-and-up. So, I had sent them a deposit and promised full payment when I saw the whites of their eyes on the first day of fishing.

Ben showed up next morning right on the dot of 8:30 am, as he explained that the best fishing was between 10 am and 4 pm, when the sun was high for good sight fishing. He followed us to turn in the rental car, and then hauled us in a Prada with Brett's new boat (The Albula) in tow, for a 30 min drive around the cape to the Tantabiddi boat launch facility. It was a particularly low tide, and Ben had to position heavy metal strips on the sand under the wheels to get the boat in the water. If I remember correctly, there was only one other rig in the parking area when we arrived and none when we took out that afternoon.

It is amazing to me that there are such poor boat launch facilities in the area. The ramp on the gulf side at Bundegi is unusable most of the time due to sanding problems, the town of Exmouth is too far from the best fishing areas, and Tantabiddi seems to be about the only good option on the ocean side. Anyone wanting access to the southern gulf side has to launch across the sand. This will change in the near future; I'm sure, as there is a big resort and deepwater marina going in on the outskirts of town. From all appearances, Exmouth is about to be "discovered", which will be most unfortunate.

There was a good breeze blowing from the southwest, which is the typical wind direction here, and Ben said he would be happier if it died a bit. There were a few small whitecaps on the water inside the reef, but much calmer than yesterday. We could see big breakers on the main reef, which was clearly visible well offshore. Ben had us wade out and climb on board, and then he got the boat up on plane and headed south along the coast. Shortly, the engine alarm came on, and he had to stop and shut the motor down, then restart it. This occurred a couple more times as we made the 30 minute run past Mangrove Bay and the Milyering Visitor Centre to the area he intended to fish, but there didn't seem to be any real problem with the big outboard. It had been serviced the day before, and Ben wasn't happy about the alarm going off, but it didn't interfere with our fishing.



The water was amazingly clear, with generally sandy bottom, but with dark coral heads, well spaced near shore but more concentrated out toward the reef. Once on the flats, Ben made sure my 10 wt outfit was properly rigged, as well as the similar outfit Craig was to use on the boat (Lefty Kreh TFO TiCr Rod with a Lamson Velocity Reel). The leader consisted of a 4-5 foot, 40 pound butt section, and a similar length of 20 pound fluorocarbon tippet. I was using a floating saltwater line with a clear, slow-sinking tip of about 15 feet. The rod Craig was using looked to have a similar line, and both had lots of backing on good, sturdy saltwater reels. Ben tied big cream-colored Gotcha flies on each, about size 2. We would target bonefish and permit this first session, species that neither Craig nor I had caught.

Ben set up to drift with the breeze across the sandy flats in about a meter or two of water. If the drift rate was too high, he would set out a sea anchor in the form of a plastic tarp with a big hole cut in it, strung across the windward side of the boat like a hammock in the water. Ben lowered the electric trolling motor on the bow and used it to position the boat, in or out from shore, or to adjust the angle for better casting. He stood on the

highest point, on a cushion atop the cooler at the back of the front casting platform, with the wireless remote for the trolling motor in his hand. He spotted fish as we drifted, giving instructions as to what they were, where they were, when to cast and when to start the strip retrieve. The strip retrieves were to be slightly different for bonefish and permit, shorter and slower for the latter.

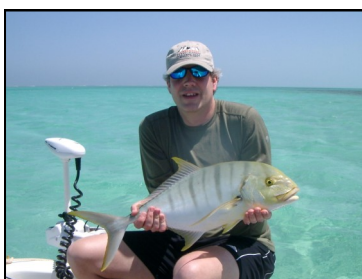
The main fishing position was the front platform, where the right-handed cast was over the bow, and the only things you had to worry about your line tangling about were your feet and the trolling motor. A second angler could get in an occasional back-hand cast from the rear of the boat, but there were tons of things to get the slack line caught around back there by the motor, and it was hard to get much distance with the wind at your back. Craig took first duty on the casting deck. Ben gave him some instruction in casting with the wind. Ben said we needed to use a strip strike, as opposed to lifting the rod tip – strip until you feel the fish solid against the line, then let go and lift as the rest of the line goes out through the guides, so the fish is working the rod when everything comes tight again.

It wasn't long until Ben started spotting individual or small schools of fish, and Craig got in a few casts to them. He got some follows and even a couple of brief hookups, but they were spitting the fly pretty quickly, and none stayed on long. None were permit or bonefish. The only place we saw a good concentration of fish was in a quiet, shallow bay behind a big area of dark coral, and quite near shore. We spooked most of them on the first pass, so we let it rest a few minutes and tried drifting through the area again, but without success.

We back-tracked and drifted some sandy flats a bit further from shore, with occasional coral heads clearly visible below water level. We had no luck finding bonefish, but there seemed to be some Trevally around, so Ben fixed us both up with green/white Clousers (about 3 inches long on 1/0 hooks), and we went in search of the school that he knew worked this area of the flats. Ben found a school of big Golden Trevally, and they were feeding on crustaceans in the sand as the boat approached. Craig got out a good cast, let the Clouser sink, and then started some short rapid strips. The fish were immediately interested in his fly, and at least three of them darted out from the school and ate it, the first two spitting it out. It was so exciting to be able to see all the action in this crystal clear water.

Craig strip set on the third fish, and he was into his first firm hookup, as the fish was off on a burning run toward the reef, quickly well into the backing. As with all of the fish in the jack family, Golden Trevally are incredibly fast, as well as being very powerful. Their first run is quite an experience for a fly fisherman brought up on trout fishing.

Ben pulled the trolling motor, drug in the sea anchor, and fired up the boat to chase the fish, to get it back on a short line, but mainly to try to steer it clear of coral heads. He would put the boat between the fish and a coral head when necessary, and then just let the boat drift when the fish was in a clear area. Craig put a lot of pressure on, but the leader stayed intact as he worked to control it. It took about ten minutes to get the fish under some semblance of control, and another period of about the same length to get it to the boat and tire it enough to start thinking about the net.



After several tries, Craig finally got the fish into position, and Ben was able to get the net under it and scoop it up. It was a nice Golden of about 10 lb, quite similar to the one my friend Jerry caught down in Baja. Ben said those are a different species, however FishBase on the web indicates that they are all “Golden Trevally” (*Gnathanodon speciosus*), with distribution including both Australia and Baja California, where local common names are Golden Jack, Palometa Amarilla and Jurel Dorado. There were big smiles and high-fives, and we were all three glad we had broken the ice with this first fish in the boat. We got some good photos before releasing the fish. I was particularly glad it was Craig's time to catch one of these really strong salt-water fish. He had a smile in the pictures that told it all.

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I took the front casting position, and we eventually found the school again. Ben maneuvered the boat so I could cast to them, and I hooked up with a really nice one. It was off toward the reef, just like Craig's. Ben

got the boat between it and the first coral head it went for, then stopped the boat for me to fight it. To our surprise, it surged to another coral head, darted under the bottom edge and ripped my tippet apart – tactics of a Giant Trevally rather than a Golden, according to Ben. The tippet came apart at the joint where the tippet had been tied to the butt section of the leader. I couldn't figure whether it was the added tension when the leader encountered the coral, or the knot getting caught on the coral, or something to do with abrasion. When we later lost fish in this way, and the leader broke at the fly knot, there was never any indication of tippet abrasion. All I know is, when a big fish under a lot of tension hits the coral, you better let off on the tension quickly, or the tippet will snap every time.

Ben anchored up in a shallow lagoon near shore, and we had a pleasant lunch of cole slaw and roast chicken. We relaxed and admired some of the sea life around us, including the big green sea turtles that would swim by, surface and stick their necks up for a look at us, then dive and paddle rapidly away. We also saw small sharks swim by, big rays moving along the bottom, and a few squid floating past. The coral heads were alive with small, colorful reef fish, as well as a few bigger predators like Barracuda, Spangled Emperor, Queenfish and Bluefin Trevally.

After a few very quiet drifts on the flats after lunch, Ben suggested we go out and try what he called “a special place where some bad fish play”. He drove the boat out to where there is a break in the main reef, allowing fish to move easily back and forth between the open ocean and the beach side of the Ningaloo. The bottom was blotchy and dark – obviously more coral out here, but the water was not much deeper than in on the sandy flats. He let the boat drift and used a hookless five-inch popper on a big spinning rod to search a wide area around the boat for fish, the idea being to bring them in within fly casting range.

I was in the front, and the first thing to come to the popper was a big barracuda, but it dropped off and would not look at my fly. A few minutes later, we all saw this huge swirl around the popper, then, closer to the boat, two dark torpedoes shot into view. Ben yelled, “Huge Trevally coming in!” I got a good cast out, he stopped the popper, and I stripped a couple times. “He ate your fly!” Ben yelled. “They don't do that!” I set the hook with a strip, and felt something really heavy and moving fast. The fish was hooked and kept on its original course, past the boat, and off toward the main reef like a shot. In a few seconds, the fly line was already out of sight and the backing coming off at a tremendous rate.

Ben fired up the motor and turned the boat to follow. Shortly, the line went limp. I retrieved everything, including a broken tippet – snapped me off on the coral – typical Giant Trevally behavior. Ben said the fish was well over 50 lbs – easily the biggest fish I have ever felt on any kind of tackle. Wow, was that exciting! My heart was really pounding. While all this was happening, Craig had cast from the back of the boat; and hooked, landed and released a small Yellowtail Emperor. In all the excitement, we didn't even get a picture.

Nothing else came to the popper, so we headed back in to drift the sand flats again. Craig was in front, but the boat would swing around periodically to head out from shore, and I could cast forehand with the wind. I cast to a coral head, and a cod popped out, ate my fly and darted back into his hole. Then, of course, I was hooked to the coral, and Ben had to break it off. We did accidentally catch a few of these small cod during the two days of fishing.



As we drifted by, a large coral shelf looked inviting, so I laid a cast up on the edge of the shelf, and a small school of four or five snappers (Spangled Emperors) chased my fly. One of them grabbed it within a few feet of the boat and was off like a flash. I horsed it away from the coral. It fought well and took me several minutes to subdue it and get it to the boat. It was a very colorful fish of about 5 lb, the first of this type of reef fish I had caught. Ben said they were very good eating, but we had no way of cooking in our room, and had made no arrangements with the Potshot dining room, so we released it. Since such fish were running over \$20 per pound in Perth, it was tempting anyway.

It was soon time to head for Tantabiddi and the drive back to Exmouth. We hadn't seen another boat on the flats all day. At the Potshot, we got showers and walked up to Whaler's Restaurant by the shops, where I had fish and chips, and Craig had chowder and some prawns. We split a wonderful sticky date pudding with ice cream for dessert. Stuffed and tired, we watched highlights of the first day of the India vs. Australia cricket test match in Perth, and a bit of the Australian Open tennis on TV before sleep. We had tickets for the fourth day of the cricket when we got back to Perth, and it looked to be an exciting test, with lots of controversy to boot.

We got up about 7 am and had the continental breakfast at the Potshot. Simone phoned the room to say that Ben might be a few minutes late. He and a mechanic were going through the motor to see why the alarm went off yesterday. He knocked on our door about 8:45, and we were off for our second day fishing with him. We had discussed the evening before that if the weather was better, we would go back to the Ningaloo, but, if it wasn't, we would go down to the bottom of the Exmouth Gulf and fish the flats down there. Ben said he had an arrangement with a land owner, and could launch down there, much closer to the action than at Learmonth, where we had put in on the 2002 trip. He said he was down there the previous week, and there were lots of fish, but nothing really big. Anyway, the wind was light and predicted to stay that way all day, so we went back to Tantabiddi and launched the boat.

There were a few more boats going out of Tantabiddi today, maybe a half dozen all told, brought out by the prospect of better conditions on the Indian Ocean. Most were headed out through the opening in the reef to fish the open ocean. The targets out there are predominately big game fish like Bluefin and Yellowfin Tuna, Spanish Mackerel, Sailfish, and Marlin. We headed back to the same flats where we started yesterday. There was one boat down in that area, which Ben said was very unusual – it left soon after we arrived. The wind was light, and the water had just a nice ruffle on it. Conditions were near perfect for spotting fish, and got better as the day went on.

We eventually found a school of Golden Trevally which we could cast to. In between hookups, we would have to track it down again. Craig hooked and fought well a slightly larger golden than he got the day before, the only really tense moment was when it swam over a coral head. Thank goodness it didn't dive under the lip. He landed it after about 20 minutes for pictures and release.

When we found the school again, I hooked a nice Golden, which headed off toward the reef. Ben got the boat around it, and I was successful in steering it away from trouble spots for a long time. Then, it found a coral head, but I kept the pressure on, and it swam over the top, just like Craig's had, and everyone thought I was in the clear. Then, with the boat in the wrong position, it surged back to the coral head, swam under the lip, and snapped my tippet, catching us all unawares. Ben couldn't believe I had lost another one in this unusual way: "It just doesn't happen like that with Golden's."



A bit later, I was casting to a snapper, when a huge golden came out of nowhere and ate my fly going full bore away from me. None of us had seen the fish until it grabbed my fly. My strip strike was too strong, and I only felt the fish for a second before the tippet parted. Another time, I back cast to a school of snapper that had missed Craig's fly, when a giant one grabbed the fly and headed up past Craig and off toward shore. It got to the coral shelf and snapped my tippet. Ben said this one was several times the size of the one I landed yesterday. Also, I spooked a huge barracuda that was hiding in a coral head. I had seen him swim into position, so I dropped my Clouser in with him. He was off like a dart. I guess it was a poor decision on where to cast.

In my opinion, it would have been better to have used 40 pound leader all the way to the fly for this in-shore flats fishing with so much coral around. The problem with this would be that if a really big fish were hooked, you might just get spooled. It would not have been a good idea further out on the reef where the big Giant Trevally hunt. In fact, I was glad just to have the experience of feeling these big fish, even if many of them got off before being boated.

We had lunch anchored over a coral head about 20 ft in diameter. There were really interesting small fish and coral down there. There was also a big shark circling around when we stopped. It soon moved off, and Ben and Craig swam before eating. Craig used Ben's snorkel gear to look around under water. He would have liked to have spent a full day doing this.

In the afternoon, we hunted down the school of big Golden snappers again. I cast to them as they were coming along, feeding nose down along the bottom, straight for the boat. I let the fly sink to the bottom, then gave it some short strips. A big Golden ate it and spat it back out, then another fish ate it, and I gave a strong strip strike and felt solid resistance. It was off toward shore, and then turned and headed out. Ben got the boat running, so we could cut it off from the coral if needed. This fish was incredibly strong, and Ben said it was a really big snapper that had been in with the Golden snappers. It finally got us to a coral head, and darted under the far lip. I lowered the rod tip and let up on the resistance. This time the tippet held. When we were past the coral, I pulled the fish back out from under, and we were off again. It took a long time to tire this fish to the net.

The big snapper measured 63 cm on the scale on the side of the boat. Ben said it was a very special fish. His biggest one was about 52 cm, and he had tried and tried to get a bigger one on the fly. The tippet was still in good shape, in spite of the brush with the coral head. I think it is the added strain on the tippet when it contacts the coral that is the biggest problem, but a fish could rub it until it gave way, given enough time on the coral.



When we could not locate the school of Golden snappers again, Ben asked if we wanted to go out and tease up some big fish out on the reef like yesterday. Craig said he would really like that, and I agreed. We motored out to the dark area near the break in the reef, and Ben stopped the boat, let it drift, and started casting out the hookless popper. After several casts, he got a follow from a big barracuda, but Craig got line fouled up, and couldn't get a good cast to it.



After repositioning the boat, and casting a few more times, another barracuda followed the popper in. Craig got a good cast out to the area, which was directly out from the back of the boat where I was standing. The barracuda disappeared, but another big fish came past the popper when it stopped and went directly onto Craig's fly near the surface. He stripped and set the hook, and it was off on an initial run. It ran several times in both directions, but did not take him into the coral. Ben said it was a Gold-spot Trevally, and they did not want to go to the coral. After a good fight, he got it to the boat. He would get it near position for netting, and it would surge off again. Finally, it was in the net and in the boat. I grabbed Craig's

camera and took pictures. Unfortunately, he had it on manual focus, and they were not the best. Ben took some with Brett's camera for their web site, and Brett sent me a good one later.

We fished the flats up near the visitor center, and got in some casts to a few passing fish. We did see a couple of permit, but they were easily spooked by the boat. Also, we ran into a school of bonefish on these flats, which were nearly impossible to see. We never got a shot at them. Then it was time to head in. We were back at the hotel by just after six, and both had a swim and showers before going back over to eat by the pool: "Two skippy," the hostess at the counter called into the kitchen the kangaroo we ordered. It was warm but very pleasant by the pool.

The next morning, we caught the shuttle back to Learmonth, then the flight back to Perth. We had good views of the Gulf of Exmouth and Shark Bay on our flight south. It had been a great trip, one to remember for years to come. The action was exciting and constant. We didn't put a lot of fish in the boat, but they say you remember best the ones you fished to and lost. I think it will spur us to get down to some of the great saltwater fishing spots in our part of the world.

If I ever have a chance to get back to Exmouth, I wouldn't miss it for anything. I would especially like to go on one of the "Boneheads" trips the Perth-based Saltwater Flyrodders of Western Australia organize each year. If you are in Australia for whatever reason, a side trip to Exmouth will not drain your retirement savings, but it will be an experience of a lifetime.

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Two pictures from the Saltwater Flyrodders of Western Australia Web Site (<http://www.saltwaterflyrodders.com/>)