

ABSOLUTE Mayhem At Rocky

*Much has been written in recent times about the great offshore fishing around Greenly and Rocky Islands. As **Shane Mensforth** discovered recently, this area still provides some of the best blue water fishing South Australia has to offer.*



Jonny Smith with a full load from south of Rocky Island

The south-easterly was fairly howling as I pulled into Coffin Bay township and headed for the commercial wharf. It never ceases to amaze me how often conditions can be bright, sunny and calm for several days leading up to a long awaited fishing trip, then turn to absolute crap as departure time approaches. As usual, I had been monitoring long-range weather forecasts for much of the previous week and was fully aware of what to expect on the weather front – a mixture of winds from the east around to the south, varying in strength up to 30 knots or so.

Like a growing number of keen offshore fisho's, I had booked to join Ryan Carlisle and crew for a three-day stint based at Greenly Island, where the fish are generally big and nasty and the action can be mind-blowing if conditions are right. For those unfamiliar with Greenly, it sits way out on its own in the Southern Ocean, pretty close to 50 miles from the top of Coffin Bay and about as isolated as you can get.

You need a good boat and favourable weather to fish this area safely and comfortably, and at least we had the boat part of the equation well sorted. Absolute Fishing Charters operates 'Reel Therapy', a 46 foot West Coaster that is among the best offshore hulls in its class. It's nicely set up for groups of six, with comfortable bunk-style accommodation up forward, a nice sized saloon, spacious shower/toilet and, most importantly, a massive cockpit that provides heaps of fishing room.

Without a cumbersome flybridge to elevate her centre of gravity, 'Reel Therapy' is incredibly stable; in fact, I can't recall a more stable fishing boat than this one, and that can only be good news when you're about to venture a long way offshore in less than ideal conditions.

I hadn't met the five other guys with whom I would be sharing this charter. I did know they were repeat clients, however, and it was obvious from the outset that they were as excited about the coming three days as I was. On previous trips they had experienced a mixture of weather conditions, ranging from dead calm to decidedly rough, but one thing remained constant – the incredible fishing.

Ryan generally likes to leave the Coffin Bay wharf by mid afternoon, motoring past Point Sir Isaac before

sunset and then blasting out to Greenly Island to spend the first night at sea. That leaves two and a half full days of fishing before returning late on the third day. On this occasion, however, the afternoon departure plan would have to be modified. With 25-30 knots of south-easterly whipping the more open expanses of Coffin Bay to a frenzied mess of whitecaps, the sensible plan was to anchor inside the lee of Point Sir Isaac for the night before reassessing our options next morning. With a big sea obviously running outside the bay, no one on board was disappointed with the decision. At least we would all sleep comfortably.

To our collective relief, the wind had abated quite a bit as we ate a hurried breakfast next morning. There was less than a metre of swell as 'Reel Therapy' left the protection of Point Sir Isaac, and just 10-15 knots of south-easterly wind to contend with. The plan was to motor directly to Rocky Island, which lies ten miles south of Greenly, and try our luck on a few of the lumps and pinnacles off its southern side. I had fished this area many times over two decades, often with spectacular results, and simply couldn't wait to get back there again.

Ryan had been enjoying consistent success on mid-sized samson fish and yellowtail kings, and we were rigged and ready for action long before arrival. We had collected a good supply of salmon trout inside Coffin Bay late the previous afternoon to use as live baits, and these

kicked away happily in twin tanks secured to the marlin board. The fishing strategy involved a mixture of live baiting and jigging – a combination that had been working nicely on most previous charters.

The seabed around Rocky Island is really quite dramatic, particularly when mapped and displayed on the MacSea 3D imaging system on board 'Reel Therapy'. Average water depth is in the 80-100 metre range, with some of the pinnacles and reefs rising to within 25 metres of the surface. It really is tiger country out there, which is why it attracts and holds top line predators like kings and samsons so well. There's usually a stack of baitfish around the pinnacles, including slimy mackerel, yellowtail (chows), swallowtail and dense pilchard schools, so it really is a smorgasbord situation for big fish with big appetites.

As is usually the case when I head offshore, I'd packed a mountain of tackle. Seven jigging/live baiting outfits, a mega tackle box full of lures, jigs, plastics and hard bodies, and enough hooks and leader for the entire crew ensured all bases would be covered. Apart from the usual Shimano Stellas and Penn Internationals, I also had a couple of new reels to try – A Shimano Saragosa 20 000 and a Gladiator Titan 8000. If they could cope with what I hoped would be dished out for the next few days, they would definitely pass the test.

Despite the amount of wind we had copped over the past 24 hours, open

water sea conditions weren't as bad as anticipated. Ryan was able to maintain 14-15 knots all the way out to Rocky, which put us in the strike zone just before lunchtime. Four of us set up heavy jigging outfits, while the other two rigged for live baiting, and Ryan sounded the first of several pinnacles in search of fish. Drifting is the preferred method out here, as it allows you to cover plenty of likely bottom until a school of hungry samsons or kings is located.

Working heavy metal jigs in deep water isn't easy. Both samson fish and kingies like the jig moving quickly and erratically, which means you've got to rip it back to the top – flat out. If you are doing it right, jigging is physically demanding, and these days I'm only capable of five or six minute bursts before needing a short recovery period. As taxing as it may be, however, jigging is by far the most spectacular way to hook a big, angry kingfish. The strike is usually quite violent; one minute you're working your butt off to keep the 300gm jig moving upward at warp speed, then it all comes to a shuddering halt. The rod loads up instantaneously, heavy braid starts spewing from the reel, and you are tight to one of the most powerful fish in the ocean.

On this occasion, however, it was the two live baiters who hooked up first. No sooner had we drifted into the prime bite zone, on the leading edge of a substantial pinnacle, than both bait rods bent over and two happy anglers broke into ear-to-ear grins. The rest of us kept our jigs working frantically, confident that it was only a matter of time before the kingies found them, but it simply wasn't to be. The two kingfish landed weren't monsters, but at around 14kg apiece they were nice fish plucked from heavy bottom. Despite battling against 80 pound braid and heavy drag settings, they still pinched plenty of line, but eventually succumbed to the net. It's knock down/drag out fishing at its best, and those who hadn't hooked up on the first drift were primed and ready to get their jigs back into action as soon as the boat had been repositioned.

Much to our collective dismay, however, it was the pair of live baiters who were straight back into the action within seconds of their salmon trout touching bottom. The quartet of jiggers worked their arms off, still confident of success, but it simply wasn't to be.



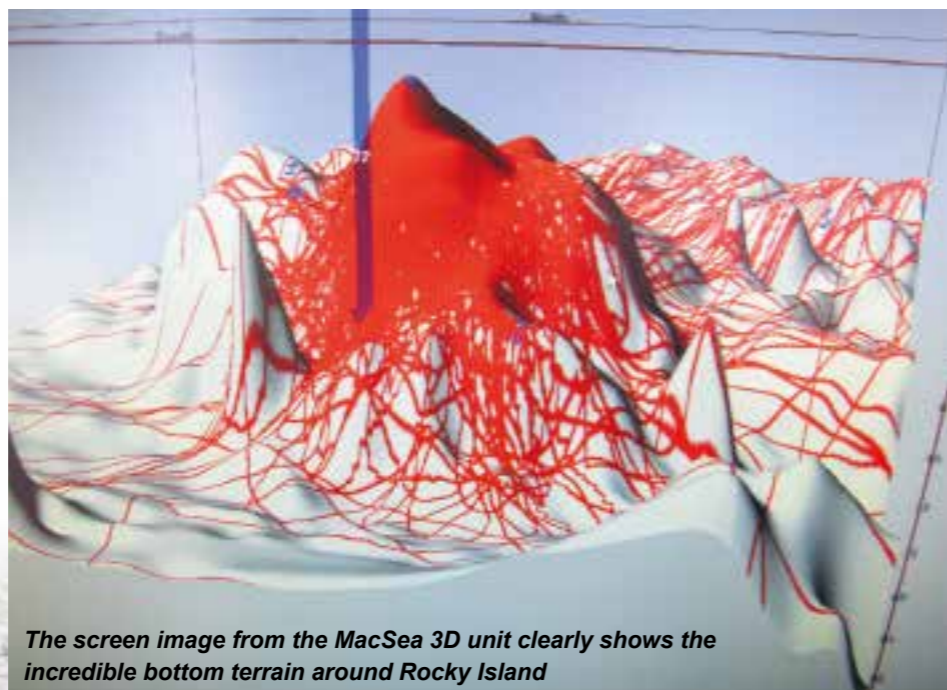
None of the kings were giants, but they could still pull some line against heavy drag!

One by one they unclipped metal jigs and replaced them with live bait rigs, despite the skipper's pleas to persist. I was the last one to switch to bait, and almost immediately it was bent rods and screaming drags all round.

The fish were a mixture of samsons and kings on this pinnacle, which provided the perfect opportunity to compare the fighting ability of the two seriola cousins. I pulled a 12 kilo kingy and a sambo of similar size in successive drops, and was left with no doubt as to which is

tougher; the kingy wins hands down. I've always maintained that, on a kilo for kilo basis, yellowtail kings are at least half as strong again as samson fish, and this was reinforced throughout the afternoon whenever we would hook the two species side by side.

Despite their close family ties, kings and samsons also vary markedly in another area – their vulnerability to barotrauma. For those unfamiliar with the term, barotrauma refers to the stress caused as a fish hooked in relatively deep



The screen image from the MacSea 3D unit clearly shows the incredible bottom terrain around Rocky Island

water is pumped up towards the surface. Water pressure decreases relative to depth, causing the fish's swim bladder to expand abnormally with internal gases as it comes to the top. If you take an inflated basketball down to a depth of 50 metres, water pressure will crush it to some degree. Release the basketball from that depth, and as it makes its way to the surface, water pressure decreases, the internal air expands again and the ball ultimately pops out of the water the same shape as it went in. It's all physics, but it can be a death sentence to some fish accustomed to living in deep water.

For some reason samson fish often suffer severely from barotrauma, whereas kingfish are rarely affected. When you are catch and release fishing as we were, this can be a major concern. Like most offshore charter skippers these days,

Ryan Carlisle is very conscientious when it comes to releasing his fish in good condition, taking particular care of any samson showing signs of barotrauma. It's reasonably common for the swim bladder of a boated samson fish to be distended once it hits the deck, and simply throwing it back over the side after unhooking will almost certainly lead to its demise. It's imperative to relieve the pressure of expanded internal gases for the fish to have a good chance of survival.

To this end there are two main options – venting the swim bladder via a hollow needle or attaching a specially designed release weight to get the fish back down into the depths. Venting is quite an invasive process, which involves actually puncturing the swim bladder through a tiny hole in the gut cavity. Unless you know precisely where to insert the needle,

it can be detrimental to the fish's long term well being, defeating the purpose of the whole exercise.

The use of a release weight might seem a bit agricultural, but tagged fish returns indicate that it's pretty efficient. This involves a heavy lead weight to which a big, barbless hook is attached. Once the fish has been unhooked and photographed if so desired, the barbless release weight hook is inserted in a fleshy part of the fish's jaw and the whole lot is lowered over the side on heavy cord. Once the weight has taken the fish back down to the depth at which it was caught, the cord is jerked a couple of times and the barbless hook pulls free. Provided all has gone well, the fish's swim bladder has compressed to its original state and the fish is able to swim away to lick its wounds. This may all sound a bit brutal, but there's no doubt it works – and it's definitely a better option than seeing a big samson floating off into the sunset, unable to swim downward due to a bladder full of expanded gas.

By mid afternoon we had caught and released a dozen or so mixed kings and samsons – a reasonable catch, but only a shadow of what we knew could be achieved if the fish really came on the chew. The wind had been predominantly easterly for much of the day – a direction that, for some unknown reason, seems to shut the bite down to some degree. We trolled up half a dozen bluefin on the way back to our overnight base at Greenly Island, and looked forward to upping the ante on day two.

With livies providing premium results out near Rocky, filling the bait tanks after dark became top priority. As soon as the sun had set completely, Ryan turned on the twin overhead deck lights to attract Greenly Island's omnipresent population of chows. These members of the mackerel family are among the best live baits you can get, and they are nearly always available in vast numbers. Catching them is as easy as dropping a multi-hook bait jig over the back of the boat and poling them in. Chows live well in a large recirculating tank and the kings and sambos love them.

A light southerly greeted us as we rounded the north-western tip of Greenly next morning, which put a smile on the skipper's face immediately. A wind shift away from the east was exactly what he

had been hoping for, and our confidence levels began to rise accordingly. We had sounded plenty of big fish the previous day, but ended up with just a modest catch; hopefully this would be the day.

Ryan headed 'Reel Therapy' up into the breeze after sounding up a massive school of obviously large fish, and before the first live bait hit the bottom, it was set upon. Within half a minute a second livey was take, then a third. This was what we had come for!

Most serious blue water anglers have different ideas on live baiting, and in particular how best to present their baits. Ryan and his deckie, Dave Zadow, like to use a dual hook rig, with the top hook pinned through the chow's top lip and a second 'stinger' hook positioned half way along the back. I prefer a single hook – usually a Mustad Hoodlum – pushed securely through the bait's top and bottom jaws. Both set-ups work well, resulting in very few pulled hooks during the course of the fishing day.

Terminal gear needs to be tough when you're trying to extract large, ill-mannered fish from unforgiving terrain. This is no place for light line, shoddy knots or thin leader; those who play the game with anything but quality equipment will lose – every time.

Our first drift yielded four nice kings, varying up to 1.2m and probably 16 kilos or so. Living out in open water and competing endlessly for food, these fish are super fit and only too keen to 'brick' you in the reef if you give them half a chance. The only real option is winding on as much drag as you think your gear can handle and 'muscling' the fish away from sharp structure and dense kelp. There's no finesse fishing here – just heavy gear, brute strength and crossed fingers! Only once you have your kingy well away from



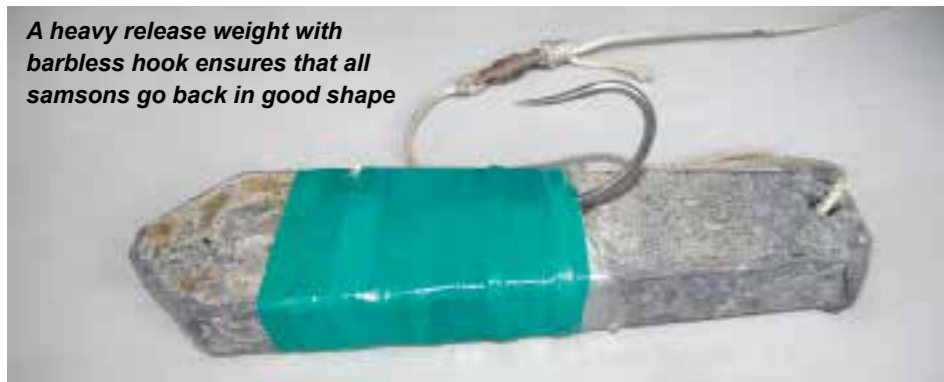
Smithy with an average samson of around 16kg

the reef can you afford to back off a little and enjoy the fight.

With 15 knots of southerly providing a nice drift speed and a heap of fish ready

to bite, the action was steady for much of the morning. We moved from lump to lump, hooking up regularly on a healthy mix of kings, samsons and the odd big nannygai. We tried jigs again from time to time, hoping to entice the big guys into eating metal, but it simply wasn't to be. They wanted live chows only, and this meant being a bit careful with how many we used. The transom tanks carry up to 60 baits, but with half a dozen guys going flat out, these disappear pretty quickly.

I alternated between outfits, keen to see how both the Shimano Saragosa and the Gladiator Triton performed. I also tried a few mega shad soft plastics that had taken plenty of samsons in this area on trips past, but even these failed to score a



A heavy release weight with barbless hook ensures that all samsons go back in good shape



Live chows proved the key to consistent hook-ups

hit. When the predators are zoned in on a particular bait, it's often difficult to change their mind-set, and this was definitely one of those occasions!

I kept a rough count of what we caught on day two, which ended up at 30-odd kings and about half that number of samsons. There had been some monumental wipe-outs, probably from the occasional larger kingy, and we had also lost a few fish to sharks. Big whalers frequent these reefs systems when the kings and samsons are about, and any hooked fish provides an obvious target. Ryan doesn't like to lose any fish to sharks, and it's his policy to shift location as soon as the big guys move in and start chopping things up. It's a policy I fully agree with, and one that fits well with his overall catch and release agenda.

It's nice to relax at the end of a hectic day's fishing like this one, and that's exactly what we did back in the Greenly anchorage that evening. A few beers and a glass or two of quality red complemented prime rib steaks, cooked to perfection on the gas barbecue. As soon as the dishes were done and the cockpit squared away, it was time to collect more chows for our third and final fishing day, so the boys broke out the bait jigs and began stocking the tanks. Everyone was tired, but still high on the action we'd experienced over the past 12 hours, and the bait collecting session didn't last long. It's surprising how fast six guys can catch 60 chows!

Just in case we hadn't had our backs and arms stretched enough, Dave Zadow decided to rig up a shark line for an hour before we hit the sack. All manner of big bities frequent the Greenly anchorage after dark, ranging from makos, blues and whalers all the way to giant great whites, and it's rare to send out a big bait under a balloon without having it eaten.

It required just a few minutes for the tuna fillet to attract attention, and when the hook went in, it was immediately obvious we were in for quite a tussle. It took half an hour or so to subdue the 200kg whaler, which was duly unhooked and released like everything else we'd caught that day. A second shark bait was discussed, but with our collective stamina running low, the idea was shelved and everyone hit the sack. It had been a long, but thoroughly enjoyable day.

With just the morning session on day

three remaining, we made an early start and were back on the grounds south of Rocky Island not long after sunrise. Once again the wind was in the south and the drift was ideal, so all on board were pumped and ready to trade blows with those feisty seriolas.

No one even bothered with jigs, and before Ryan had shut the engines down on our maiden drift, there were multiple hook-ups along the boat's starboard side. Crossed lines are par for the course when the bite is this hot, and sorting things out with four kingies heading in the same direction is rarely easy. However, both Ryan and Dave have plenty of experience with this sort of situation, and I can't recall one fish being lost due to crossed lines for the entire trip.

We had enjoyed a shark-free session up until mid morning, boating another 20 mixed kings and samsons of up to 18

kilos or so without having to think about moving. The southerly had dropped to under ten knots and there was scarcely a moment that at least one of us wasn't standing over a bent rod and losing line to a hot running fish. The mayhem continued and we were loving it.

The arrival of the biggest bronze whaler I've ever seen soon changed all this, however. Instead of mutilating a hooked fish at mid water as usual, this shark chased a 30 pound king right to the top, where it removed at least 15 pounds with a single bite. This all happened within a few metres of the boat, and would have made spectacular shots if I'd had the camera ready to go!

Ryan announced one last drift at around midday, but when three of us hooked up simultaneously and subsequently boated a trio of lovely kingies, we earned the privilege of one more. That second drift

turned into a third, then the third into a fourth, and before the skipper eventually turned the boat for home, we'd enjoyed ten 'last' drifts and boated as many nice fish.

All up, my running tally put the final count at 62 kings and 43 samsons. We must have hooked and lost half that number again due to sharks and bust-offs, so you can imagine there wasn't much down time between hook-ups. Sure, we hadn't managed any of the legendary giant kings that have made Greenly and Rock Islands so famous over the years, but the sheer numbers of 10-18kg fish provided adequate compensation.

Like the others, I was super impressed with the way Ryan Carlisle runs his operation, and particularly the amount of TLC he devotes to releasing fish. Sustainable charter fishing is well and truly possible if those involved adopt the right attitude, and I'm pleased to report that conserving fish stocks is now right up there with our charter skippers' top priorities.

If you have the slightest inkling to try long range blue water fishing, I'd suggest that you give it a go. You don't need to own a mountain of expensive tackle, nor do you need to be rich to join a charter group. All you need is a sense of adventure and a decent camera to record what will probably be the fishing trip of a lifetime!

The new Shimano Saragosa acquitted itself very nicely during several hectic kingy sessions



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