

Moreton Bay Longtail

Gordon Low highlights the nuances of Moreton Bay's longtail tuna



My first memories of longtail tuna are from when I was a teenager. At least that's what I now know those infuriating tuna that my mates and I chased around the waters of Moreton Bay to be. I still remember the rare occasions, sitting on a patch of reef off Redcliff in a tinny soaking baits for squire, when a sudden eruption of black-backed torpedoes would have us pulling the anchor and tearing off in a fruitless clatter of waves slapping against alloy, barely drowned out by the howl of the two-stroke outboard and the excited yelling of a couple of kids in hot pursuit of the hastily departing school. Funnily enough, we never came close to hooking one of those tuna ... heaven help us if we did!

These days, armed with fly rods and better boats and techniques we're actually landing a few of these fish, but that same excitement is still there. That split-second mayhem as your fly line clears all obstacles and hits the reel and the relieved satisfaction of knowing everything has come together as line starts to pour of the reel never fade, even after you've boated dozens of these fish. Personally, I think there are few things better in fly fishing than chasing south east Queensland's longtail tuna!

AN INSHORE ICON

Globally, the longtail tuna (*Thunnus tonggol*) is found up the eastern coast of Australia and as far north as Japan in its eastern distribution, across to the Indian Ocean and up into the Red Sea, and down the northeast coast of Africa to the west. In Australia, they've been caught from as far south as Bermagui (NSW) on the east coast, up around the northern coast of Australia, and as far south as Shark Bay in Western Australia. In northern Australia, large numbers of smaller fish (averaging 4–7 kilograms) can be targeted (the Weipa baitball fishery being a classic example). The further south you go, the larger the average size is. In the west, Shark Bay is home to some truly massive specimens. Craig Radford's IGFA 10 kg class record on fly of 25.4 kg came from there. On the east coast the current all-tackle record fish, weighing close to 80 lbs, came from Bermagui in NSW. However, this is considered to be an unusual capture to say the least.

ABOVE: Geoff Volter has every right to be happy with this larger than average longtail taken in tough conditions on an overcast day.
RIGHT: The author enjoying the opening run of a 'cruiser' picked off the edge of a sandbank current line.

From a fly fishing perspective, southeast Queensland, particularly Moreton Bay, Hervey Bay and the coastline between, is regarded by many as 'where it's at' when it comes to longtail tuna. In these waters, boating a 'longie' is considered a right of passage for many saltwater fly fishers and the species has become somewhat of an icon for inshore fly fishing.

In the early days of saltwater fly fishing in Queensland, Daryl Steel has been credited for a great deal of the groundwork developing the longtail fishery. Warren Steptoe also made inroads figuring out and publicising it, as have Rod Harrison and Wayne Kampe. More recently, Gavin Platz, Kim Strathearn, Scott Mathews and Paul Dolan (to name just a few standouts) have continued to discover patterns and refine tactics.

As a testament to the allure of these fish and the passion with which fly fishers pursue them, a series of three tournaments has been running now for the last decade, with one each in Hervey Bay, Mooloolabah and Moreton Bay. Despite the fish being the same species, the areas they are found and the ways they behave can vary from day to day along the coastline. The fact that names like Scott Mathews and Kim Strathearn keep showing up on all the tournament trophies is not only a sign of skill, but of time spent on the water figuring out the behaviour of the fish and the nuances of each of these areas.

To cover the diversity of these fisheries from Moreton to Hervey would take several articles, if not an entire book, so for now we'll concentrate on Moreton Bay itself. Being on

the doorstep of a capital city, Moreton is also the fishery that most folk will get the opportunity to experience. Hooking up in the midst of a foaming chaos of tuna and baitfish with the loading cranes of Fisherman's Island and city high-rises as a backdrop can be a surreal experience.

WHEN, WHERE AND WHY?

Longtail are a coastal inshore species and can be found in many different habitats, from shallow sand flats or surf gutters to coral edges or rocky inshore reefs, chasing gar or flying fish, balling up anchovies or pushing prawns off the bottom. As with most other predators their movements and behaviour is largely dictated by that of the bait they feed on. Whenever the bait starts to show up in large numbers the tuna usually aren't too far behind. In Moreton Bay this time tends to be around late November (this of course varies a little from year to year) and seems to coincide with the large aggregations of bay Anchovies and also, to an extent, when the warm tropical currents start to push in closer to the coast. Whether these longtail are the first of the fish showing up on their southern migration or just resident fish homing in on the bait isn't well known. Either way, this seems to be the time when the first decent numbers of longtail start to show up in the bay and some experienced tuna chasers feel this is also the time when you'll have the best chance of pinning a real monster. Average bay longtail tend to be around the 8 to 12 kilogram mark but at this time of year it isn't unusual to see fish well in excess of 15 kilograms.





As Christmas nears fish can mysteriously disappear and the only logical explanation for this seems to be temperature; a classic example being the 2006–07 season. As water temperature in the bay rose over 25 degrees Celsius the longtail became rather thin on the ground. When they did show up it seemed to be in deeper (cooler) water or on rough overcast days when the surface temperatures had cooled and the wind and chop had aerated the water. As the temperatures dropped again in late February and into March the fish appeared again, this time in much greater numbers.

March through May is recognised as the main longtail season. This is also when the other pelagic species such as mac tuna, Frigate, Watson's Leaping Bonito and various species of mackerel are also present in large numbers. On some days

the bay seems to be one great foaming orgy of predators smashing bait and the toughest choice can be which flock of birds or patch of white water to check out first.

As the months cool the great numbers of fish disappear (believe me, sometimes it's like they vanish overnight!) and the remainder of the fish tend to disperse throughout the bay. These 'residents' will continue to appear anywhere from Macleay Island to North Point on Moreton Island throughout the quiet season; however the bigger fish seem to spend the winter in the deeper water in the middle of the bay. This is the other time you'll have a chance of hooking one of the bay's resident monster longtail. When the westerly winds bring on the coldest months of the year a few packs of hungry tuna can also regularly be found in close to the ocean side of Bribie Island at the northern end of the bay.





FIND THE BAIT AND YOU'RE HALFWAY THERE

With bait abundance being at the whim of various factors such as runoff, and the necessary nutrients it introduces into the bay, predicting where you'll find the tuna can be difficult and really there still is no substitute for time on the water. Failing that, reliable, up-to-date information. However, the wind will always play a very important role. Many fishers believe that tuna always feed into the wind. The fact that all the tuna don't end up off Tasmania after a sustained southerly blow obviously suggests that this isn't entirely as simple as it first sounds but it does hold true to an extent. The reason for this is that bait tends to push into the wind. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe they just keep pushing until they find shelter. What it does mean is that you will often find bait, and tuna feeding on them, tucked in the lee of Moreton, Stradbroke or one of the other Islands in Moreton Bay. It also means that when the southerly winds start pushing for weeks on end in late summer you'll find the tuna further south in the bay. Of course this also depends (there's always a caveat) on the bait being there in the first place.

The other thing to look for is places where current and topography (reefs and sandbanks in this case) cause bottlenecks that trap or concentrate the bait. There are plenty of places that fit this bill in Moreton Bay and it won't take much asking around to get pointed in the direction of some of the more reliable spots. Some of these will fish better on the incoming or outgoing tide depending on which pushes the bait into the most compromising position. The one common factor is that the slack between tides is always the quietest.

TIDE AND MOON

What effect the tides have on longtail and pelagic predators in general will vary between locations. In Moreton Bay, the bigger tides around the new and full moons produce much more water movement and tend to concentrate the bait more. This in turn will concentrate the predators. Given a choice, most experienced tuna chasers prefer to fish the new moon period. Common consensus is that the light of the full moon allows the

fish to feed through the night which reduces the enthusiasm with which they feed during the day. With effectively half the available time to eat their fill over the dark phase longtail seem almost frantic during the new moon period.

LONGTAIL TACKLE

Just like any form of fly fishing (any fishing for that matter) there is always going to be varied opinions on what constitutes 'the right tackle' when it comes to tuna. Some people like to give the fish a 'sporting chance', while others prefer to get the fish to the boat and on their way again. The longer you play a fish, the more lactic acid it will build in its muscles and the greater chance there is of a shark finding it. Using good technique and a suitable rod will help boat fish faster.

WHAT ROD?

Rods can be anything from an eight weight through to a 13 weight and not be unsuitable depending on the size of the fish and the situation at hand. The consensus recommendation would be to use a good saltwater nine or ten weight for the majority of situations. With all of the quality rods around you're sure to find something that will suit your style and budget. If you have the resources, an 11 or 12 weight rod can also be worthwhile when the fish are running a bit larger. In the initial stages of the fight it doesn't make much difference but when you're battling to keep the fish's head up and get it into the net or away from sharks the extra butt strength counts for a lot at the tail end of the battle.

BUY A GOOD REEL AND STUFF IT FULL OF BACKING

Lets get this out there right away; if there was a top ten list of excuses to get a quality reel then a big longtail would be way up near the top. There are several quality reel manufactures out there now so save yourself the box of dead and burned out cheapies and buy the best reel you can afford right from the outset if you intend on having more than the occasional foray after tuna ... in the long run you'll save money and frustration. Just make sure you have enough change for backing and that the reel will hold a minimum of 300 metres of it under your fly line of choice. Although most longtail won't take much more than one hundred meters of backing (despite what many enthusiastic exaggerations may suggest) there will be the occasional freak!

ABOVE: These are the days we dream of! More bait than water, plenty of hungry tuna and birds to show you where they are. LEFT: A powerful 10 weight is the optimal rod for Moreton Bay's longtail tuna.



Without question, braided GSP is now the ONLY choice when it comes to backing. It's thin so you can pack more on, doesn't get waterlogged and it comes in a myriad of cool colours. When joining your backing to fly line, make sure you at least double the braid to prevent it from cutting into the loop on your fly line or, better still, install Gudebrod loops on the end of your backing and on any fly lines that don't have welded loops.

CASTING, LINES AND LEADERS

After good boat driving (more on that shortly), the next best way to improve your chances of hooking a longtail is to be able to make fast, long and accurate casts. By 'fast' I mean minimal false casting as well as quick presentation. Although many opportunities will present themselves well within average casting distance, time spent in the park or on the water honing your technique will enable you to make the most of what is generally a short window of opportunity and get the fly in range before the fish move on. Being confident at distance also means you'll still have a chance when the fish are being timid and flighty – a definite possibility on a busy weekend in the bay. The other important factor is getting the fly to lay out neat and straight. Choosing the right fly line will help there.

There are a plenty of fly lines on the market that will fit the bill. Characteristics to look for are long casting lines that will perform well in windy conditions and settle under any

chop quickly. Intermediate or fast sink lines are the way to go and popular choices include Scientific Anglers Stripper IV or Tarpon intermediate and Rio's series of Outbound lines. Recently I've started using the new Rio Saltwater I/I as it has a longer head than the aforementioned lines and allows me to aerialise more line before shooting ... aiding in accurate presentations at long distance.

A QUICK TIP ON CASTING

When you make your final cast, don't just rip out a big haul and let the line go. Form an O-ring with your hauling hand. This forms a big stripping guide (for want of a better way of describing it) that helps prevent the line fouling on the rod, reel, guides etc. as it travels and also allows you to stop the line just before it hits the water. This aids turnover and presents the fly on a tight, straight leader; ready to move the moment you strip. The final part of the delivery system, the leader, shouldn't be overlooked either.

There are many different ways of putting together leaders for tuna and everybody seems to have a slight variation on their favourite. While some folk will go to the trouble of tying up twisted or tapered leaders, others opt to minimise any possible points of failure (i.e. knots) and fish a rod-length of 10 kg (or thereabouts) tippet material straight from the fly line to the fly. If you're like me and not so keen on wasting expensive fluorocarbon tippet by the armload, a three to four foot butt section of 60 or 80 lb (with Perfection loops tied at either end) looped to 5 to 6 feet of tippet is a good

compromise. Learn to tie a good, short Bimini Twist in the tippet where you loop it to the butt section and you'll maintain 100% knot strength. Finally, attach your fly with a Lefty's Loop knot. It'll allow your fly to swim freely and tied well is also close to being 100% knot strength.

I won't dwell too long on the subject of fly selection for longtail tuna as this has already been covered in issue 2. I will say one thing though ... 'Think Pink!' Kim Strathearn was the one who first put me onto using pink flies and at first I have to admit to being a little skeptical. But the proof has been in the results (Kim won all three of the 2006 Tuna comps using pink flies). Make sure you've got a few in your flybox! A good selection of surf candies and polar fibre minnows in natural colours, as well as the good old clousers and deceivers, should still have their place in there too though.

So, you know where to look, what to look for and you've got your gear in order ...

NOW LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE!

Below are a few different situations you may encounter Moreton Bay longtail in. Every school or fish will have its own nuances but hopefully this will give some idea of what you could expect and how to deal with it.

SCHOOLING FISH

When you motor out into the bay in the morning you are always hoping to be greeted by masses of birds milling over tightly packed balls of bait pushed up from below by rampaging schools of tuna. This can occasionally happen but it is far from the norm in Moreton Bay. More often you will find a school traveling in one direction, hitting bait as they move.

In schooling situations (whether it's a baitball or a fast moving pack) it is often a matter of quietly approaching the school from ahead and to the side (even on a tightly packed ball of bait the fish will nearly always be moving in one direction). Don't come in too fast and try to minimise any engine or boat noise. A good driver will come in from the angle that puts the wind behind and on the good shoulder (e.g. on the left shoulder of a right-handed caster) of the angler. Turn the boat away from the direction of the cast as it goes out to prevent any forward momentum spoiling the retrieve. If you can get the boat facing in a direction that allows you to continue following the school if you don't hook up before they move by then all the better. Try to not put the boat dead in the path of the school as this may spook and put the fish down.

MAKE SURE YOU PICK YOUR TARGET!

Learn to single out one fish at the leading edge of the school and cast to it. Don't just lob your fly in the thickest part of the action in a hope that it will land in an open mouth. By singling

out one fish (or a small group of them) you can watch and gauge the reaction to your fly. It also puts you in good stead when you only have one cruising or mooching fish to cast at.

CRUISERS, MOOCHERS AND SIPPERS

One of the great things about longtail is that they aren't as school-oriented as many of the other tuna species. You will often find them small groups of three to five fish or sometimes even just feeding alone. These 'cruisers' tend to be heading in one direction along a flat, sandbank or reef edge on a search and destroy mission and are relatively predictable once you figure out the pattern. Either drift or electric in the direction you expect the fish to come from and position the boat so that you won't be forcing the fish into shallower water as they go by. Try and lead the fish by a good few meters with an obvious fly and you'll rarely get knocked back.

I first heard the term 'mooching' used to describe feeding longtail while fishing with Brisbane local Wes Pang. These fish will literally 'mooch' along a slick or weed line caused by wind and currents looking for small clumps of bait caught in an eddy or seeking shelter amongst flotsam. Because of the generally small size of the bait and the fact that moochers will tend to come from any direction, double back and generally make pricks of themselves they are hard to pin. The best way to approach these fish is to just be in the area and be ready to fire out a quick, accurate cast close to the fish when they appear. About the only thing more frustrating than moochers are what many people call singles.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Spearing tuna into the sea gets the water rushing through their gills, promoting faster recovery.

BELOW: Cast to a fish so that you can see how it reacts to the fly.



THE INFURIATING SINGLE

The classic 'single' is usually a fish (or small group) that will jump or hit-up once, rarely twice, well out of casting range and promptly disappear before you can get anywhere near firing a cast at them. Rather than roaring back and forth trying to catch these fish (and putting down every other fish in the process) try to figure out where they seem to be hanging around and why they are there. There may be bait down deep or prawns schooled up over a patch of bottom. Look for bait on the sounder or clouds of stirred up silt (caused by what Chris Pritchard calls a 'prawn hatch') and concentrate on these areas. This is a classic situation where the 'heave and leave' tactic comes into its own. Get a fly in the water (you won't get anything with it hooked in a stripping guide) and hope a fish swims by.

You've got your fly in front of a fish ... now what do you do?

STRIPPING THE FLY

There are a multitude of techniques for stripping flies and every expert seems to have their own favourite. The fact is, they all work! From double-stripping to leaving the fly to drift down through a baitball, they all have their merits and times they work best. I guess the best advice here is to experiment and see what works for you. Once you see a fish take your fly or feel a take though, don't stop stripping! And whatever you do, DON'T lift the rod!

SETTING THE HOOK

After the take, keep the rod pointed at the fish and keep stripping until everything comes up tight and you know the hook is set. If the fish takes the fly and keeps swimming towards the boat (this is a classic situation where fish are dropped) stomp on the floor. The first time I saw Geoff Volter do this I thought it was a pre-emptive dummy-spit for what I thought would definitely be a lost fish. Instead, the fish turned, sped off and set the hook in the process. You will however, most likely scare the crap out of the rest of the school in the process.

Once the hook is in, tilt the rod to the side with the reel out of the way and the butt hard up against the inside of your forearm. Relax your grip and let the line slip lightly through your fingers and take stock of the situation around you. A quick glance at you feet and the line to make sure nothing is going to snag and wait for the fun to start.

HARD DRAG OR SOFT

Personally I reckon there's nothing better than that first opening run so I set my drag light and let the fish go as hard and far as it wants. Some folk like to set a tight drag and keep the fish close to the boat but from what we can figure out it doesn't make much difference to the fight

time. The fish is either going to run a hundred meters along the surface, or swim for a hundred meters in circles under the boat!

SHORTENING THE FIGHT WITH GOOD FIGHTING TACTICS

Once the fish stops running, start cranking line back in. You should either be losing line or gaining it and any stalemate just gives the fish time to catch its breath and prolongs the fight. Some people like to drive the boat up to the fish once it stops running and this definitely helps gain line quickly ... just make sure you don't give the fish any slack to work with. If you do drive the boat after the fish, try and keep downwind of it so that if it does start surfing the chop it's at least doing it towards the boat and shortening the distance between you. When the fly line is back on the reel it's time to really put the hurt on. Keep the rod bend low and flat and continually change the angle and direction of pull in an attempt to confuse the fish, stop it and even roll it over. If the fish starts to circle the boat, use your rod to plane it up then quickly reverse the direction of pull to stop it. Once you have its head up, do your best to keep it up and coming towards the boat.

Having a landing net on board is another way of shortening the fight time. It's much easier than tailing the fish and reduces the chance of having your arm taken off by a shark. I haven't heard of it happening yet but I've had one close call personally and heard of many others. If you are going to release your fish, the new Environets minimise any harm to the fish and stop you from stretching the fish's spine when lifting it by the tail.

GETTING THE FISH BACK IN THE WATER FAST

Lets face it, there are few things tastier than a fresh tuna steak or slices of sashimi and no reasonable person will begrudge you the occasional feed of fish. However, if you are going to release the fish, then have the camera ready, get a few quick snaps then spear the fish head first back into the water as quickly as possible. Spearling the fish in gets the water rushing through its gills again and gives it the best chance of surviving. It's in our best interests as fishers to do our best to preserve the wonderful fishery we have here.

BELOW: Jon Makim demonstrates textbook low rod angles critical for landing tuna and other powerful fish quickly.

