

CAIRNS GIANT BLACK MARLIN SEASON

2009



There is no better time or place to catch a truly enormous marlin than during the last months of the year along the Cairns region of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. The 2009 season was exceptionally good for black marlin of well over 1000lb, as Kelly Dalling reports.

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“His season highlight was 20 marlin over a week’s fishing.”

Capt Luke Fallon looks down from the tower of KEKOA as his deckies haul on the leader and battle to tag another giant black marlin for their client.

The annual run of giant black marlin along the outer Great Barrier Reef – between Cairns in the south and the reefs off Lizard Island in the north – usually begins around September and tapers out sometime in December, when the breeding aggregation once again scatters out into the broad Pacific.

This account of the action experienced by the professional charter fleet in 2009 illustrates just what a phenomenal destination the Cairns region is. If you want an encounter with the biggest marlin on the planet, this is the time and this is the place that it’s most likely to happen.

However, the 2009 season has been full of contradictions. While the fishing has been better than the past two years, bookings were down and much of the fleet spent more time in port than ever before.

Yet while potential clients may have been hesitant to part with their cash in the wake of the financial crisis, some of the opulence of the

1980s has resurfaced. Capt Dean Beech with *Castille III* spent a large part of his season based out of the up-market Lizard Island Lodge. One of his international guests stayed in-house for 14 days straight. And both *Viking II* and *KEKOA* had guests meet them at the outer reef via seaplane. Although once common, seaplane delivery is now regarded as a luxury and has been virtually a thing of the past.

NEW BOATS IN THE FLEET

The financial crisis affected the fleet in other ways too. In 2009 it was a smaller professional marlin fleet than in previous years as some boats decided to forgo the Cairns season. But contrary to this, there were four brand-new boats, launched in 2009, that made up the numbers with their maiden seasons.

Askari, the 55ft *Assegai* launched in July 2009, has had a dream ‘shakedown’ season and performed amazingly well according to owner Shane Siphthorp. As an example of

her performance, Shane told how he ran at an easy 25 knots to Cairns through torrid conditions after the Lizard Island tournament in October, and all the while his guests were asleep downstairs.

Shane was back on the boat again in early November. He watched the boat catch its second grander of the season when Capt Corey Hard steered angler Stephen Liddall to a fish estimated at 1100lbs off Number 4 Ribbon Reef. (Shane himself released their first grander during the Lizard Island tournament.)

Owner/operator Russell Caporn said that his new creation *Kaizen*, the first *Kaizen 52*, had not missed a beat aside from the usual teething problems. On their first Cairns season, Russell mainly fished with friends, including fellow Sunshine Coasters David Trask and Nathan Douglas, who were on board for his best day during the Lizard Island tournament when they tagged four black marlin of 900, 900 and 600lb for David and one of 400lb for Nathan at Jewel Reef.

The Lizard Island tournament also saw the maiden grander for Capt Ashley Wallis on *Kalira*. Owner Geoff Lindrea was in the chair. Ashley said that before bringing the 50ft *Maritimo* to Cairns (the first built to survey and launched in early 2009), they put the boat through its paces off Bermagui in southern NSW, over 2000km to the south. It helped familiarise the crew with the boat and proved a huge benefit for their live-aboard season in Cairns.

Cool Runnings, a 41ft *Express* from Dick Ward’s Cairns Boatbuilders, with Capt Troy Dallman at the helm, was another new addition to the fleet and I heard that both the boat and the fishing exceeded their expectations. The highlight of their first season was

an 1100lb black marlin that they caught off Linden Bank for their lady angler from the US.

A YEAR FOR BIG MARLIN

2009 has certainly been the year for big fish, but significantly, there had probably been only one killed and weighed by the time this was written, towards the tail-end of the season in late November. That was a black of 1058lb caught aboard *Ultimate Lady*.

Contrary to years gone by, in 2009 you were almost as likely to catch a big fish (say, 700lb-plus) as you were a small one. In past years you might catch 10 small ones before a ‘big’ fish came along. Then again, the small fish off Cairns would

make an angler extremely happy in any other port in the world!

The run of really big fish was particularly evident during the Lizard Island Classic, which moved this year from early October to late in the month, and benefited from some of the best fishing all year.

Angler Jason Hassett returned to fish the tournament this year, to try once more after spending 7.5 hours fighting a monster marlin, before losing it, in 2008. This year he decided it was all-out war. He brought along his good friend John Wildburger for support and fished with Capt Luke Fallon on *KEKOA* again. It seems they got their just rewards. In four straight days they released four fish over

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800lb, including two over a grand, and one of those was a monster of over 1200lb.

Another who celebrated a long sought-after big-fish milestone during the tournament was angler Bill Borkan, fishing aboard *Kanahoe* with Capt Dave Pemberton. Bill has been fishing the Reef since 1990 hoping to catch a 'grander' and his dream fish came along with just 30 minutes to go before the end of fishing on the final day. Capt Pemberton said that Bill had the footage on You Tube within minutes of arriving back at Lizard Island, and if you've seen the footage (search You Tube user Bbbillfish to watch), you'll understand just why Bill was so excited.

Aboard *Joe Joe* with Capt Barry Cross, friends Brock and Clayton Allan, Paul Brown, Aaron Murphy and Grant Millar gathered for what has become their annual fishing trip. The usual trip is barramundi fishing or the like, but this year they took a step outside of their

comfort zone to fish the Lizard Island Classic. Not only did they all see their first marlin, but all left the island having caught at least one. And Clayton, the only member of the group without a barra of over 1m to his credit, set the new standard by releasing a black marlin of 1100lb on the first day of the competition! Paul Brown followed up with another 1100lb black on Day 3.

BIG LADIES WAITING AT THE BUS STOP

The grander action seemed almost non-stop for owner/captain Adam Jordan on *Iona 2* at his now regular haunt, the 'Bus Stop' at Linden Bank. On that section of reef he released four granders in a week.

Capt Trent Vischer, on the original *Iona*, was back this year after missing the 2008 season due to illness. He saw his share of the action this year and said that this season almost definitely signals a return to the glory of years gone by,

even though, in those years, he saw big fish in even greater numbers. Capt Vischer spent six days with some fellow Newcastle lads who have fished with him for over five years. They had another great trip and released 14 black marlin, the biggest over 850lb.

Capt Peter B. Wright on *Sea Baby IV* is another who hails the return of good fishing, but says it's not quite there yet. He said it's been a funny season for his team, patchy but with periods of good fishing and with good-quality fish. Likewise, Capt Kim Andersen on *New Moon* commented that the big fish this season are just the stimulus that the fleet needed. Kim only fished a few days this year, but was there for the hot bite in mid-November and soon released a 900lb black for Townsville angler Jason Carter.

HAYDEN WAS RINGING THEIR BELL

The definite 'belle' of the ball in 2009 was Capt Hayden Bell on *Release*,

who is happy to acknowledge that luck has been on his side. Hayden said that for him 2009 has been as good a season as any he's seen on the GBR. Without needing to fish wide in search of the big fish, he's had some amazing trips, including one with four fish over 900lb in mid-November. His season highlight was 20 marlin over a week's fishing in late October!

Hayden takes over the mantle from Craig 'Sparrow' Denham, who led the way in 2008. This year Sparrow has had his share of problems, with the engines on *Square Bear* being pulled apart, and pulled apart again. As a result, he spent some of the season running one of the smallest boats in the fleet, *Wild Turkey*. But as usual, he was straight into the action. On his first day out they hooked and fought one estimated at 1200lb off Linden Bank. They battled it into dark before the line unfortunately parted. During the time that Capt Denham wasn't driving *Wild Turkey*, Capt Tye Fenn took the helm and was also getting into some great fish, including two of 850lb and 1100lb on a brilliant day at Linden Bank.

Other members of the Cairns-based fleet, including Capt Jared Weir on *Shaka*, were finding good fish on the grounds off Cairns early in the season. *Shaka* released one estimated at 950lb in early October. Capt Darren 'Biggles' Haydon enjoyed a spectacular six-day trip that ended with 12 releases, including one over the 1000lb mark. Capt Chris 'Sharky' Miles moved his family to Cairns in 2009 and is making the most of it. He enjoyed a good season with several days of three or four fish, which is way better than last year. To top it off, he once again won the Lizard Island Classic.

Capt Steve Philp on *Kianja* released some good fish this season, including two of 700lb in a week while fishing off the middle Ribbon Reefs. Capt Ross Finlayson on *Top Shot* ended one of his five-day trips with nine released marlin, including a selection of 'fat rats' and two very nice fish between 800lb and 850lb.

A late starter in the 2009 season was Capt Tom Francis and his team aboard *Ultimately Lady*. Until October the boat was on the hard at Rivergate Marina in Brisbane, undergoing a refit. But after travelling north via Mellish Reef (where they once again released some good-sized blue marlin), the big blue boat went straight to the

hotspot of Number 10 Ribbon Reef, where they enjoyed some good fishing with owner Fred during the rough weather. Capt Francis said they eventually found the fish that Fred has been hoping for, but pulled the hooks soon after he hooked it. Undoubtedly, Fred will be back next year to try again.

DAY OF THE GRANDERS

Capt Bill Billson on *Viking II* once again reported good fishing from the outset of the season. On a single day in October he released two fish that he called over the 1000lb mark. On that same day, Capt Dean Beech on *Castille III* released one that he put at 1100lb and Capt Hayden Bell released yet another grander-class marlin. Meanwhile, the team on *Watchdog*, with Capt Brian Felton at the wheel, released one estimated at 1050lb for their angler Nigel, on his first trip to the GBR.

Brian's season was cut short due to illness (although we hear he is all better now), but *Watchdog* was not done catching fish. On another memorable trip they released four blacks to 850lb for their team from Tasmania, even though they lost

part of their trip to bad weather while sheltering behind the reef.

Just a few days earlier another veteran captain, Jim Dalling on *Reel Chase*, had released his first grander of the season for Towcam's John Faulkner at Linden Bank. Jim was delighted to see one of his old favourite routines of live baiting yellowfin tuna work so well on the big fish. The live bait was no sooner in the rigger than the grander appeared and was in hot pursuit, eventually nailing it after four unsuccessful swipes – to a rapt audience aboard *Reel Ripe* who were driving past just in time to witness the bite.

GREAT TIMES IN THE MARLIN PARADISE

Capt Tim Ryan, skippering *Reel Ripe* for his second season, said that on reflection, his numbers weren't as good as last year, but the size of the fish was much better. Tim's own 2009 season highlight was catching a grander for his good friend Stuart Tobin. As usual, the team enjoyed some great times with good friends and clients who enjoyed everything the GBR has to offer, besides the marlin fishing.

"In four straight days they released four fish over 800lb, including two over a grand."

Once the tag is placed, the angler sometimes jumps out of the chair to say goodbye to his fish before the crew cut her free.



"This season definitely signals a return to almost the glory of years gone by." Capt Trent Vischer

At the end of a long tail-walking run, a big black successfully throws the 15lb mackerel tuna skipping bait.

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With the night's anchorage often just minutes away, behind the outer reef, boats can fish the grounds until nearly sunset.

Capt Bob Jones, who was back at the helm of *Iceman* in 2009, felt the same way. He said that the fishing this year was a lot better than the past two years, “and thank Christ for that!” Bob agreed that there had been plenty of big fish around this season and he congratulated the skippers that had done so well with them. Echoing that sentiment, Capt Tim Richardson on *Tradition* said he saw a heap of big fish, but the real highlight was having return clients back on the Reef, and new clients like Dave Conkle from Pensacola, Florida, who went home with great memories of the 950lb marlin he released off Number 10 Ribbon.

BEST GIANT MARLIN FISHING IN THE WORLD

Capt Daniel McCarthy on *Moana II*, whose best day this year was off Number 4 Ribbon with four fish to 1100lb, asks, “Where else in the world can you realistically expect to catch a 1000lb marlin at all?”

He continued, “With the return of good numbers of big fish again this year, it shows that our Cairns giant black marlin fishery is in great shape.” And hopefully this will signal an increase in interest and bookings for next year.

And from Capt Tim Dean on *Calypso*, “A lot of big ones were around this year. We’ve seen them, caught them and let them go. Where were you all?”

In late November, as the season wound towards its end and this report was rushed off to make the deadline, the fleet was starting to venture wide off the Reef edge



in search of marlin gathering around the annual lantern fish spawning aggregation. This late-season phenomenon, which attracts multitudes of predators from whale sharks to masses of big yellowfin and bigeye tuna, is often way offshore, but if the current drifts the fish within reach, the boats know the action can be spectacular.

Way offshore, *Little Audrey*, with 21-year-old Capt Daniel Carlson at the wheel for his first Cairns season, spent two days at the

Cairns seamount and released an 850lb black upon arrival and had two more up the following day. After returning to port, Capt Carlson said he would be straight out wide again on the first chance he got.

At that late stage of the season, the water temperature and currents were still perfect, so there was high expectation that even though the chartering anglers were rapidly thinning out, the great fishing opportunities would continue right into December. ☒

