

Deep Water, E

Report and pictures by Andrew Hestelow and his mates, mostly off the Continental Shelf.



Electric Muscle

There's not much doubt about it, is there? Today's fisherman has to travel much farther afield than ever before, and for many, fishing the 'Shelf and beyond for VERY deepwater ooglies, is the only reasonable solution to the ever growing list of Marine Parks, restricted fishing areas and - frankly - too many fellow fishermen. But fishing down a couple of hundred metres has its own problems (apart from the fundamental, invasive weather issues) not least of which is knowing the best methods of getting terminal tackle and baits up and down such vast distances without losing the lot to seals or sharks. In this special report, deepwater specialist Andrew Hestelow highlights the techniques involved using powerful 12v winches to handle the heavy lifting.



'That's cheatin', mate!'

I was on our stand at the Melbourne Boat Show - next to our big electric reel which, at the time, was mounted on a heavy Saltiga bent butt rod. Probably the fiftieth time I'd heard it over the four days of the Show but thankfully, it was always said with a smile. I turned to face the bloke and his mates and quickly assessed them as genuine fishos – although probably restricted to the Bay.

'Electric reels, mate', I said. 'For fishing 400 metres, and deeper. If you want to try bringing up two big blue eye from that depth on your TLD 25, go right ahead.' I smiled. 'Like a demo?'

Deep water fishing with electric reels has taken off in a huge way over the last few years. The edge of the Continental Shelf swarms with fish and almost all are delicious, on the plate. They can be fished for with regular gear and several blokes on my boat have scored

their bag limit with an ordinary game rod and reel, mounted in a correctly adjusted bucket and back harness. But for regularly fishing the abyss, particularly when conditions aren't ideal, an electric reel is the way to go.

Here's how to do it:

Firstly, where to start. That's the easiest part of the puzzle. Digital marine charts, online forums and fishing magazines can provide locations and even way points, of likely hot spots. For many species – like bar cod in northern NSW and southern Queensland – fishing can start at 200 metres. But big tasty targets like gem fish, blue eye cod and hapuka prefer sea mounts, wrecks and canyon walls in 300 metres, and beyond.

To the gear required. One thing I've noticed when buying tackle is that the kit which promises to do the job when you're in the tackle store doesn't look quite so powerful, when you're way off shore. A 50W

Tiagra looks such a weapon, when you put it in the rod rack. But when a blue marlin hooks up and runs so hard that you can't even get the rod out of the holder, you realise that big fish need big tackle. It's the same with deep water bottom fishing. The rod should be a bent butt, to hold the line well clear of the gunwale. Two piece with butt join is handy, for storage. Electric reels are valuable, and you don't want them being knocked around in the rod rack, on the long run to the Shelf. I like to unscrew the rod from the fore grip and stow the reel – normally clamped, to the butt – in the cabin. A bit of TLC will add to your gear's longevity.

Your line has to be braid. Both to show bites at the rod tip, and to reduce drag on the drop. 80-pound is our minimum for deep dropping, although 50 is fine for bar cod and smaller inshore species. When multiple droppers are used for big fish we use 200-pound braid on the reel. Line

Author Andrew Hestelow with a very toothy (gemfish) critter! Like most seriously deepwater species, gemfish are superb eating.



Hey - this is what deepwater fishing is all about - a superb blue eye cod, surely one of the tastiest fish to ever grace a dinner table - but catching 'em this big requires no little skill, a lot of patience, and either a very strong back - or a 12v winch.



strength is not solely dependent on the anticipated weight of fish being retrieved. It's common – off southern NSW and Victoria – for hooked fish to be attacked by makos, bronze whalers and seals, on the long way back to the boat. If your 10 kilo blue eye cod suddenly turns into a 140 kilo mako you'll need all the line strength you can find. And yes, one client has boated a 140 kilo mako - after it took a gem fish 60 metres under his boat.

For terminal tackle, avoid the following:

- Chemical or electric lights;
- Reinforcing rod, sash weights and bricks, used as sinkers;
- Shark clips and lumo tubing.

Remember that anything you add to your terminal tackle will slow the rate of sinking. Anything other than a lead sinker will slow the rate of sinking, too. And your sink rate is very important. It takes so long to get to the bottom that

you could be hundreds of metres off the way point on your GPS screen, or the fish marking on your sounder, by the time your baits arrive on the bottom.

For terminal tackle, I recommend monofilament line slightly lighter than the breaking strain of your braid. So, if your reel is spooled with 200-pound braid, use 150-pound mono for your traces. Large spools of heavy braid are expensive and the last thing you want is to snag up and break off your line, at the rod tip. Not only will you have to go to the tackle shop for an expensive spool of line, but it's very likely that there won't be enough line left on your reel to reach the bottom when you have re-rigged. So protecting the main line is very important.

Keep the droppers short and simple. I use the heavy Crane 3-way swivels available from Shogun, which have the horizontal ring rotating around the barrel. These are rated to 265 pounds breaking strain and have never let me down. I crimp the

mono to the ring and make a short dropper of around 25 centimetres. A heavy hook is crimped onto the end of the dropper, with a lumo bead inside the crimped loop.

To my mind long lengths of lumo tube and mini strobe lights just aren't necessary. In the inky blackness 400 metres down, a lumo bead will give off plenty of light. Plus it's cheap, and easy to rig up.

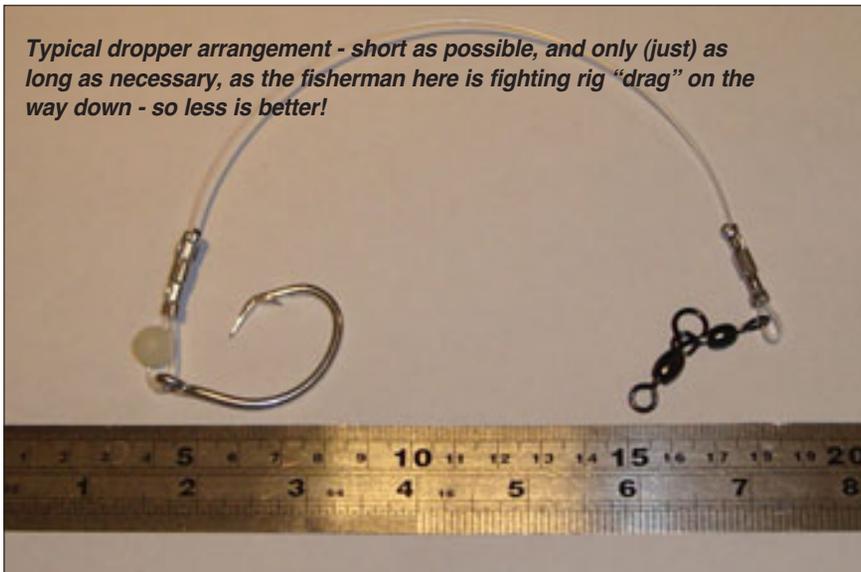
Hook selection is crucial. With the retrieval time of a hooked fish being anywhere from 6 to 10 minutes you must have a good hook set with the leader well clear of biting teeth. This means a circle hook. I am not going to recommend a size or pattern because we are still experimenting and indeed, often use two completely different hooks on each rig. It's a work in progress so for updates visit our website where we discuss the pros and cons of deepwater fishing constantly.

Bait's simple, any oily fish or



This is the decidedly better looking half of the Andrew Hestelow / Stelco Team - AH's lovely wife Carolyn who many readers have met and talked with on the Boat and Tackle Show circuit. They both look forward to meeting existing and future customers as they do the long yards around the Show Circuit.

Typical dropper arrangement - short as possible, and only (just) as long as necessary, as the fisherman here is fighting rig "drag" on the way down - so less is better!



We've published this Lowrance pic a few months back - to the astonishment of many readers; folks, this is not a trick pic - it IS really that deep!



fresh squid is fine. Don't use a large bait because all you'll do is slow the sink rate. If using a strip bait, put the hook once only through one end of the bait, leaving the point standing clear and proud. I find slimy mackerel heads are great. Put the point of the hook directly through the nose and bring it out through the lower jaw, so the head sits well within the curve of the gape.

Keep in mind that the water pressure at these depths is incredible. A strip of mullet will have juices pumping out like a mini-burley trail at 400 metres down. Your bait will be drifting

along the bottom, illuminated by the lumo bead and trailing a delicious scent of oil which of course will also be rising, through the water column.

The real challenge with this kind of fishing is the hook up. I will just describe what works for me, keeping in mind other fishos may have just as good or better methods they prefer. It's quite common to be drifting across the deep grounds and registering 0.5 or 0.8 knots, on your plotter. What does this mean, in practise? A knot is one nautical mile, or one metre every two seconds. Your bait is very likely

moving across the ocean floor at quite a clip. Thankfully, the braid has no stretch, and will register bites at the rod tip in exactly the same way as if you were fishing for bream off your local jetty.

When those bites are marked I immediately do one of two things. Either, we free spool line on the reel, or reverse the boat in the opposite direction to the drift. The intent is to stop the bait dead in the water, allowing any pursuing fish to swallow it deeply. After a pause, slide the drag up or knock the boat into neutral, and hopefully watch the rod tip load. The hook has come back up the fish's throat and out through the mouth, hopefully giving a perfect hook set in the corner of the jaw. As the rod curves under load, you are ready to start the long retrieve to the surface.

You can make a pretty good estimation of what's coming up depending on how the rod and reel responds. A steady load and curve with occasional heavy bending means you have two gemfish who occasionally swim in the same direction. Constant unchanging load is often indicative of a blue-eye, especially if regular tail beats are noted. Mako strikes usually seem to occur around 60-80 metres down, so when you pass through that band it's cause for relief.

Seals are a growing problem off southern Australia. They make certain spots almost unfishable due to the fact that after eating their fill, their powerful hunting instinct means they still attack hooked fish anyway. We are working on a seal scarer to fix this problem



Above & Below: Obviously, fishing 20-30 miles off the Coast calls for serious luck with the weather, or a particularly clever forecaster, and it is one of the reasons one most of the pros prefer to work the winter months. However, enticingly, the big deep water species like these, are there all year round, so of the weather settles - get outa here!

but have not had an opportunity to test the prototype as yet. Keep reading **The Boat Mag** for developments.

With your hooked fish drawing near the surface - as shown on your digital line counter, your analogue line counter or your colour change braid - it's time to prepare for boating. And I do mean prepare, because it's not like swinging a whiting aboard.

Gem fish are hard to gaff, and have hideous, vampire-like fangs. Don't even dream of putting your hands inside their gills without using gloves. Your mates will henceforth call you 'Stumpy.'

We usually bring them in by the leader and grasp them under the gill latch wearing heavy gardening gauntlets or sometimes, Kevlar filleting



gloves.

These are one of the best eating fish in the sea, so please give them the respect they deserve. Don't let them thrash themselves around on the deck. Bleed them quickly and get them into an ice slurry in either a chiller bag or a big cooler, ASAP.

And without sounding preachy, please be an ethical angler. Gem fish swarm on the southern sea mounts yet the bag limit is still very low, at two per angler. It's not uncommon to see blokes putting them back over the side and fishing on, in the hope of catching a blue eye or hapuka. Please don't do that. Try for something else out at the sea mounts – cubing for yellowfin, jigging for albacore, fishing for sharks or even using your electric reel for swordfishing.

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