



*Left: The grin says it all - beautiful deepwater bass groper hauled up off Sydney's Browns Mountain by Fred XXXX . To fish where this beast came from requires a massive commitment in fishing skill, boat preparation, and a large degree of luck to cope with vagaries of the weather right out wide.*

*Right: For many years recreational anglers didn't know much about gemfish, especially as the specie was badly knocked about (unwittingly, largely) by the pros before better management practices came onto the scene. These days, as fishos travel further afield into deeper water, gemfish have resumed their rightful place as one of the best (table) ocean fish we have.*



# Deepwater Fishing Brown's Mountain

**We don't think there is a fisherman with a pulse who hasn't dreamed of catching a big oogle from the deep . . . this is truly the stuff of legends, isn't it ? All the way back to the beginnings of recorded history . . . but as the Green Movement continue their push to lock-out fishermen from waters they have fished for generations, more anglers are heading out further than ever before. In this excellent - and timely - report, Sydney based tackle guru **Andrew Hestelow** provides a heads-up on what to expect and how to do it . . . in seriously deep, canyon country.**

**B**ack in the 1970s Sydney had a weekly fishing newspaper called, appropriately enough, *Fishing News*. It was renowned for cheesy pun headlines such as, 'Trag by the Swag', and 'Thisaway to Chittaway.'

*Fishing News* surpassed itself when, in a freak event, a sea eagle picked up a fish from the surface of Queenscliff lagoon, then lost its grip while flying over the adjoining golf course. The resulting front page headline, 'Mullet Stuns Golfer', was an unforgettable moment of magic.



In amongst all the nutty stories, there was some very good information on fishing spots. It was in the pages of *Fishing News* that I first

learned of the almost mythical Browns Mountain.

In the 1970s, we had no GPS, VHF radio was rare, weather forecasting was hit and miss and we had no Internet. Navigation was by dead reckoning or the 'third pine tree over the surf club' technique - that sort of thing. *Fishing News* published the Giant Fishing Map Book, which included this image of Browns Mountain.

Of course that image looks nothing whatsoever like the bottom out there, and Browns does not 'rise



**Above:** A day to die for! Doesn't get any flatter than this, especially off the 'Shelf. Note albatross trio - a sure sign of underwater activity. **Right:** Check the bottom discrimination at 600m! Is your image this good? **Below:** Serious stuff this - like so many good deepwater grounds off the Australian coast, Browns is a LONG way out.

dramatically' from the surrounding sea floor. But this map was enough to inspire a teenage fishing tragic like myself with countless dreams. I made a solemn vow to get a Browns-capable boat and get out there myself, one day. That took twenty years, but now we fish the place on average once a week through winter, when weather permits. I don't consider myself an expert on Browns by any means, but we have learned quite a lot from our countless trips out there and thought I'd share it with those considering their first run, this winter.

### It's A Long Way Out . . .

If you've never fished deep water, your first trip to Browns should be on a charter boat. There are two good options out of Sydney, being *Ambition* and *Sea Lord*. Ivan from *Ambition* is a tuna specialist who regularly scores large yellowfin and bluefin for his clients off Sydney each season. *Sea Lord* is a bit more cosmopolitan; they also fish the bottom with electric reels

Firstly, the boat. Browns is 21.5



**Above:** Gemfish are a really prized table fish with tight catch restrictions (2 per angler/day in NSW) but very much part of the deepwater fisho's reward for effort.

**Left:** Holy Toledo, Batman - that mako has gone ballistic - and crikey, all you can do is hang on like never before, and work your butt (and wrists) off to keep that line taut . . . good luck!



nautical miles on a 110 degree bearing from the South Head of Sydney Harbour. That's a long way. I'm not going to rule in or out any type of boat, and have seen people out there in tiller steered tinnies operating quite safely. But note - they were experienced, the boat and engine was in perfect order, and the seas were dead flat. The key is to be prepared for anything that might eventuate.

Make sure all your safety gear is spot on, your radio is checked and your crew is capable of a full day offshore. Check your batteries with a multimeter and monitor your water separator regularly. If you break

down out there it's possible the Water Police will not come out to help until hours after dark, by which point you will be very cold. So pack a warm top, a beanie and of course, a good rain jacket.

Log on with Marine Rescue before departure, and do a radio check. It's a very good idea to take a back-up hand held VHF radio, too. Make sure you have plenty of reserve fuel because if a hard westerly arrives, it's a long wet trip home.

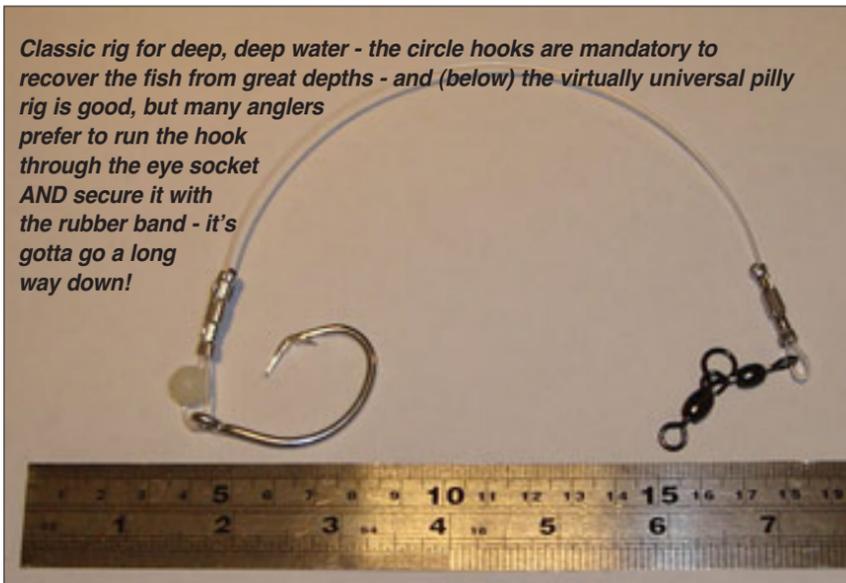
If you have a breakdown, ascertain whether it's repairable ASAP. If not, call Marine Rescue on your VHF who will most likely organise a tow from the NSW Water Police.

One thing to mention about that option: The Water Police base is near the Sydney Harbour Bridge, a long way from Browns. So if you have a break down in the morning and need a tow, call it in as soon as possible. Mid-afternoon could mean a long wait in the dark.

Most of all, be mentally prepared to turn back if conditions deteriorate to marginal on the way out. There will always be another opportunity.

### Best Times

When to go? In early June - usually - Sydney gets a protracted period of calm weather. Smog builds up over the city and greenies phone in to radio stations, demanding a reduction in car numbers. That's a good time for your first run. Check the weather online, using as many sites as possible, to confirm a stable weather forecast of calm seas for the following 18 hours. Leave your VHF on all day, because should a storm be moving up the coast you will often get advance warning, from stations



Classic rig for deep, deep water - the circle hooks are mandatory to recover the fish from great depths - and (below) the virtually universal pilly rig is good, but many anglers prefer to run the hook through the eye socket AND secure it with the rubber band - it's gotta go a long way down!



down at Kiama or Wollongong. Don't take anyone with you who gets seasick or has to be back by a specific time, because you may have a late bite and you won't want to pull the pin on that. For your first few trips, make sure you are back inside the Heads before dark. There are

departing from Botany Bay. If the kingfish are on fire, you may not want to go any further! We usually spend about an hour over the 100 metre reefs then pack everything away, and proceed to the Mountain. Keep your eye out for temp breaks, current lines, schools of striped tuna and birds as you cross the 80 fathom line. That's a fish rich spot.

Browns Mountain is not a mountain at all. Its shape is roughly like a canted table, with the highest corner being the south-west and the deeper water to the north-east. On arrival you will see a cluster of boats, usually on the south-west corner, and sometimes a commercial Steber surrounded by orange floats.

These are his drop lines, stay clear of

superstructure and the amount of hull in the water.

### Tackle & Techniques

Drift can be reduced by deploying a sea anchor, although the sea anchor can get in the way of fishing, at times. We often find ours worth the extra bother. Ours is made in Australia by John Hayden, contact him on [haydenj@dodo.com.au](mailto:haydenj@dodo.com.au) if you want more details. While you're checking your boat's drift rate, have a good look around the boat to the horizon. See any albatross clusters?

When fish drop off the hooks on the way up, they often float to the surface. Once there, the albatross find them. If you move quickly, you can sometimes pick up a nice blue eye cod or gemfish before you've even put a line in the water. But get over to it fast because an albatross beak can do a lot of damage.

You're now ready to start fishing. What to start targeting? Back when I was totally focused on yellowfin I was fishing with a predominately young crew. Some of them uni students, and still living at home. We never fished the bottom so if the tuna weren't there, we would return empty handed. This resulted in long faces and a severely depressed crew, before I got the message. Now, we start every trip with a bottom fishing session. Once we have a chiller bag full of prime table fish, it's amazing how everyone's mood lifts.

Electric reels are the way to go. We use a big powerful one, based around an 80-wide game reel. It holds 1000 metres

of 200-pound braid. Forget toy electric reels from eBay, at Browns you want all the

power you can get. On the end of the braid we attach a three metre 150-pound mono leader, with two droppers terminating with 10/0 circle hooks.

Circle hooks are needed because it's such a long way to the surface for a hooked fish, and you don't want a drop-off half way. You must have a good hook set, to ensure your fish make it to the boat. A lumo bead is

mounted just above each hook. Sinker is a 4-pound teardrop weight. When the gemfish are really on, no bait is needed. They will hook up on the glow bead alone. But most times, our bait is just half a pilchard. Surprisingly small, but we have found them very effective. The pilchard is cut in half and the point of the hook is entered directly between the eyes. If the size of the hook matches the pilchard, the hook point will come up beneath the lower jaw, and keep the mouth closed on the long trip to the bottom. Squid and tuna strips work too but remember, big baits will increase drag, meaning a longer sink time. We find getting to the bottom as fast as possible is the key, particularly when current or wind is moving the boat quickly.

Forget lead sinker substitutes like bulldozer track pins, window sash weights, bricks, and reinforcing rods. Unless you're out there for the bottom fishing alone. If that's the case, big baits and sash weights aren't a problem and jigs are quite effective, too. But for us, the idea is to get down quick, hook up quick, and get our catch to the top as soon as possible. Note that an electric reel is not essential, if you're comfortably set up with a bucket and kidney harness.

### The Strike Zone

When the line stops going out, you are on the bottom. Immediately wind five to ten metres of line back onto the reel. You don't want your sinker bouncing on the reef. Browns has the roughest bottom imaginable and is notorious, for lost gear. It's a volcanic outcrop covered in fissures and swept clean, by the East Australian Current. One time we pulled up two lines, one yellow and one white, totalling hundreds of metres. It filled a large bucket.

Now your baits are in the strike zone but, if the boat is drifting quickly, you may be pulling them away from hungry fish. If the drift is too fast, putting the boat in intermittent reverse will help. Braid has zero stretch and you will see the rod tip bouncing from bites exactly the way you would fishing for bream, off a wharf. When that happens, release a few metres of line. That gives the fish a chance to get the bait down. Then crank the reel

**Right:** Fisheries patrols do make the run right off the 'Shelf, so it pays to be vigilant about the local capture rules, no matter which state you live and fish.

**Below:** Slowing the rate of drift becomes quite critical - especially if the eastern current is running strongly - sometimes it is nigh on impossible to get the baits down to the bottom. Sea anchors are reasonably effective, but can be problematical if you are working big fish around the boat.



manually and watch for the rod tip to load. When that happens, go to electric retrieve. If all goes well, some big fish are hooked up and heading for the surface.

Retrieval time will be six to eight minutes depending on depth, the power of your reel, and the size of the fish hooked.

If the makos are a problem, they usually take one or both fish around sixty to eighty metres beneath the boat. The rod will dip heavily and the load will become obviously lighter. There's nothing you can do about it except re-rig, and drop again. Seals can also be a problem, although they usually leave when the makos arrive in big numbers, in late July. One of our clients saw a large seal being eaten by two makos at Browns in September 2011. That one obviously left his departure a little too late.

### Thoughtful Stuff

Monitor your line counter or depth indicator, as the fish draw near the top. We usually swing gemfish aboard by the leader, and gaff larger fish like blue eye and bass groper. Note that many other fish are

common catches including frostfish, mirror dory, rock perch, alfonsino and greeneye sharks. Keep in mind the strict bag limits and that the maximum allowable catch of gemfish is two per angler, maximum ten per boat.

Once your bag limit has been reached please don't be tempted to return gemfish to the water and fish on, for blue eye or other species. These delicious fish are a priceless resource, and even though they swarm at the Mountain, deserve to be treated with respect. If you see someone dropping gemfish back over the side, take a pic and send it to me anonymously for the weekly Shame File. If we don't take responsibility for our sport's ethics, the authorities will. And yes, it IS quite common to be inspected by Fisheries, at Browns.

After a few drops - if all goes well - you will have a fish bag full of delicious deepwater fish. Make sure they're bled while alive and iced down as quickly as possible, to maintain table quality.

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**Caption needed for here - do you sell these? How much?**

plenty of hazards en route which are hostile to night navigation - including trap buoys, large pieces of flotsam and of course, the ever growing number of whales.

It's always a good idea to break up the trip with a jigging session en route - either Twelve Mile Reef, if leaving from Sydney, or the Peak if

them. Knock the boat into neutral and zoom your plotter, to determine the rate and direction of drift. Drift is affected by many factors, including the design of the boat's