

Hold on tight!

Getting stuck into big fish in reefy terrain on mega heavy popper tackle is about as extreme as modern sportfishing can get. LUKE WYRSTA reports.

ABUCKLED over rod pumping out 20kg of drag needs to be seen to be believed. Accompanied by the high-pitched hum of braid rocketing through the guides, and coupled with sweat and sheer determination, this is what heavy popping is all about.

Popping the reef edges and steep drop-off zones is where the bad boys come out to play. The fish encountered here literally blow smoke in your face. They're big, mean and they live to destroy your popper.

The purpose of this article is to give you a general introduction on the tackle, techniques and some locations involved in heavy popping. Do you want to triumph over some colossal customers that would eat Dirty Harry for breakfast? Read on...

Reels

A quality high-speed threadline that is capable of high drag settings and able to hold at least 250m of 50lb GSP braid is mandatory for heavy popping. A lower geared threadline is also acceptable but can require a lot more effort and work from the angler.

Reels such as the Shimano Spheros, Penn Spinfisher and Daiwa Saltiga Blast provide choice for anglers on a budget. The addition of aftermarket upgrades (such as Carbondex drag washers) is highly recommended.

At the higher end of the market, the Shimano Stella, Daiwa Saltiga and Dogfight and the Accurate Twinspin rule supreme. Tough as nails, these reels have been purpose-built for applications such as heavy popping. Sporting quality drags that can produce 20kg plus of gut-wrenching drag straight out of the box and regularly locked up to the point where other reels would wet themselves, you can really see why they can leave a rather big hole in your pocket!

If you invest in a reel like this, make sure you buy an extra spool to fill with more braid; you never know when you may have

to up the odds with a heavier line class or recover from a spooling.

Rods

Extreme forces and pressures mean that rods must be capable of virtually "bending over backwards" with drag settings that would rip the arms off an average angler. With grunt in the butt to pull a tractor but enough action in the tip to impart action on a pencil popper, specialist popper rods define the term "cutting-edge".

Many of these specialised rods are coming from the Japanese market and can be upwards of \$1000. Light, robust and hand-crafted like a piece of art, they feel more like a perfectly balanced Samurai sword than a fishing rod. And just as

deadly, too! If you are willing to part with the cash, rods from the likes of Fisherman, Carpenter, Seven Seas, Smith's and Zenaq all have models specifically designed with the heavy popping angler in mind.

The Shimano T-Curve Bluewater spin rod or one of the Daiwa Saltiga models provides a good off-the-rack option for those looking to kick-start their heavy popping account. These rods are ideal for 50lb tackle and can knock over some serious fish. Any desire to go heavier will require a custom rod or one of the Japanese rods already mentioned.

With heavy popping popularity now on the increase, many rod builders have recipes for some lethal popping rods. Quality blanks up to the job are coming from the likes of





MAIN PHOTO: When you encounter beasts like this, you begin to realize why you need 80lb line, souped up drags and \$1000 rods!

Calstar and GUSA. My personal rod of choice has been built on a Calstar blank that is capable of handling 100-130lb braid. I find it much more comfortable to use and preferable to Japanese models that I've used in the past. Discuss options with your preferred rod builder or ask a tackle shop for more information.

With all that being said, we can't forget old favourites such as beefy Ugly Sticks. Such rods are more than capable of knocking over reasonable fish, however, don't expect them to last for too long under really heavy popping stress!

Mainline

Low stretch and small diameter make GSP braid ideal for heavy popping.



A selection of proven Japanese style poppers. Local brands such as the Halco Roosta and Haymaker are excellent as well.

Heavy Tackle Poppers

A mainline of 50-80lb GSP is preferred for most popping anglers. These line classes are recommended to help achieve maximum casting distance while also providing enough grunt to apply

significant pressure on a fish.

An increasing number of anglers have progressed beyond 80lb up to classes as heavy as 130lb. These line classes provide more room for the angler to apply

maximum pressure and increased diameter for extra abrasion resistance. The potential to subdue a fish much quicker and to help ensure a faster and safer return to the water are additional advantages. Be warned, these line classes are not for the faint hearted: if you're not prepared for the strike or do not have your technique correct, you could be going for a swim!

Tried and tested brands such as Power Pro and Tuf Line XP are cost-effective and reliable choices. Japanese braids such as Daiwa Hyper Sensor, YGK Jig Man and Varivas Avani GT are also very good but considerably more expensive.

Leader

A nylon or fluorocarbon leader of between 2-5m in length is necessary for heavy popping. A shorter leader is usually used to keep the connection between the mainline and leader outside the rod tip. This helps eliminate the connection itself from becoming wrapped and snagged on the guides. A longer leader is used to help add more shock absorption (helps combat shock-load and to minimise hook pulls)



Even "medium sized" GTs like this demand heavy tackle and plenty of muscle.

and for increased abrasion resistance around the reef zone.

Tried and tested brands include Sufix, Moimoi and YGK. A minimum of 100-150lb breaking strain is required for lighter mainline classes and between 150-300lb is common for heavier classes.

Twisted leaders can be very useful in heavy popping, however, they are beyond the scope of this article. Further information on these leaders can be found on the internet.

Knots & Connections

The ability to tie an array of knots with confidence and speed is essential; you will simply waste your time and money if you can't. Leaders and connections should be prepared prior to hitting the water.

Tying a double at the end of the mainline is necessary to attach the leader. In my opinion, the best way to form this double is through the use of a 70-turn (minimum) Bimini Twist, however, if you want to steer clear of doubles, tying a Midknot to attach the leader is the next preference. I prefer a smaller double (no more than a few inches) in order to help minimise hang-ups and snagging on the rod guides. To complete the connection, I use the Bristol or "No-name" knot. Very quick and easy to tie, this knot is best



Big coral trout will get in on the action as well as GTs, red bass and various tunas.

used when casting with a leader that is outside the rod tip. Alternatively, you can use an Albright knot.

The next part of the equation is connecting the leader to the swivel or solid ring. My favourite and most reliable knot for this purpose is the four-turn uni knot. Make sure you lubricate adequately and pull the knot as tight as you can with the aid of pliers. Stiffer and harder leader material may require the use of a heavy duty crimp in place of a knot.

You can search the internet for details on how to tie these knots or study one of Geoff Wilson's excellent knot books.



Specialised gloves like these ones (which are made by Daiwa) are a mandatory piece of gear when fishing heavy drag on 80lb braid.

Terminals

Heavy popping can be merciless on tackle. Warped trebles and opened split-rings are more than possible so it pays not to compromise.

Factory fitted trebles and split-rings are usually inferior and should be abandoned immediately if you want to achieve success in this big fish arena.

Split rings and solid rings should be high quality brands such as Owner, Decoy and Fisherman. Lighter and heavier line classes should use at minimum 200lb and 300lb respectively.

Trebles should be high quality brands such as Owner, Decoy, Gamakatsu and Fisherman. Treble size will depend on size of lure and tackle set-up being used. Minimum treble sizes are 5/0-6/0, while heavier setups using bigger lures and generally targeting bigger fish using 6/0 to 10/0 trebles. Crush or file down the barbs on these hooks to avoid damage to fish and angler and to help speed up the release process. Hooks should always be kept sharp to ensure best penetration.

Swivels should be high quality brands such as Owner, Decoy and Fisherman. I've also found Wilson to manufacture very good and reliable swivels. Breaking strains are the same for split ring and solid ring recommendations.

Locations

Most heavy popping is done in the tropics. Just about any reef system with current and steep drop-offs will produce results. Reef points with breaking waves and white foamy water can hold some mammoth fish that you will wish you had never hooked!

Many exciting destinations are available to the Australian heavy popping angler, here are some personal favourites:

Exmouth & the Murion Islands

The beautiful Ningaloo reef on the north-west coast of Western Australia can provide hot action for popping fanatics. Friendly locals and cheap accommodation at Exmouth provide the ideal base to target big fish.

Throw poppers at the reef edge where rolling waves pound the reef zone or land-based at the "Oyster Rocks" on the North-West Cape.

North Queensland

Cairns and surrounds provide a comfortable base on any budget to target big fish on poppers. The reef systems and tropical islands will hold big fish at times; find current and significant drop-offs for action. Some game boats and smaller operators do offer specialised solo and share charters for big GTs and other species.

The Coral Sea

The Great Barrier Reef is a Mecca for heavy popping. Operators such as Damon Olsen's Nomad Sportfishing charters are renowned for quality of service, quality of fish and the sheer remoteness of their operation. The fish out here are big, mean and numerous.

Carpentaria Seafaris operated by Greg Bethune also offers extended charters to the far north outer reefs of the Great Barrier Reef. The fish here are downright possessed and can destroy a popper with ease.

Fraser Island

Located north of Fraser Island is the extraordinary Breaksea Spit. This tough and unforgiving stretch of water is home

Heavy Tackle Poppers



Cutting edge gear combined with big poppers and tough terminals is what's needed for this style of extreme sportfishing.

to some monster fish. A destination also serviced by Nomad Sportfishing, this is one on the menu that you cannot afford to pass on!

The Pacific

With airfares hitting rock-bottom prices, the Pacific is a viable option for the heavy popper angler. Destinations such as Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia all provide some great environments for an awesome popping adventure.

New Caledonia, situated only a short two hour plane trip from Sydney, is a world class destination that provides modern facilities, untouched scenery and some seriously hot fishing. Expect world records from this place in the future. Go with the boys at Le Poisson Banane for some of the best fishing of your life.

Techniques

There are three styles of retrieve technique that are effective for heavy popping:

Chugging & Blooping

This involves working the popper to create a big and visible surface commotion with long pauses in between. Leaving the popper stationary for a few seconds or winding very slowly until the next "bloop" or "chug" is up to angler preference. This style is best achieved by moving the rod from a forward position (in front of you) and then jerking back towards your body, or, by placing the rod in a forward horizontal position then giving a big jerk to the appropriate side. Effective in all sea conditions.

Flat-out

This involves working the popper quickly to imitate a fleeing and frightened baitfish. This style is best achieved by positioning your rod in a forward position, holding the rod tip high and cranking as quickly as possible. Add some up and down movement with your rod-

holding hand with some occasional pauses thrown in. Deadly and effective. If you can see a big fish shadowing, slow down! This style works best in low swell and wind conditions.

Mix It Up

This style involves a combination of both styles described above. Seems to be the solution when fishing is quiet.

Poppers

Big solid poppers with a deep-cupped face are great for heavy popping in all conditions (especially heavy swell). Length should be at least 15-20cm and weigh at least 120g with terminals. Used to create big and almost violent displacements of water, these lures are sure to be a magnet for any big predator. Effective with "chugging and blooping" retrieval technique.

Long and slender poppers known as pencil poppers are great for heavy popping in calmer conditions (but can be used in all). Length should be at least 20-25cm and weigh at least 120g with terminals. Used to create continuous foaming wakes of water, this style of popper is best used with a flat-out retrieval technique.

Stickbaits are also popular, although they are not really a popper. Stickbaits are very similar to pencil poppers however they lack a cupped face and are generally shorter. Much easier to work than other poppers, stickbaits jerk and twist erratically upon retrieval. Best used in calmer conditions popper with a flat-out retrieval technique with short pauses and jerks thrown in for variety.

Hints & Tips

- Heavy popping is physically demanding - so get fit.
- 3-5 aggressive rod thrusts after the hook-up will help drive home barbless hooks.
- Practice your cast - being able to cast 60m is a bare minimum (the further, the better).
- Go easy on drag settings until you know your capabilities - only the sharks want you to go for a swim!
- Get some lightweight gloves suitable for handling GSP braid (some are marketed as "spectra resistant").
- Use a gimble or special padded rod belt.
- Depending on where you're fishing, expect to catch trevally species, mackerel, cods and gropers, tunas, barracuda, jobfish, red bass and other species that call tropical reefs their home.

