

Home and away

Former British MP and angling activist **MARTIN SALTER** has fallen head over heels in love with Australia and our fishing. So much so that less than a year after returning to the Old Dart he's back laying down a challenge to Aussie anglers to get organised ahead of the upcoming federal election.

MAIN PIC: The jetty at Bloomfield Lodge, described by Martin as "a beautifully remote and well hidden piece of paradise with great fishing and wonderful food".

BELOW: UK-based angler and river habitat expert Simon Evans with wife Hazel spending some quality time on a tropical island near Bloomfield Lodge.

RIGHT: Martin enjoying himself with a golden trevally hooked on a plastic in the Bloomfield River.



AFTER a truly fabulous 15 months living and fishing in Oz, where I caught the fish of childhood dreams, made some really good friends and hopefully contributed something useful in the shape of my *Keep Australia Fishing* report, I just knew that it wouldn't be long before we were back Down Under. Luckily for me the organisers of the August 2012 National Recreational Fishing Conference on the Gold Coast needed a keynote speaker and I was delighted to accept their kind invitation to return to what is fast becoming a second home for my wife Natalie and I.

Now leaving an English Olympic summer for an Australian winter may seem a little strange but since two of our favourite places in your country are WA's Ningaloo Reef off Exmouth and Bloomfield Lodge in Far North Queensland, the timing for our expedition suited us just fine.

Our schedule almost planned itself and saw us landing in Perth to spend a bit of time exploring historic Fremantle before flying north to Coral Bay and Ningaloo, east to Brisbane for the conference, north again to Cairns and on to Bloomfield and the Great Barrier Reef before returning south to our former, and much missed, home of Sydney.

The Wonderful West

Happily the winter weather was as perfect as ever at Coral Bay plus I had couple of days fishing to look forward to aboard Bernie Vale's *MahiMahi III*, the top charter boat in the area.

Although there are fish aplenty off Ningaloo Reef, location is key and there's no substitute for going with a good skipper. Bernie's 25 years experience as a charter operator shines through as he has consistently recorded the highest catch

rates in the whole of the Gasgoyne region, winning the Billfish Foundation's top tagging accolade in a staggering nine of the past 12 years.

Ningaloo was where I caught my first sailfish the year before but with the pelagic action being somewhat slow this time around we headed off to one of Bernie's favourite marks to target some big red emperors and rankin cod. Everyone was soon into fish from the first drop down. My favourite moment was helping eight-year-old Flynn Curry from Melbourne land a great double-header of cod and emperor. This little lad was on an extended caravan tour with his family and was well on the way to becoming an accomplished fisherman. His mum Fiona, however, showed the rest of the guys how to fish by landing one of the biggest reds of the day.

Failure to replace a frayed leader cost me a big red but I was happy enough with some



Simon casts a speculative fly over a flats system to the east of Bloomfield.



ABOVE: Martin helps eight-year-old Flynn Curry with a nice double-header off Ningaloo Reef. One marine park where anglers are actually welcomed!

LEFT: Flynn's mum Fiona with the biggest red emperor taken during Martin's trip aboard WA charter skipper Bernie Vale's impressive new *MahiMahi III*.



nice specimens and a solid cod. At the right time of year there is great action to be had with sailfish and marlin at Coral Bay. When the baitfish are about in numbers, packs of queenies can be seen smashing into them with gusto. From the shore there are plenty of spots to target not just queenies but spangled emperor and trevally. What I love about Ningaloo Reef is the fact that despite being a World Heritage Site and a marine park it is managed sensibly for recreational fishing, wildlife watching, diving and snorkelling with benthic protection areas set aside for anglers wishing to drift or troll. Why on earth this can't be adopted as standard policy in other marine parks is beyond me.

Beautiful Bloomfield

Our next fishing venue saw us returning to one of Australia's best kept secrets – the beautiful Bloomfield Lodge. Situated beyond trailer or charter boat range from

either Port Douglas or Cooktown, with no road access, Bloomfield Lodge gives anglers a chance to fish a pristine part of the Great Barrier Reef while providing everything that our non-fishing wives and girlfriends could ask for in a holiday.

For this trip I invited along my friend and co-speaker at the Gold Coast conference, Simon Evans, who hails from one of the UK's leading rivers trusts. Simon wanted somewhere to meet the requirements of his wife Hazel and his as yet unrealised ambition of landing a GT on a fly rod. Hazel had, some 10 years before, selflessly booked their honeymoon at Alphonse on the Seychelles Islands, reckoned to be some of the best GT fishing in the world. Despite being a gun fly angler, Simon had smashed all his rods on these brutes and was keen to put matters right.

The Lodge has two boats. A new five-metre centre console sportsfisher, the *Kingfisher Paradise*, for estuary and

inshore work, and the *Bloomfield Explorer*, a comfortable 12m cat. Given that the weather was a little cloudy for the start of our stay but set to be fair later in the week, we decided to save the offshore trips for the last two days. I was quite happy relaxing with Natalie around the lodge pool and taking a day excursion to see Cooktown. However, the ever-excitable Simon simply couldn't wait to get a line in the water.

First up he bagged a brace of barra from the jetty at the top of the tide. Only modest fish but how many people have taken their first barramundi on a fly? On the second "non-fishing" day Simon packed my travel spinning rod and a few lures as essential accessories for a romantic walk to the nearby Kangaji Beach. Fortune clearly favoured the brave as within a few casts his Rapala was taken by a smallish mackerel which in turn was hammered by a sizeable mangrove jack that unsurprisingly failed to hook up. Simon cast out again and was



RIGHT: Simon with his first ever barra, caught on fly from the Bloomfield jetty!

FAR RIGHT: Once back in Sydney, Martin caught up with *Fisho's* John Newbery and had some fun with harbour blackfish.

hit by another decent jack, albeit somewhat smaller than the bait-robbing specimen. This one stayed connected and without really trying our man had scored two of his target species in no time at all.

Day three of five and it was time to start fishing properly. Knowing my passion for queenies on light tackle, head guide Shayne pointed the *Kingfisher* up the Bloomfield River to a spot that had recently produced some metre-plus fish. Despite marking plenty on the sounder, it soon became clear that the changeable weather had switched the fish off. Spots where we had taken quality fingermark and barra in the past only produced the odd follow from small trevs. It wasn't until we anchored at the head of a sweeping eddy that the drag on my trusty Daiwa Certate 3000 started screaming. And what beautiful fish they were – stunning golden trevally up to nearly two kilos. The first I had ever seen and the only time Shayne had found them

Martin felt a bit bad about catching this GT as his mate Simon was desperate to get one but unluckily missed out.



this far up the river. The ever-reliable jerkshads bounced slowly across the bottom did the damage but unfortunately for Simon they simply wouldn't look at his flies, despite his expert presentation.

The penultimate day saw us heading out to Hope Island on a day-long combined fishing and snorkelling trip. You really can do both at Bloomfield and it's one of the few times my wife agrees to share a boat with a fishing rod. The plan was to give Simon a shot at ending his GT jinx as there's some great fly water around the island where big GTs had been seen herding baitfish into the shallows. We'd skip the morning snorkel and spend the time fishing before rejoining the rest of the party for one of Bloomfield's



sumptuous picnic lunches and a swim. It didn't take long to find the bait schools and the big GTs weren't far away but they appeared completely disinterested in feeding. Even Simon's carefully cast fly made them twitchy while my poppers had them exiting the area in no time at all. In the end we decided to cut our losses and have fun with some chunky spanglies on soft plastics. This area is barely fished and we couldn't help feeling that a serious campaign by some dedicated sportfishers could throw up a few surprises.

Day five and I encouraged Simon to leave his fly rod behind and stick with the tried and tested local methods of trolling and livebaiting. This was our last chance and

we had yet to score a Spanish mackerel, never mind a GT. Shayne and fellow guide Craig were determined to put us on fish and decided to run the *Bloomfield Explorer* around their favourite reef before heading out wide to a couple of productive seamounts. We took turns on the rods fishing a spread of three with two Halco Laser Pros in "Qantas" red head and mackerel blue along with a brightly rigged garfish. Simon was away first with a nice coral trout before we both got into some decent mackerel. Unfortunately the first serious Spaniard spat Simon's hooks after a blustering 80m run. That wasn't the end of his bad luck. His next fish was a big GT which cut him off on the reef. It was one of those moments when everything goes just a little bit quiet on the boat.

I was relaxed about whether or not a GT came along so when the smaller Laser Pro was snaffled by something violent I had the feeling that I was attached to the fish that my friend so desperately wanted. After one hell of a tussle, a chunky GT, which did its best to brick me in the reef, was finally ready to net. It was 10 kilos of pure muscle – any bigger and I'm sure I'd never have got it out of the rocks. Being the good sport he is, Simon was genuinely pleased for me but I could tell he was gutted at missing out on a GT of his own.

Sydney calling

Natalie and I had just six nights left of our trip and a host of people to catch up with in Sydney but perhaps the highlight for me was to get re-acquainted with the art of weed fishing for luderick with friend and

fellow *Fisho* writer John Newbery.

John arrived on cue with bait and tackle but informed me that due to exceptional water clarity the fishing had been extremely hard. Luckily I remembered a deep ferry wharf where some fish might be hiding. The hunch proved correct and in no time at all we amassed a cracking bag of 27 luderick. As we headed off to the pub, John confided that that had been his best bag of the season. Brave of him really since few Aussies take kindly to being guided onto fish by a Pom in their own backyard!

Fighting for fishing

The conference itself was a real success (see reports on the *Fisho* website) and was attended by representatives of the tackle industry, peak bodies, state and federal governments, the media and grass roots rec fishers. The key themes were selected by fishos around Australia through an online survey. Best of all, there was a clear action plan to take forward between now and the next gathering in two years time. You can keep up to date at www.recfishing2012.com.au.

For me, the most important message is that Aussie fishos can't place their trust in one side of politics or the other. You need to start getting organised at a national level, set out your own Australian charter for angling and challenge the vote-grubbing politicians to sign up to it. No more waiting for crumbs to fall off the top table ...

Unlike many parts of this planet, Australia still has a great fishing future that is worth fighting for. That's just one reason I'll keep coming back.

Martin in full flight at last year's fishing conference.

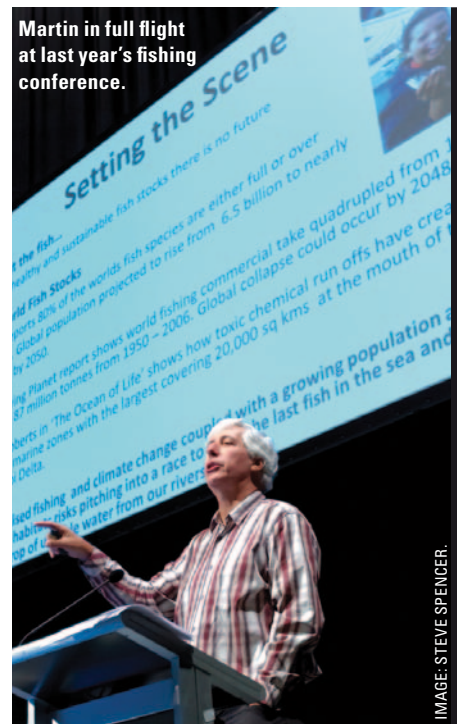


IMAGE: STEVE SPENCER.

HANDY HINT

If you fancy following in Martin's footsteps, here are some contacts to keep on file:

Coral Bay

For more info on Coral Bay Ocean Fishing Charters and the *MahiMahi III*, check out www.mahimahicoralbay.com.au or call 0899 425 874.

Bloomfield

Check out www.bloomfieldlodge.com.au or call 07 4035 9166 for details on this spectacular boutique resort.



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