



MACKERELS MAGIC PILBARA PISCATORIAL PLAYGROUND

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SCOTT COGHLAN LETS US IN
ON ONE OF WA'S VERY BEST
SPORTFISHING SECRETS.

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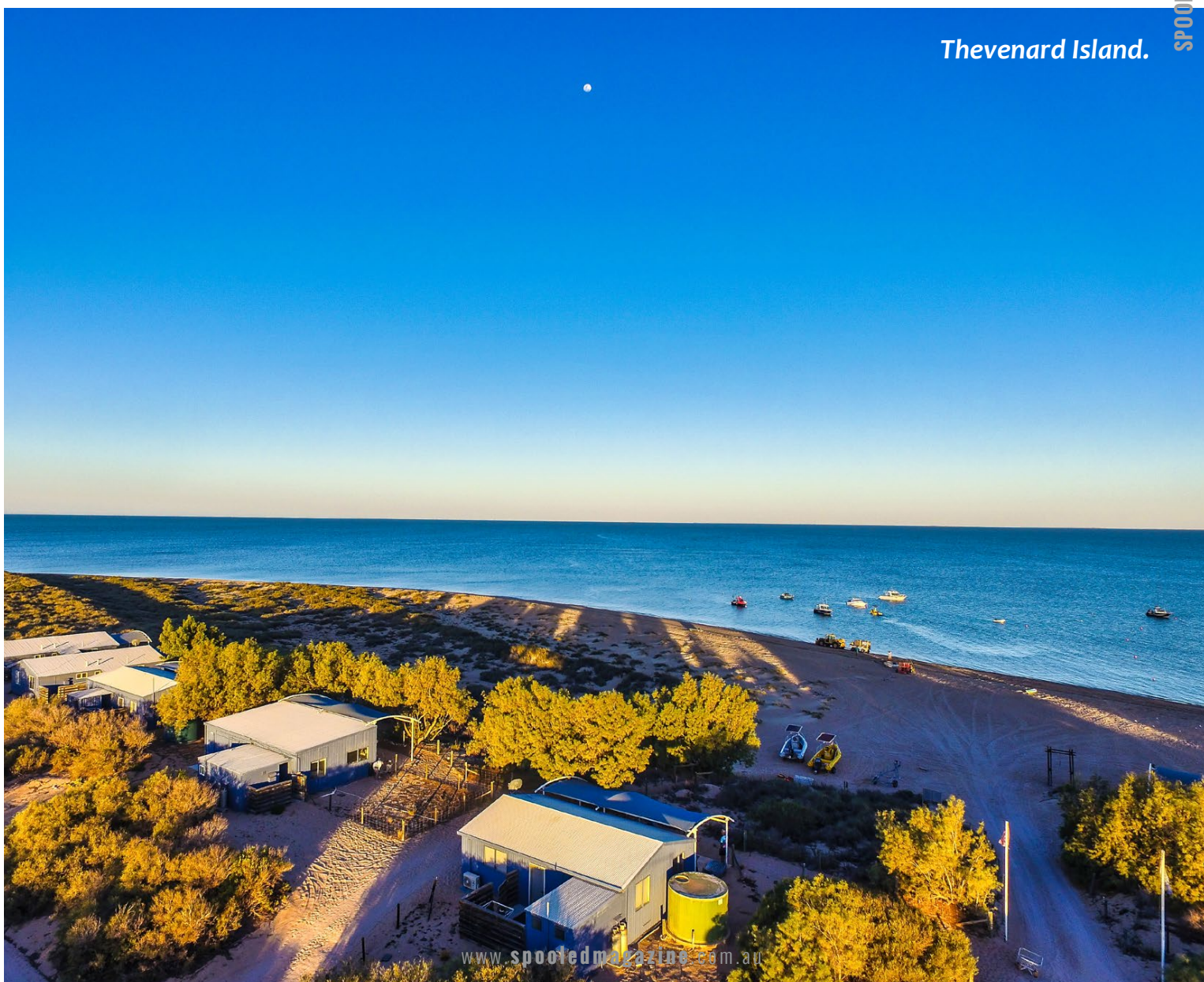


Located off the coast off Onslow, some 1400 kilometres north of Perth in Western Australia's rugged Pilbara, the Mackerel Islands is a fishing destination with real bite. For all the fishy locations spread along the vast western coastline, I reckon the waters of the Pilbara are as good as anywhere, offering a wide range of highly-prized angling species, both demersal and pelagic, without having to deal with the monster tides of areas farther north.

The Mackerel Islands, a collection of 10 or so islands and atolls, are just far enough away from any major towns to minimise angling pressure, with the quality of fishing certainly not falling away in the three decades I have been going there. Some of my best fishing memories have come at the Mackerel Islands and I'm fortunate enough to visit there every year on an organised Seafari, where we take dozens of people to Thevenard Island for a week of fishing on their own boats.

Thevenard itself is around 20 kilometres off Onslow and easily reached in any boat over 5m in most conditions. The accommodation at Thevenard is what sets it apart from many other prime fishing destinations in WA, with fully self-contained beachfront cabins enabling anglers to set up a very comfortable base for exploring all the local waters for the duration of their stay.

Thevenard Island.



Boats are moored in the small bay in front of the cabins, so owners can keep an eye on their pride and joy while they are not on the water. There is no need to take gear off the boat every night and no worries about boat ramp queues when you want to go fishing. Facilities on the island include fuel supplies, unlimited desalinated water in the cabins, a small shop that sells tackle and bait, and a storage freezer, while meals can also be arranged if preferred during peak times.

The cabins themselves include air conditioning, flat screen TV, plenty of beds, large fridge and shower, not to mention great sunset and sunrise views. It's not uncommon to be able to watch fish busting up while rigging and preparing tackle on your cabin porch, which is a great way to build the anticipation for the day ahead.



Big queenfish are a feature of Mackerel Islands fishing.

The facilities at Thevenard Island are second-to-none for an offshore fishing destination in WA, and that's one of the reasons it has been such a popular spot with visiting anglers for decades. However, the most essential element of the Mackerel Islands fishing experience are the fish themselves, and you can catch all the prime northern species in these waters. From queenfish to giant trevally, and marlin to red emperor, if it's on your bucket list it can probably be caught at the Mackerel Islands.

The beauty of fishing out of Thevenard is that there is a myriad of options to suit the preference of different fishers. There are heaps of shallow-water options for dedicated lure casters like myself, while those looking for a good feed of bottom species don't need to fish in much over 30m and there is a plethora of ground like that through the Mackerels. Those who are so inclined can push farther afield to chase deep-water species on the bottom, or billfish on the surface, while sailfish often show up in quite shallow and have been caught in little more than 5m of water at times. Whether you are a troller, caster, jigger or bait soaker, the Mackerel Islands has something for you. If you really want to enjoy the Mackies lucky dip, simply put a floating bait out the back while doing other things, as this method often produces some amazing captures!

Scott Coghlan
releasing a shore-
caught queenfish
at the west end of
Thevenard Island.



While we always take our own boats, you can fly to Onslow from Perth several days a week, and transfers are available to the island. They have small boats available for hire at Thevenard, and also offer a charter service. Even the shore fishing can be great, and I've had some incredible sessions walking the shallows at the west end of Thevenard, catching queenfish, small giant trevally, golden trevally, long tom and a few other species.

The service jetty near the cabins also produces a few fish, including some solid mangrove jack, as well as heaps of squid. The only limit at the Mackerel Islands is time, and there often isn't enough to enjoy everything this magical area has to offer anglers.



The Mackerel Islands are well named!

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As the name suggests, this is a prime spot for chasing mackerel. While big spaniards are taken around the Mackerels, what is most staggering is just how many smaller fish there are, and they can often be in plague proportions. Finding the fish is usually not hard. There are many well-known locations like the Supermarket, Rowley Shoals, Penguin Bank and Black Flag, to name but a few, but sharks can be a problem at times at these more popular spots.

Pretty much anywhere there is a decent dropoff in 10-40m there will be mackerel cruising along it, and it's not uncommon to find big schools of fish. Often you will see markings on the sounder as you approach the drop-off and can almost count down to the scream of a reel.

When they are about in big numbers, the action can be frenetic, with hordes of 6-10kg fish hitting lures.

We'll often troll until we get a hit and then cut the motor and just cast a variety of lures around. Metals, bibbed minnows, poppers, stickbaits – they all work when the fish are fired up. Using a stickbait or popper offers the most excitement though, with explosive surface strikes as mackies launch into the air. Sometimes you can look over the side of the boat and see heaps of mackerel just free swimming in the water below.

I don't like using wire generally, as I believe I get less hits, but when the fish are so prolific, a short length of single strand is essential to avoid horrific lure losses, and even then you'll still likely suffer a bite-off or two. Sharks aren't as much of a problem at some of the lesser-fished spots, but if they move in, it is time to move on, as that will be a battle you won't win.

Mackies can turn up anywhere around the Mackerel Islands and many a jig has also been lost as a spaniard comes through and snips it off with its razor-sheep teeth. One of the benefits of fishing for spaniards is the bycatch, which can be varied.

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Former Eagle, Ash McIntosh,
with a longtail tuna hooked
in a metre of water.



Yellowfin and northern bluefin (longtail) tuna are a regular catch, and the odd wahoo shows up, while there is always the chance of a sailfish or marlin showing up. Shark mackerel are also common around the Mackies, often in quite close around the islands. The tell-tale sign of the sharkies is fish busting up with birds around them in shallow water, with the backs of the mackerel cutting rapidly through the surface of the water. While spaniards hit anything that moves seemingly, sharkies are more like tuna in that they can become turned on to one particular food source and can be frustratingly hard to catch when they turn onto tiny baitfish.



Nice spangled emperor on fly for Glenn Edwards

//OTHER PELAGICS

The waters of the Mackerel Islands are teeming with hungry shallow-water predators that offer some awesome sportfishing opportunities if that is your bent, as is the case for yours truly. Big queenfish around a metre in length are found in the shallows around many of the islands and offer brilliant visual fishing, with their propensity to hit lures and get airborne when hooked. On our most recent visit last year we found good numbers of thumping queenfish and golden trevally in the shallows just a few kilometres from our base at Thevenard at a spot called Sandy Cay. We had a magical couple of hours where we enjoyed triple hook-ups and the big trev's and queenies had us dancing around the boat.

Several of the islands have sandy points around which the queenfish can be cruising as the tide rises, including Thevenard, where there are some fun shore fishing opportunities at the west end at the top of the tide. It can be tough work finding the queenfish at times, but then all of a sudden they are all around the boat. The explosive surface hit from a fired-up queenie is a sight to behold and they fight very stubbornly in shallow water.

There are several species of trevally to be had around the Mackerels and it's not uncommon to find numbers of both goldens and gold-spots in the shallows and also around structure in deeper water. Some very big goldens and gold-spots show up at times and fully test angler and gear. The king of the trevally family, giant trevally, can also be found around the Mackerels. Little GT's are often in the shallows in massive numbers, but the big hulking fish are also there for those who want to target them. The bigger GT's don't like angling pressure and shut down pretty quickly if there is constant pressure, but we've got some nice fish to 25 kilos and seen bigger ones.

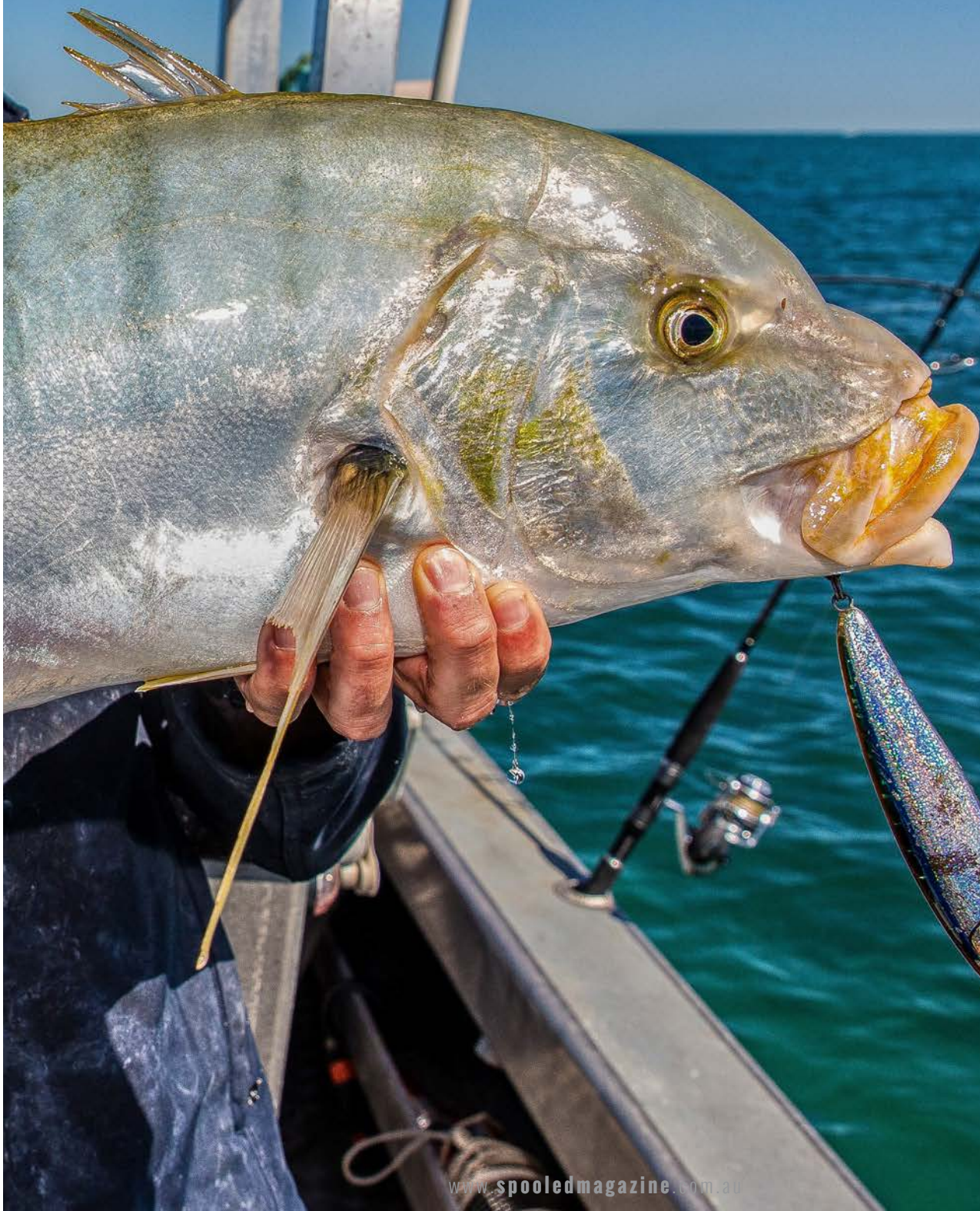
One great memory from the Mackerel Islands was idling along in a metre of water, spotting packs of GT's and sight casting at them. Most of the islands have a few resident GT's around them, but they don't always play the game and sometimes conditions ensure you can't get at them either.



Former Collingwood star,
James Clement, admires
a golden trevally

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Cobia are another common species at the Mackerel Islands, and I've seen some absolute horses hooked there, while wahoo often find their way into quite shallow water. We've caught them in 20m at times and there seem to be years when they are around in quite big numbers.

This cobia swam up to the boat in 10m of water.



Sailfish are another regular capture at the Mackerels and often show up when least expected. A few years ago former Test fast bowler Merv Hughes was casting a Halco Roosta popper into a school of longtail tuna when he hooked a sailfish! Sails also are often hooked on floating baits by anglers chasing other species. Those who make the effort to head out wide can certainly get marlin and sails, but it's not something we've ever worried about.

In closer, while they are not pelagic species as such, lure casting can also produce some other fun catches. Spangled emperor are a willing lure taker in only a couple of metres of water and fight hard for their size as they try to bullock back into structure, while good numbers of prized coral trout are also found in the same areas and are always a welcome catch.



//BOTTOM FISHING

There is no shortage of bottom structure around the Mackerels, and highly-rated demersal species like red emperor, coral trout and rankin cod are taken in this area in good numbers.

Fishing the bottom around the Mackerels can be very tide dependent. and those who plan their attack do best.

You don't need to go deep either, and many of the best hauls are in 20-30m, unless you specifically want to target deep-water species like gold-band snapper, ruby snapper and the like.

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The most successful bottom fisherman at the Mackerel Islands is Darryl Hitchen, who for a few years ran a charter business in the area. A very canny fisho with a lifetime of experience behind him, Darryl rarely fishes in more than 30m and has a very specific plan for catching demersals that works an absolute treat. Hitch chooses a location and aims to be there a couple of hours before the turn of the tide. He'll then anchor up and berley as the tide slows, with the aim of bringing the fish on the bite at the turn of the tide.

His most productive time will be an hour either side of the tide change and he catches some stunning fish this way. Darryl always has a floating bait out the back too, which has accounted for sailfish and many mackerel over the years. Once the tide starts to pick up again, Hitch will up anchor and move off to target pelagic species like mackerel.

Rankin cod, in particular, and coral trout can also be caught by trolling over likely-looking bottom. Anglers who go out at night can find some good action on reds, in particular, in surprisingly shallow water.

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Darryl Hitchen picked up this big rankin cod on the troll. (Pic Andrew Jarvis)

Coral trout are a common catch at the Mackerels. (Pic Andrew Jarvis)

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//POTENTIAL NEW OPTIONS

At the time of writing a plan was underway to create several new artificial reefs in the waters around Thevenard Island. There are a number of oil rigs/platforms that are no longer in use and need to be removed, but around which fishing is currently not permitted. There are large numbers of fish around several of these platforms and the plan is to turn them into artificial reefs rather than removing them altogether. If this plan comes to fruition, it will add another great new aspect to what is already a fabulous offshore fishery at the Mackerel Islands.

