

Finding fish under working schools of birds



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The art of berleying up snapper (and a lot of other fish) with crushed kina (sea urchins) is a well known spearfisher's trick.

Snapper large and small emerge from a myriad of hidden corners when the scent of crushed kina starts wafting through the water. But the bigger snapper are wary and take flight when they sense a diver's presence. These guys do not get big by being stupid. Stealing quietly back to the boat and then fishing stealthily back over the crushed kinas can be the wisest move.

I have used the technique many times. It is a very good way of bagging snapper after a decent dive. By straylining portions of pilchard into 'crushed kina country', it is possible to fool fish after fish. And there is no mess and no fuss – it is an excellent way to end a day on the water.

Recently I was working on doing just this and it was working brilliantly. Snapper of varying sizes began hovering around my pile of crushed *Evichinus* urchins. The larger fish, hanging back, just on the edge of visibility, waited impatiently for me to get out of the way. Crawling back into the boat, I eagerly anticipated the red-hot snapper fishing that would follow. Unfortunately I had failed to watch the time. Having spent too long in the water, I instead had to up-anchor and rush home. Fast receding water and a tidal launching site threatened to leave me mud-bound if I didn't get back in a hurry. Those big kelpy snapper would have to wait for another day.

I returned soon after, with bronze-red scales and pan-fried snapper fillets firmly on my mind. My every intention was to get snapper fishing immediately. Somehow though, I was thwarted. The sight of a thousand birds dipping and weaving and diving across the surface of the ocean seriously diverted my attention. There were work-ups everywhere!

This was too much. Within moments I was scrabbling amongst the mess in the bottom of my boat looking for lures and flies. The number of terns present over the water suggested that small fish were on the menu so I rigged accordingly. On the light spin rod I tied on a miniscule angler jig and on the fly rod a smallish deceiver. Now for the fish.

The first work-up I lined up was a squawking, wing-beating confusion of low-flying, water-diving [fluttering shearwaters](#), a fairly small and very common breed that have remarkable diving abilities. This particular group were excitedly dipping under the water then frantically popping to the surface to run forward on wings and feet and do it all again.



Their comical landing style with their heads plowing the water in front of them was symptomatic of fish feeding down below and very familiar. They do it to keep track, by sight and smell, of the fish they are following.

Down there somewhere a big school of something was pushing an even bigger school of something else to the surface. Some form of fish fry were the probable prey while large koheru probably did the pursuing. I say 'probably' because, when no fish break the surface, and no fish are caught, it is very difficult to tell what the work-up consists of. What I do know is that the few times I have dived on them I have always found hundreds of very large koheru blasting past in midwater.

So switched on to their intended prey items can these mid-water feeding koheru become that they can be very difficult to catch on any lure or bait. Small flies and jigs do work, but with the fish schooling in a horizontal fashion 10 to 20 metres down they can be very hard to target. Your lure or fly has to be at just the right level – and in front of the fish. These are not easy tasks when the school is moving quickly.

A few terns worked alongside the shearwaters in some of the other koheru schools in the area, but it didn't change the fishing prospects any. I had to move out of the area and find a different type of predatory fish if I wanted to put fish in the boat.

Smaller, faster moving work-ups further out to sea seemed like good places to start looking. I suspected kahawai or even kingfish – I suspect that both species are a good deal stupider than koheru. Certainly they seem more responsive to a tinsel-dressed hook. I motored on over to them and left my previous thoughts of snapper angling far behind.

These new work-ups looked similar in nature, yet there were some vitally different elements to them. Most noticeable was that the species of seabirds in attendance had completely changed. Instead of hundreds of fluttering shearwaters there were small groups of the larger Buller's shearwaters. Also there were more terns associating with them. It looked hopeful. As I motored closer I noticed explosions in the water, and then large silver-sided rockets spearing into the air. Skippies!

These were big skipjack fish of six kilos or more, and as I readied my fly rod to cast to them I must admit to suffering a trifle from buck fever. These fish were slashing around wildly and moving fast. My only hope lay in the fact that they were working one general area and occasionally winding up into intense and concentrated whirlpools of activity. These I could possibly whip a fly across if I could place the boat just right.

Now I have fished for Bay of Islands skipjack tuna that are feeding in this manner many times before and have found they do respond favourably to a small fly trolled at a relatively quick speed. Having said that, they do not seem to be as easy to catch as skipjack from more southerly waters. The reason for this may be

hard to fathom but I think it has something to do with their principal prey being somewhat smaller up this way. Baby anchovies are high on the menu, as are tiny shrimps.

Consequently the best way to fish for Bay of Islands skippies can be to just fish blind for them behind one of the local gameboats. For free-roaming fish are never so selective; visibly working fish more often demand that you 'match the hatch'.

But that should be okay for fly-rodgers. Isn't 'matching the hatch' what fly-rodging is all about? Well, it is for fish like kahawai: fish that are easy to motor up beside and relatively simple to cast to. Skippies are a different matter. You really have to get them in 'meatball' mode to have any chance with the fly rod at all. 'Match the hatch' advantages therefore are somewhat tempered by a fly rod's casting distance restrictions.

Nevertheless I managed to get next to a bunch of fish and lay a cast over them. Quickly I stripped the fly in. POW! One tuna had a go and missed. POW! POW! POW! Three more explosions behind the fly and three more misses. My retrieve speed had me dancing, and weaving wildly around the boat.

These were big fish feeding madly and I was shaking like a leaf. Frantically I false cast again, the tuna moved a little bit further from the boat, I tried for extra distance, and lost the cast in mid flight. DAMN! Anxiously I stripped flyline back though the guides in readiness for another shot. Loose coils of flyline lay all over the floor and while I was sorting out the mess the fly sat stationary in the water connected only to slack line. Strike! Another failed connection. I could have cried. But it told me what these tuna needed: a nice medium-slow retrieve with lots of contact through to the fly.

I cast again. The tuna moved further out. Then a tourist boat thundered into range. The tuna went down. All the loopies waved as they blasted past. I didn't wave back. I'd been scuttled by the Bay of Islands tourist industry yet again.

It was impossible to make contact with the tuna again after that. They were still working, but in smaller, faster moving groups that were difficult to get near. Interestingly though the strong delineation between the type of birds that associated with them was maintained: the little shearwaters were with the hard to catch, deeper swimming, koheru while the larger Buller's were with the tuna.

It reminded myself of other bird and fish associations. Seagulls are a good one. Big black-back gulls nearly always mean there is something dead in the water (or the bulldozer driver just scared them off the local dump), while congregations of the smaller red-billed gulls suggest that fish are feeding on pelagic shrimps nearby. These can be trevally, kahawai, koheru or skipjack tuna. With the first three, the seagulls generally sit on the water picking rapidly away at the shrimps that are being pushed upward by the fish. With skippies they move around more taking advantage of the miniature meatballs of crustaceans that fast moving, shrimp-feeding skippies leave behind.

And do note that both these seagull congregations are seagull congregations on the water; seagull congregations on land shouldn't be ignored either. If you notice large numbers of gulls standing by the water on a beach they don't normally frequent, then you'll probably find kahawai or kingies pushing baitfish up onto the sand. It is a regular event in my part of the world when the smelt are running in spring, or the anchovies are moving inshore come winter.

Further out to sea the bird-fish associations become more confused. Principally because dolphins don't enter into the picture and dolphins don't always have large schools in the Bay of Islands that attack saury schools. Marlin and tuna are taken from these work-ups, but not with a frequency that would suggest these work-ups are worth putting a lot of time and effort into.

More fish come from bird activity that pinpoints deeper aggregations of baitfish. This might be a smattering of deep-diving gannets with no dolphins visible, or a bunch of squawking, flapping, shearwaters or petrels: birds that have the ability to dive to 30 metres or more. The larger species of shearwaters or petrels perhaps pinpoint the location of marlin and tuna more than any other bird – in the Bay of Islands at least.

Feeding albacore for example seem to generate wild seabird surface activity that moves around little. The birds dive down deep repeatedly and are generally sitting on a current line or temperature front. Look for it next time you're out. The particular feeding activity is quite distinctive.

There are other bird signs to watch for: a line of little storm petrels walking on the water suggest you have come to a tide line, while an antarctic fulmar suggests that you've got the wrong season and should probably go home!