

Gamefishing - using birds to find fish



Written by Jeff at Big Fish. Published at <http://www.fishing.net.nz/fishing-advice/how-to/gamefishing-using-birds-to-find-fish/> Thanks to NZ Fishing Magazine & Fishing.net for the use of this article.

Want to catch gamefish? Look for the birds – the end!

As the water starts to warm up, bait schools will start to congregate at various locations along the coast, and if you fish these locations long enough and if you're well prepared, you will catch some very worthwhile fish.

Locations vary from season to season according to the currents and weather patterns, but anyone who has fished a few seasons will be aware of the areas to watch and what signs indicate that a bite is about to start. Usually these places are not very deep. A good rule of thumb on the Northland coast is from about 90m to about 140m of water. Some prime locations to watch on that depth line from north to south are as follows:

- Hoopers Point and Tom Bowling Bay
- The De Surville Cliffs to a line due north of North Cape
- Parengarenga Harbour
- Mount Camel
- Karikari Peninsula, and continuing along that line at any point all the way to the Cavalli Islands
- Inside Takou Bay

- The Bay of Islands
- The area off Whangamumu Harbour.

While this seems like a virtually continuous line – and for all intents and purposes it is – there are a few well-known landmarks along that line that seem to regularly produce fish, including the following:

- Off Matai Bay, with Puwheke Hill right over the middle of the bay.
- With the eastern end of Stephenson's Island touching the entrance of Whangaroa Harbour
- Out from the area that intersects due east of the Whangaruru Peninsula and due north of Home Point.

There are numerous other landmarks I'm sure any friendly skipper will be pleased to pass on for the price of a few beers.

What to look for...

These are the things a good skipper hopes to see develop over a period of days, or even a couple of weeks, as he or she fishes the coast.

- The current starts to run in a strong and consistent direction ('no run, no fun!')
- Good water colour pushes in with the current. This is reasonably important and most skippers get particularly excited if there is a relatively rapid change in water colour and temperature while heading out.
- Bait schools on the sounder. Over the first few days you may notice quite well dispersed but consistent bait schools in a likely area. These may form large red columns and begin to be visible on the surface.
- The most obvious sign that things are starting to 'hot up' is the presence of birds.

Which birds?

In my opinion, only two species of birds are of any real importance to game fisherman in the north. They are [Australian gannets](#) and [sooty shearwaters](#). Of the two the gannets are really in a class of their own when it comes to indicating the presence of baitfish. Sooty shearwaters are always a good sign, but tend to be more associated with offshore structures such as the Cavalli Seamount and the 505 Seamount off Karikari. Skippers working these wide structures will often be encouraged to make a few extra passes or even put in a whole day of fishing over a structure that has sooties present.



The sooties tend to feed in a more spread out, non-specific manner, while a work-up of gannets on the other hand, is clearly very specifically associated with a bait school. Even if the gannets are just resting on the water, they tend to be present in the more isolated areas, and still may indicate baitfish presence nearby.

However, one frustration when finding large numbers of gannets in a good looking area is that they're often accompanied by common dolphins. While it would be untrue to say that the presence of common dolphins precludes the presence of gamefish – especially the various tuna species – I personally get much more excited to find good numbers of gannets without the dolphins.

Be ready

Fishing gannet work-ups is enormous fun, not just because it is productive, but also because it can be quite technically challenging. Good preparation is essential. This is the checklist I like to go over before heading to the fishing grounds and, even more importantly, if we are likely to be fishing a hot bite with plenty of work-ups:

- Minimum of two working tuna tubes
- A barnacle-free, working bait tank
- Two tag poles and gaffs, and one good quality scoop net
- Two bait rods (initially set up with sabiki flies and then changed over to skippy lures)
- Half-a-dozen fresh, rigged pitch baits
- 10 to 20 good-sized live mackerel
- A full complement of game rods, with the reels tested and the line and doubles checked for any damage
- At least one stand-up outfit with bait attached
- A good margin of surplus fuel without overloading the vessel for a day's fishing.

Crew drilling is as important as tackle preparation. Things can happen very rapidly in a work-up, and it is vitally important that all team members – including guests – have a clear understanding of what is required of them and what the various instructions they are likely to be given actually mean. Crew mistakes are the most common cause of missed opportunities and lost fish.

Good practice on all professional boats is to have the leading deckhand run all the guests individually through the cockpit drills and familiarise them with the chair and the operation of the reels. (Remember: if tournament fishing or planning to claim any sort of prize or record from a captured fish, all team members must observe the IGFA rules. The only person who can handle any part of the gear – except the leader – after a fish strikes is the angler.)

Professional deckhands take several seasons to produce and are worth their weight in gold. These guys are invariably the difference between placing well in the tournament during a hot bite and not featuring at all.

On the grounds



So you get to the grounds and it looks promising. While there are no work-ups actually happening, there has been activity in the area over the past few days and there are plenty of gannets sitting on the water waiting for the action to start.

The first thing I generally do is make a few passes through and around the ground, with lures out and pitch baits ready, to see if anything shows up and to mark any obvious bait sign on the sounder. If no action happens during this time I put out two skipjack tuna lines (if we hadn't already caught some) and get ready to live bait.

Then, continuing to keep a careful eye on the gannets, we deploy two quality live baits in the water and wait. If it looks as if a work-up is going to begin at all, we head in that direction with the baits still in the water. If the work-up gets underway and we are too far away at live-bait trolling speed, I pull in the baits and run to the action, pitching the baits back in as we get there. Invariably you will get a bite at this time.

Never be scared to put more baits in the water aiming for multiple hook-ups. Striped marlin, in particular, will often be present in numbers, and this could be your only opportunity for the day, so make the most of it.

The process of changing to lures while catching live bait, trolling live bait, and picking up and running to work-ups, could be repeated many times on a good day. It is hard work for the crew, but this is one of the few scenarios most of us encounter where there is a good chance of catching multiple fish in a single day's fishing.

Out wide

At this point it is worth mentioning another scenario you may come across, often when fishing a bit further out and sometimes in excess of 500m depth: patches of gannets, associated with sooty shearwaters and occasionally whales and/or pseudo orca. What you may see is very short sporadic work-ups with large yellowfin tuna crashing through the bait ball. It is likely you will catch the yellowfin on your lures as you travel to the work-ups, but I have had a couple of amazing sessions pitching live mackerel into these



workouts and catching tuna on the baits. On one particular occasion we hooked a yellowfin, only to have a whale swim through the line and take off with it. I've never heard a Shimano Tiagra make a noise anything like it. Eventually the line came free and we still caught the yellowfin.

It also pays to remember that blue marlin love to eat yellowfin tuna, and you are highly likely to be surprised by one (as we have been), so be ready for anything.

Mix it up

There are numerous techniques that will produce results in an area holding fish, as indicated by the presence of the birds. Live baiting is my personal favourite, alongside actually pitching baits into the work-up. Conventional lure fishing or 'tease and switch' fishing are just as productive for some people. A technique that hasn't found much favour in Northland, but has been used extensively in the Bay of Plenty, is cubing. This involves drifting in a likely-looking area and cutting up bait into small cubes. The cubes are slowly fed into the ocean, much like a berley trail. Light traces and small hooks are placed in the occasional cube and the bait is drifted back in the trail. This technique is particularly effective on yellowfin tuna. I'm sure live mackerel would be equally effective on the yellowfin, and you'd probably hook any marlin in the area, too.

On some days finding birds is the hardest part. Good quality binoculars are helpful, particularly the new image-stabilizing models, but many people find them difficult to use on a boat. I have been told you can use your radar to spot work-ups at a distance, but personally haven't had much success with this (possibly due to a lack of real effort and/or not having a radar of suitably high quality).

Probably the best technique for finding birds is to listen to the VHF radio, as fishermen cannot help but boast when they are onto a good thing.

Summary

- Be fully prepared in the cockpit and ensure all your equipment is working correctly.
- Get the best quality deckhands possible running your cockpit.
- Have a well-drilled team, where all members fully understand their roles.
- Be prepared to put the time into an area that looks good. If the birds are there, the fish will be there, too. Never leave fish to find fish.
- Watch the birds carefully for signs a work-up is about to start. Be prepared to pick up your gear and run to a work-up, as getting your baits into the action is the best chance you'll have of catching a game fish.

As always, I would be more than pleased to answer any questions by email (jeff@bigfish.co.nz or website: www.bigfish.co.nz), and am often available for crewing purposes. Good luck and sharpen your hooks.

More info on New Zealand seabirds and what they contribute to our fishing at the Southern Seabirds website

Seabirds are an important part of our fishing environment. As anglers, it's our job to look after them while out fishing. Check out these resources by Southern Seabird Solutions and enjoy the birds.

FISH SEABIRD SMART

TIPS FROM SALTWATER ANGLERS

Seabirds and fishing go together – but sometimes seabirds get tangled in fishing lines and nets or caught on hooks. If a breeding adult is injured or killed, its chick will die of starvation. Small changes in the way we all fish can make a big difference to seabird survival.

- FISH TIDY**
 - Seabirds are hunting for food – keep decks clean and put bait scraps and fish waste in covered bins until hooks are out of the water.
- FISH FAST**
 - Seabirds mostly fish within six metres of the surface – sink bait well below six metres fast, particularly when there are lots of seabirds around, like work-ups.
 - Seabirds move fast – set and reel in your gear quickly and always watch for birds.
- BURLEY WELL BELOW THE BIRDS**
 - Sink burley containers deep – further from the birds, closer to the fish!
- DETER OR DISTRACT BIRDS FROM YOUR GEAR**
 - Create a 'safe zone' to get gear up and down away from birds. Some anglers tie streamers to an outrigger or spare rod to distract birds, others throw a bucket of water towards birds.

FOR MORE IDEAS: WWW.SOUTHERNSEABIRDS.ORG

SEABIRD SAFE RELEASE

REDUCES INJURY TO THE BIRD AND THE FISHER

ESSENTIAL TOOLS



HELPFUL HINTS

- Keep essential tools for seabird release with your fishing gear.
- Approach birds from behind where possible.
- Protect your eyes when handling birds.

- 1** Go to the bird. Use a landing net to lift the bird on board.
- 2** Hold small birds between fingers behind the neck.
- 3** Wrap medium sized bird in a towel and cover eyes if possible.
- 4** Hold feet firmly. Hold large bird's beak shut. Don't cover nostrils or twist the beak.
- 5** Cut fishing line. Use pliers to flatten barb or cut hook with small bolt cutters.
- 6** Pull the hook back out of the beak.
- 7** If hook is swallowed, cut line as close to entry as possible. Fishing line left on bird can tangle it on plants, rocks or other birds.
- 8** If bird is exhausted or waterlogged place in loosely covered box to recover.
- 9** Release bird at water level.

WILDLIFE EMERGENCIES: 0800DOCHOT OR 0800362468