

Fishing the Solitary (Coffs) Coast of Northern NSW

The focus of game fishing on the northern NSW coast is centred around the prime marlin grounds stretching from Southwest Rocks to Yamba. This is often referred to as the Solitary Coast after the iconic inshore island group, which also lend their name to the large nearby Solitary Islands Marine Park. It is also called the Coffs Coast, after the perfectly located coastal town with the only all-weather harbour between Port Stephens and Brisbane.

At 30° south latitude, Coffs Harbour is situated at the junction of the Coral and Tasman Seas where the edge of the continental shelf is just 13 nautical miles or 30 minutes cruising from the marina. This proximity to the deep shelf structure and the East Australian Current that flows along it gives big game anglers fishing this coast unparalleled time for fishing with minimal wasted transit times to the deep water and the large pelagics that inhabit it.

The southernmost of the Solitary Islands is situated only 20 minutes by boat from the Coffs marina, and through the summer months in particular, the islands and their reefs create perfect conditions for yellowfin tuna, wahoo, kingfish, mackerel, sailfish and juvenile black marlin angling.

This coast is one of the few areas where all three types of marlin can be caught - sometimes all at once for anglers interested in the primo billfish trifecta. With an extended summer fishery for large blue marlin over 250kg, and juvenile black marlin to 100kg, plus an all year local population of striped marlin, simply chasing marlin alone can be a year-round pursuit, quite often with other pelagics joining the mix without even being targeted. Even while fishing specifically for blue marlin out in the deeper water beyond the shelf, catches of large mahimahi, wahoo, yellowfin tuna, and short-billed spearfish will often punctuate a good day out.

Coffs Harbour itself boasts the only open ocean direct access trailer boat ramp on the north coast of NSW, and the harbour has its own marina for larger visiting boats or permanent resident game boats and yachts.

The marina has two fulltime game and sportfishing fishing charter operations, bottom fishing charter boats, plus whale-watching and scuba diving boats, as well as being the base for the northern command Water Police boat, Fisheries and Marine Parks patrol boats, and a local Marine Rescue watch-keeping service and rescue boat.

Access to the Solitary Coast is easy, with vehicle driving times from Sydney and Brisbane being 6.5 and 4.5 hours respectively, while the all-weather airport has numerous daily services from Sydney, and the Countrylink XPT train service passes through Coffs daily from both Sydney and Brisbane.

There are two game fishing clubs active in Coffs Harbour, and the larger Solitary Islands Game Fishing Club operates an IGFA certified weighstation. There are also two annual game fishing tournaments based in Coffs Harbour – the greater

Solitary Coast's Heavy Tackle Challenge, and the Coffs Harbour Hot Current Tournament.

For bottom fishers, there is also a mackerel shootout during summer, and a snapper tag and release tournament at Easter.

The climate on the Solitary Coast was officially described by the CSIRO as being Australia's "most liveable", and with mild temperate conditions year-round, a long warm summer, and the East Australian Current bringing offshore water temperatures that range from 19-28C, game fishing conditions are generally excellent.

Timing, location and angling tips ...

While never totally predictable, the blue marlin for which the Solitary Coast is renowned first appear in late September, and the action heats up progressively until mid-December, when a strong bite can be counted on continuing until about mid-April, tapering off until the end of May when the blues disappear. The blues are always fond of the bottom edge of the shelf structure, between 100 and 250 fathoms, and move between schools of striped tuna, flying fish, and smaller yellowfin tuna pushing along the edge of the shelf.

Each new pulse of warmer water in the EAC will bring a new flush of blue marlin into the area in summer, and if conditions are right, the blues will stay for days if food is plentiful. The blue marlin bite most aggressively on skirted lures trolled between and around bait schools anywhere from 60 to 2000 fathoms, and are very sensitive to water quality, preferring clear, blue water over 24C with flying fish and tuna schooling through, while avoiding poorer quality green or cloudy water. While lure fishing is the most productive technique for Solitary Coast blues, they will happily attack striped tuna, small YFT, and bonito rigged as skip baits. The blues are generally loners unless there's a large female in the area during spawning season, when it's not uncommon to raise a handful of male blue marlin within a mile or two of some passing female. Occasionally, large females will be raised, and if a grander blue is going to be caught anywhere in Australia, the odds favour it happening along this coastline.

The deep blue water beyond the continental shelf will often produce shortbill spearfish when fishing for blue marlin. Despite their relatively small size, the shortbills are extremely aggressive, attacking large lures and almost always hooking up on their first pass through the spread.

Juvenile Black Marlin generally first move into this coast in early December, and continue to bite well through to mid-May. The blacks first appear between 35 fathoms and the top of the continental shelf wherever bait schools are consistently encountered. As December progresses, the black marlin move closer inshore to congregate around the closer reefs and islands, generally between 10 and 25 fathoms, again wherever the schools of slimy mackerel are found. The young black marlin will rise to smaller skirted lures, but can also be reliably

targeted using drifting live slimy mackerel or yakka baits, or skip baits of slimys or bonito.

Accompanying the black marlin, the wahoo and smaller mahimahi can usually be found at the same times and in the same areas, and will attack the same baits. However, when wahoo are in the area, be prepared to lose a high proportion of baits and lures to their razor sharp teeth. When trolling skirted lures for black marlin, they can sometimes be a bit picky, and deckies should always be prepared to play around with a lure that the fish are showing interest in but not striking. Better still, having a pitch bait rigged and ready to go is always sound policy, as the blacks will often slam a pitch bait thrown in their face or drifted past them when they've been raised, even if they're not inclined to strike the lures that first got their attention.

The black marlin frequent areas over the reefs around South Solitary Island, and along the length of the top side of the continental shelf wherever bait schools are present. Water quality is not as important to them as the presence of bait schools, so green water isn't that big a deterrent as long as they can feed.

The hottest spot by far for the young blacks when they're in town is without doubt along the stretch of rocky shore only a few hundred metres seawards from the tip of Smokey Cape to abeam the old gaol ruins, where large numbers of blacks can be hooked up live-baiting just a short run out from the river mouth at the town of Southwest Rocks. When there's a red hot bite here, upwards of twenty boats can be seen live-baiting just off Southwest Rocks, often with juvenile black marlin finning around on the surface in full view.

Striped marlin are less predictable than their cousins, but will congregate in small hunting packs, generally on the top of the shelf drop-off between 35 and 85 fathoms, and almost always in the vicinity of bait aggregations. When the stripes are really present in good numbers, live-baiting on the edge of the big schools of slimy mackerel can be extremely productive. The stripes will also hit medium sized skirted lures if you run over them, but they can be extremely frustrating with their habit of spending minutes in the spread, looking all the lures over and maybe taking a tentative swipe at one or two before hooking up on one, or almost as often, simply disappearing without striking anything. Again, having a pitch bait ready to drift past striped marlin that are window shopping in the spread will often get you the strike you might otherwise have missed if they don't see a lure they fancy.

When they do hook up, doubles are not unheard of, or at least anglers may see a companion following along behind a hooked fish, or taking a swipe at a lure being retrieved after another fish has hooked up.

As summer progresses, the striped marlin that have been spending time off the Solitary Coast tend to move south with the cooler water. The stripes seem to prefer water under 24C, but in the really good years, striped marlin have been caught here year round in all conditions and water temperatures. Fortunately, if

they're on the chew, the striped marlin, like the black marlin, are much less fussy about water quality than the blue marlin.

South Solitary Island has a resident population of smaller YFT that move around within a mile or two of the island. The trick on any given day is to find where they are, which can be fairly time-consuming, but once located, double hookups of 3-10kg tuna are not uncommon. The larger YFT are generally all out beyond the shelf, and are usually moving fast, but when intercepted, can provide great action with tuna in the 30-80kg range being caught in a good year.

The reefs around the Solitaries have also regularly produced sailfish in mid to late summer. Coffs Harbour is generally considered to be the southernmost edge of the sailfish range, and while they can be caught off Coffs when the water is warmest, they appear in greater numbers off Ballina and Yamba, often favouring larger Rapalas and Laser Pros trolled past the edge of the white water plumes around semi-submerged reefs.

As summer progresses into autumn, longtail or northern bluefin tuna move into the area and work on the inner reefs and along the shoreline aggressively chasing bait. These tuna can be targeted within a few minutes of leaving the marina, and provide excellent sport once they're located, hitting skirted lures trolled around inshore bait schools, and drifting live baits around most of the inshore reefs.

Southern bluefin rarely make it to the Solitary Coast, although they have been caught off Smokey Cape at the very southern end of this coastline when ocean conditions and currents encourage them to move this far north, albeit only for a limited time.

As usual, anything floating will have a resident population of undersized mahimahi, which often sit above the larger adult fish and will rarely let a bait drop far enough down to get to the big fish around the FAD or the local fish trap floats. The big mahimahi are more easily found out in the blue water beyond the drop-off, and will always attack large or small skirted lures with gusto. The same applies to the wahoo that visit over the summer months, except that you'll lose as many good lures to their teeth as you will actually boat fish, so wahoo can be an expensive find at times.

Sadly, Coffs Harbour has a small fleet of longliners that sometimes swells when boats from the NSW south coast or Queensland bases move here for days or weeks at a time as conditions prove favourable. Regrettably, the longlining off this coast appears to be having a marked effect on the presence of both marlin and yellowfin tuna, with striped marlin and big YFT disappearing from game boat lure patterns at what is now becoming an alarming rate.

In summary, game fishing the Solitary Coast can be very much a function of the behaviour of the East Australian Current and the prevailing wind patterns. If the EAC is bringing clear blue water down the edge of the shelf and is flowing at less than about 2.5 knots, it will bring a constant stream of warm water pulses to the

coast, and with each one, blue marlin and other pelagics that will bite aggressively throughout the summer months. If the EAC is flowing hard, or is being diverted by the large oceanic eddies that often establish themselves offshore, the blue marlin fishing in particular can slow down dramatically.

Similarly, when the weather patterns set up persistent northerly winds for more than 24 hours at a time, the ensuing Ekman Transport Effect will usually result in major upwellings of sub-surface dirty water along the shelf as coriolis drives all the good surface water off out to sea, and the marlin with it.

So it pays to keep a close eye on weather, currents, moon phase, and the presence of bait schools along the coast in order to gauge exactly when to expect the best bite – as most serious game fishermen always do. Fortunately though, most of the time, there's enough going on that simply driving out there on a day that dawns clear and calm and setting up a lure pattern when the water looks "fishy" will result in some sort of action, and to hell with all the science.