

## NINGALOO REEF, NW AUSTRALIA – 2017

Physical layout of the Northwest Cape, a large peninsula in the northwest area of Australia – there are two distinctly different marine environments:

- the ocean side with the Ningaloo Reef. Spectacular marine environment beginning with shallow flats near the shoreline. As you move out toward the reef, water gets 7 to 10 feet deep with majestic coral heads, teeming with tropical fish.
- The gulf side.
- Town of Exmouth – small (pop 2500 which expands during the high tourist seasons when the Whale Sharks and Humpback Whales migrate through the area) community which was originally built by the US Navy to monitor submarine movement in World War II. Still has a strong military presence.

Exmouth fishing options.....the many ways to approach fishing here:

- pure sight casting.....looking for fish you could cast to – obviously, the reason I was there.
- Chumming fish to the boat, then casting. Works well for those interested in more numbers of fish
- Can spin or fly fish
- Great offshore fishery for billfish – sails and blue, black, and striped marlin. This is what attracts the most fishing attention. Seems as if almost everyone in Exmouth has a boat rigged for offshore fishing.

Exmouth marine attractions other than fishing:

- Scuba diving and snorkeling
- Sea Turtles – nesting, laying, and hatching
- Whale Sharks
- Humpback Whales and their pups

Feb 15 – flew to Exmouth from Perth.....our third trip and very comfortable with the logistics now. Very relaxed and rested as we fly north.

Feb 16 – fished reef side.....light clouds and light winds. Tide incoming – fished flats near shore and twice moved near reef to look for GT's. A “warm up” day getting familiar with the rhythm and timing of the fishery and the casts needed. Had a bunch of “almosts.”

- had a permit tail on my fly, but didn't eat. Had two other good permit shots.
- A large bone (12+ pounds) followed my fly to the boat.
- A big Golden Trevally charged my fly and had a hook up.....by a small blue trevally that beat the golden to the fly.
- And the highlights.....had several good GT shots including a follow by one that was 70+. Saw at least 20 GT's, most in two's and three's that went 40-60#. Made some bad casts that came up short and got follows but were spooked when they got close to the boat. Hooked a 50# fish and had him for 5 minutes before two large sharks showed and began chasing him....he panicked and cut me off on coral. Exciting stuff, but no GT photo.
- Saw over 15 sea turtles.....most days would see 20-30 sea turtles in the course of a fishing day....seemed like the larger sea turtles were on the reef side.

Feb 17 – reef side, winds light, but cloud cover and bad glare on water. Flats had bad glare from bright clouds and three dolphins showed and worked there way down the entire flat. Saw 2 permit but no shots – conditions didn't allow us to see fish soon enough so we moved out near the reef to look for trevally among the coral heads. Found a school of goldens.....got a 16# ---so tough around the coral heads....had to hold his head up over the coral. Amazing strength and bull dog approach. After 20-25 minutes, to net. School still around – two of these over the coral enough so decided to focus on GT's. Actually easy to get Goldens to eat when they are in a school, but so tough to land around the

coral. Rest of day, seeking GT's. Saw 12 fish, got 5 shots, had 3 fish charge the fly including one about 60# open his mouth and appeared to eat, but pulled off at last second. Feb 18 – Took a Giant Herring on flats (think large ladyfish....great jumper) Amazing number of GT sightings.....on the flats, had 8. Had 3 good shots and two fish charged the fly – one ate but no hookup. Saw a few permit, but no good shots. Have had two rods stripped out and was using both.....quick switches. Afternoon, moved out near reef Saw more than a dozen GT's. Had 5 good shots, 3 fish charged fly, one ate, but no hook up (trout strike). One charge – we saw the fish about 100 feet away over coral heads....then he disappeared (dropped down).....cast to where we thought he was headed and about 30 feet from the boat, this 60# fish comes charging up from between coral heads, but pulls off fly at last second as he sees the boat.

Feb 19- weather looked iffy on reef side so decided to try for barramundi on gulf side; however when we got to boat launch site on beach, winds had changed.....Brett afraid of it evolving into heavy north wind – make it tough to get the boat out. Went back to Exmouth - reef side looking better so gave it a try. Tried a few flats....saw one permit, but flats were dead. Rest of day searching out GT's. Saw 9, got 5 shots, 3 responded to fly, two charged, and hooked up with a 55 pounder. It raced toward the mainland, but made a u-turn trailing lots of line. Snagged on coral head. Brett dived in a cleared the line....fish still on, but hung in another coral head.....broke off. Damn! Getting closer!

First four days summary: Focus was on sight fishing for GT's. Saw over 50 fish, mostly singles, but a few pairs and two three-somes. Maybe three fish under 40# and four fish over 60 (one maybe at 80). Got 23 shots. Speed of retrieve critical.....sissors strip helped with speed. 13 fish responded to fly, 12 charged.....a large GT rushing at your fly is one of the great thrills. Some were on flats less than 3 feet deep, but most were on deeper flats 8-10 feet deep. Four fish ate and two were hooked up and eventually broke off on coral. Learned it was more effective to focus on the strip and not watch fish.....the charge is a major distraction.....very dramatic.

Feb 20 – Brett heard that a large number of Queenfish (a fish I wanted to check off) were around a small set of islands about 9 mi offshore (Murions). The Queens were there – great fish/leapers....after about 6 or 7, I got bored and we decided to go looking for GT's on the back side of the islands where the reefs were. Found a stretch of beach with an incredible numbers of GT's.....fish were not as large as those by the Ningaloo Reef – between 20 and 50#. Saw over 25...a few schools of 4 or 5 fish, some triples and some doubles – the largest were singles. Got 8 clean shots.....2 eats were charging so hard directly at me that I couldn't get the hook set. Got the third.....31#. Not the big one I wanted, but good enough to scratch an itch!

Feb 21 – went deep in gulf after permit....blue skies, no clouds. Perfect....except up til lunch, the tide was low, water clear, and like glass....fish spooked at 100 feet....felt like Belize! Except for the GT's we saw on the flats, all my GT casting was from a rolling boat impacted by wave action over the reef. Today, felt good to be casting from a solid platform that didn't have a lot of movement. Saw lots of fish.....for the day, over 30. One school of 5, the rest threesomes, twosomes, and mostly singles. In the afternoon, had four good shots, two bad casts, and two eats....one hookup and tough fish about 8# kept me intensely involved for 20 minutes before the net.

Feb 22 – Same weather....great. Into gulf for permit and maybe try one spot that held both permit and GT's. Saw far less fish than the previous day (about 9-10), had 5 good shots, and got two fish, one about the same as yesterday and one about 2# larger. The smaller one had some of the orange and gold coloring that we don't see are our permit....not only was he beautiful, but took me over 25 minutes.....just a spectacular pound for pound fight! Sharks....when they showed, Brett has his "rock pile" and scares them off. It was a great day, but could have been ultra-spectacular! We had a clean shot at a 60+# GT 40 feet from the boat and coming straight at us. Cast, he charged, he ate....but coming right at us and

couldn't get a set. This has happened a few times. We decided when fish is coming direct at us, we have to cast to the side and try to get him to turn before he eats so we can get the hook set.

Feb 23 – weather clear again, winds light. Gulf side again for permit. First permit we saw, one cast, and fish on. As soon as Brett got a good look at its size, he told me I was in for at least a 40 minute struggle. First run.....200 yards into my backing in a flash. About 15 minutes in, a 7 foot Lemon Shark shows, attracted by the struggle. Brett fires 3 rocks and the Lemon slowly turns around and wanders off. Another 10 minutes and it's a 12 foot Tiger Shark looking for a meal.....throw the rocks, fish stops and backs away for just a short minute, then back on the scent of my fish. Shark and permit only about 50 feet away....Brett yells for me to loosen the drag on my reel so the fish can run freely, fires up the big motor and races straight for the shark. It turns and slowly moves off to the edge of the flat. Then, back again.....this time, Brett guns the motor and puts the boat between the two fish and, in neutral, guns the motor over and over. Finally, the Tiger slowly swims off to look for something easier. After 45 minutes, the permit is in the net.....no scale, but a solid 16-17 pounds. Saw another 8 or 9 fish, got 3 more good shots, had an eat, but no more fish. A dramatic conclusion to a terrific week of sight fishing the North West Cape in Australia.

Note: my original guide arrangement was to fish 6 or 7 days out of the 8 full days that were held for me, allowing for days off for bad weather or snorkeling with Marte. However, my obsession with the large GT's the first five days eliminated my days off because I did want to spend at least three days focusing on permit. Excellent salt water guide!