

Parengarenga

Nik Mathiesen visits the remote north of New Zealand's North Island.

The wild and remote Parengarenga Harbour is the northernmost harbour in New Zealand. It is located at the northern end of the Aupouri Peninsula at the tip of the North Island. The harbour extends inland for over 10 kilometres, almost severing the northern tip of the island from the rest of the peninsula. The first thing to meet the eye is the stunning Kokota Sandspit at the southern end of the harbour, which is instantly recognisable by its shimmering white dunes. The saturation of silica sand with very few impuri-

ties makes the spit's sands as white as sand can get. Incorporating 95 per cent quartz, the silica sand has been mined and used in glass production in years past. The spit is around 20 square kilometres, forming a huge headland sheltering the inner harbour from the open ocean.

The local Maori tribe, the Ngati Kuri, have been harvesting food from the harbour ever since their arrival and the area hosts many tribal sacred places and burial sites. The harbour entrance itself has always been a revered and somewhat daunting place

for the Maoris in their canoes, as there is a very strong tidal flow, with a nasty bar crossing when there is an easterly swell running.

The surrounding areas are considered to be the most remote in the North Island, where very little fishing and hunting activity takes place. Wild pigs are occasionally seen on the beaches and wild horses are an almost daily sight. Most New Zealanders have never been to this region, and only serious hunters and fishermen will make the long traverse north to explore this wilderness. Here there are no boat ramps, no camp sites and it's only through local knowledge and contacts that the area can be accessed. Parengarenga Harbour was basically forgotten by Kiwis until 1985, when the harbour was identified as the place where the bombs used to blow up the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* were shipped in by a yacht from New Caledonia.



Hook up, and hang on!

FISH MOVEMENTS

With a two-metre tidal flow, a lot of water moves in and out through the narrow main channel connecting the harbour to the open depths of the Pacific Ocean. This main highway is used by a variety of species to enter these lucrative hunting grounds. On an incoming tide, snapper and kahawai school in hordes to enter the flats in the upper harbour. Their movements are similar to those of bonefish, chasing crabs, shrimps and baitfish on the flats.

Kingfish and sharks instinctively recognise this migration and lurk around edges and drop-offs, ready for an ambush. It is common to spot massive bronze whaler sharks lurking around waiting for a school of fish to pass through. As they blend in very well with the bottom, great caution must be taken while wading the harbour. 'Bronzies' usually spook off, but on

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DAVID WALL

Working the channel edges with a Clouser will produce good snapper.



Parengarenga... continued



Mullet-feeding kingfish will smash a Siliclone.

one occasion, Mathew McHugh had the pleasure of a decent-size shark swimming between his legs. Good to hear grown men scream like girls (then again he does live in England)!

Working the edges of channels with a 10-weight and a Clouser will produce some nice snapper wearing bright red colours to match the stunning silica sand underneath. Letting the fly sink in the current sometimes feels like traditional across-and-down salmon fishing, and people who master this technique can pick up a lot of nice fish in a day.

The incoming tide brings crystal clear water and provides some incredible sight fishing. By pumping a good berley trail into the main channel, some massive silver trevally will come right up to the boat. Silvers are suckers for berley and cubes of pilchards and once in the berley trail, they can

is one of the biggest challenges in the harbour, and any silver landed is a job well done.

As the tide slowly fills up the harbour and most fish have had a good feed, things tend to slow down a bit. Many fish will just cruise around in singles, and usually end up congregating in the main channels again, waiting for their instinct to tell them that it's time to leave the harbour. Right at high tide it can sometimes feel like the harbour is deserted of any marine life, with only the thousands of local eagle rays skating through the water showing that there is life around at all. Rays can be seen scattering off when spooked by the boat or when an angler wades too close to them.

As the tide starts to move out again, a new scenario begins. All fish need at some stage to leave the flats and enter the dangerous channels where nothing is safe. Big predatory fish like kingfish and bronze whalers understand this dilemma, and wait like kids in front of a candy store for what is about to happen. Kahawai and snapper leave first, but most of them are fairly safe due to their good size and speed. The piper, sprats and mullets fear this moment for a good reason. Big kingfish are sitting ready in position and as the last drop of water leaves the flat, there is nowhere for a baitfish to go but to enter the dark and scary channel. Explosions of bait can be seen and sometimes heard from a distance as little packs of kingfish smash schools of piper. The piper jump for their lives, big bow waves with yellow tails out of the water can be seen speeding up, and the chase

be controlled by the amount of food fed into the water. The simple rule is that the more you feed them, the closer they get. Presenting a pink Double Bunny fly in the strike zone results in instant hook-ups.

Silvers are dirty fighters, with nasty instinctive behaviours and poor table manners. They eat and run, they head straight for the nearest obstacle to bust you off, and lots of pressure is needed to stop them. The disadvantage of putting pressure on them is that hooks readily fall out of their soft mouths. Fighting big silver trevally in strong current from an anchored boat



Fishing the sandy flats near the main channel.

is on! This is a prime fly fishing time, and getting your fly into this mayhem can be a mind-blowing experience.

Yet another effective way to target big harbour-cruising kingfish is to ambush them as they chase their favourite prey, mullet. Big mullet live around mangrove lines, which offer shelter and safety for them. When a pack of wolves (kingfish) moves in, the mullet alert each other by making high jumps and big splashes. They will go to extremes to engulf a big juicy mullet, and by hunting in packs, kingfish increase their chances of at

duce strikes of Biblical proportions. Lots of broken leaders and tangles in the mangroves can be expected, but it's all in the day's work of a saltwater fly fisher.

When we successfully manage to pull a king out of the mangroves, the big chase is on. An average harbour kingfish is 15 kg, and will not answer to any prayers. Over the flats it goes with afterburners flaring, and into a channel. This is where a good skipper comes in handy, but still the odds are on the kingfish's side. If we make it to the channel with the king, we are in



Fished in a berley trail, the Bleeding Bunny is a good fly for silver trevally.

Big silvers are always hard to land.



FIGHTING BIG SILVER TREVALLY IN STRONG CURRENT FROM AN ANCHORED BOAT IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN THE HARBOUR...

least some of them nailing a mullet through sheer numbers and a pack attack mentality.

On a flat calm day, the wolves can be seen hundreds of metres away, as bow waves along the mangroves reveal their presence. Soon a few mullet will start their jumping scheme, but the wolves move in and attack in water shallow enough that half of their bodies could need sunscreen on a clear day! Well-presented big white and green Siliclones can pro-

business, as they can be fought hard here and are usually a bit tired by the time they've made their run.

EARLY MORNINGS & LATE NIGHTS

The tide is of great importance when fishing the harbour, but as in a lot of other fishing situations, there are particular bite times during the day. Early mornings are known in the world of fishing to be a prime time, and Parengarenga Harbour is no exception. The

upper channels can resemble the best trout pools in the world, with thousands of baby kahawai sipping bait in the surface like browns sipping spinners from a current line. Under them, snapper pick up the leftovers and John Dory cruise around hoping for a sprat or kahawai foolish enough to get too close.

With no sign of kingfish around, this sounds like a peaceful moment in Nature. Think again! As soon as a little kahawai is hooked up, the panic

Mornings are the best time for trevally.



Parengarenga... continued



This Fantarella Half 'N Half fished on the bottom is the best thing for snapper.

signals reach the hiding kings, and it takes them very little time to home in for an easy meal. Several times I have seen these small kahawai beach themselves in their attempt to get away from the yellow-tailed monsters chasing them. With the fly in position, a little twitch with the fly rod and the show starts all over again. The ideal scheme is to have the angler waiting with his baitfish imitation ready to present, at which point the king can be switched onto the fly, and away we go over the flats and channels one more time!

Mornings are without doubt the best for trevally. They seem to like the shallower water best early in the day, and as the sun goes higher they move into the dark safe channels.

The last hour before sunset signals the dinner gong for the snapper. After a day cruising the harbour channels and edges it's time to go shallow for a good feed. Setting up a nice berley trail a few hours in advance is the key to a good evening's snapper fishing. We're always careful not to over-feed them though, as this shortens the bite time. Finding little bits of foul in the

harbour is all it takes to locate snapper, and then intermediate lines are used to present a 'Fantarella Half 'N Half' tied on a 4/0 SL12. The fly itself just has to be the snapper pattern of the century, so deadly it has proven to be.

Patience is the trick in this game as the fly must be allowed to slowly sink to the bottom. Sometimes a snapper will look at the fly as it sinks, and only when it has hit the bottom and been sitting there a while, will they move in and suck the fly. Violent headshakes follow soon and tell the angler that it is indeed a snapper on the other end. Snapper from 1-5 kg are common in the harbour, and are some of the prettiest fish around. Very photogenic they are, with their red colours and bright blue dots over their back.

As night falls over Parengarenga big masses of piper eject from below and sit like a carpet on the surface around wharfs and structures. This is the last chance for Mr Kingfish to get a feed and it's not an opportunity that he will pass up. A big splash follows as



Parengarenga Harbour is remote and wild.

the king attacks. I have always wondered why these kingfish candies just sit there and wait to be eaten.

OTHER GUESTS

Lots of other marine and bird life lives in or regularly visits Parengarenga Harbour. Once or twice a day the common dolphins pay the harbour a visit. It's not a friendly visit though, and I am sure they too, like the kingfish, enjoy the masses of kahawai and mullet that abound. Their bigger relatives, the orcas, frequently enter the harbour as well to feast on their favourite food, the stingray. Only once have I been lucky enough to see them perform their little dinner show, which involves throwing big stingrays around like Frisbees, a sight that is about as amazing as Nature can dish up. Orcas are very private about this little game though, so keeping a distance is a good idea. This way you won't risk getting half an eagle ray thrown at you either.

Huge sea turtles and baby sea snakes also visit over summer, but are a rare sight. Every year a few are seen washed up on the beaches, so there must be more than just a few around. Tiger and hammerhead sharks visit from time to time and spread fear amongst the fish and local hand line fishermen. Still, no shark attack in the area has ever been reported.

PARENGARENGA FOREVER

The harbour is very well protected by the local Maori tribe, is very hard to access and very little information is available. Combine this with its remoteness and you will understand why the fishing is so good. Over winter I rarely see another boat on the water. Only those crazy enough to drive all night just to get to a fishing spot will be seen up here. Maybe that's why it appeals so much to salt-water fly fishers... **FI**

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