

# LIVE BAITS AT DAWN

**fishing** NEW ZEALAND  
news

*Live baits are a key to consistent kingie action.*

**Some fishing trips seem to be doomed not to happen, yet as Sam Mossman found, perseverance can pay off in the end.**

One such seemingly doomed trip, finally fished on the last day of March this year, had been about 12 months in the making. Primarily it was a lucky draw prize for Manukau angler Bruce Wells, courtesy of tackle chain FCO (Fishing, Camping and Outdoors). Bruce's prize was a day of fishing out of Tairua on the Coromandel Peninsula with kingfish specialist charter company Epic Charters. Since the original prize notification, we had tried to get on the water about four times, but something always seemed to put the kibosh on it – bad weather, unavailability of the boat, the prize winner, various company representatives, or whatever.

Indeed, by the time we finally made it onto the briny, Epic Charters had moved its base of operations from Tairua to Whitianga and FCO had announced that it was folding its tents and withdrawing from the New Zealand market. Despite this, it was good to see FCO living up to its obligations and making sure Bruce got his trip.

On the appointed day however, the FCO rep couldn't make it and neither could anyone from tackle company Composite Developments (also part of the contest) – at least Bruce and I would have plenty of room.

In the pre-dawn gloom, I was first to *Coro King*, one of three Senator trailer boats that Epic Charters runs. Skipper Owen Wells was busy filling the two capacious live-bait tanks from the schools of mackerel and small kahawai splashing under the lights at the Whitianga wharf. I was happy to help him out.

There were something like 80 baitfish peering out the bait-tank windows by the time prize-winner Bruce Wells arrived, and soon after we were heading out to the Aldermen Pins as the sky lightened in shades of orange and gold to the east. Although I had chased kingies in this area before, this was the first time I had been out with Epic Charters, and with only Bruce and our skipper aboard, I had no qualms about wetting a line myself, especially as I wanted to try out the Composite Developments Nano Fast-Jig rods that the big Senator boat had been outfitted with.

Bruce is a Manukau fisherman, but sold his boat some time ago and had only ever caught one small kingfish before this trip. Skipper Owen had his live-baiting technique down to a fine art, and schooled Bruce up on what he needed to do. The



*ABOVE: Bruce Wells had only ever caught one small kingfish before but picked up the technique very quickly.*

*BELOW: "Awesome!" A perfect day and some hard-pulling fish made for a great experience for Bruce Wells.*



boat's rigs were set up with Rainbow Braid, which changes colour every ten metres. Upon spotting the fish on his sounder he would order the live bait dropped "six colours" or whatever, to put the baitfish in front of the kings. Circle hooks are used to facilitate mouth hook-ups, enabling kingies to be quickly unhooked, helping to ensure their survival after release. Once the bite comes, the king is allowed to swim away and tighten the line, rolling the hook into place. Then it is 'lock and load' to get the fish's head up and work it hard. Epic Charters release most of their kings, but don't mind if their clients take home one or two for the table.

Initially we had trouble getting onto the fish. We caught a few smaller kings and several snapper, which darted up and attacked our mackerel live baits. Some larger fish pulled hooks or were taken by sharks. However things improved when the tide changed, and we got onto a bunch of chunky 10-14kg specimens. They were not monsters, but gave honest accounts of themselves and were the biggest fish Bruce had ever caught. As the slight wind dropped out, the morning's chop dropped away and the sea turned to a sheet of glass. Schools of trevally and kahawai started krilling on the surface around the islands and, all of a sudden, it was a magnificent day.

Bruce enjoyed his fishing trip prize immensely, and having caught at least eight solid kingies, summed the day up as "Awesome!" It was, too.

## Epic Charters

Using trailerboats allows Epic Charters to reposition the vessels easily to different ports on the peninsula, or even to the Firth of Thames side, as weather and fishing opportunities dictate. Although kingfish are the company's bread-and-butter species, snapper and deepwater species such as hapuku and bass are sometimes pursued and even the occasional marlin is caught while soaking live baits for kingfish over offshore pins. *Coro King* had nailed a beakie about a week before our trip.

The Epic company originally made its name (while under previous owner Carl Muir – the company is now owned by Roy Field) targeting kingfish on jigs, but not all anglers are strong enough or have the co-ordination to jig for long periods of time. In addition, kingfish is a species that, under regular fishing pressure, eventually seems to suss out that different types of lures (jigs, stick-baits, poppers etc) are not good for them. These fish become harder to catch on lures, until the technique becomes unfashionable, the area is 'rested' from a given method, and the next generation of fish (and anglers) comes through. Over the last four decades, for example, I have seen metal jigs go through this cycle three times and poppers twice.

But kingfish seldom seem to refuse live bait,



*Epic skipper Owen Wells puts the boat along side some hard-feeding trevally: "There's gotta be a kingie under that lot!"*

and this is often Epic's 'go-to' technique these days. Under instruction, complete novices can be successful using livies, and today's light and powerful jigging tackle loaded with braid and turned to live-baiting duty is a lot easier to fish with than the lumpy game-fishing gear used a few years ago. Four anglers can get through a lot of livies in a day, and Epic's boats have some serious live-bait capacity.

The three Epic boats fish about 200 days a year – each. About half their customers are Aussies, with most of the rest being Kiwis. Book early.



*Sam put the Composite Nano rods to the test.*



*Bruce puts some pressure on a hard-pulling king with the Composite Developments Nano rod.*

## Composite Nano fast jig rod

**D**ay-in, day-out use on a charter boat is about the toughest duty that a rig can draw. Some of the punters may be complete novices who know little about looking after tackle, and gear is sometimes subjected to ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ while constantly getting hammered. Often there is little time for much TLC. Charter boats make a great testing ground for tackle, as a season on a charter boat can be equivalent to a lifetime of normal use.

Part of the tackle supplied on *Coro King* comprises Composite Developments Nano Fast-Jig rods. These 1.6m sticks are built from Japanese high-modulus graphite and incorporate ALPS guides and Upo woven-graphite reel seats. They weigh very little, and when paired with powerful but compact jigging reels and strong braid lines, make for a rig that you can fish comfortably all day without getting tired.

When I got the opportunity, I spent some time fishing with a Nano rod rated for 100-250g jigs. Typically I would have paired

this with PE5 (about 24kg) braid, but the rig was set up with PE8 (about 37kg) and a 40-50kg leader to minimise losses and fish left with hooks. The rod was well over-gunned line-wise, but is set up like this to put up with a heavy beating day after day.

The fish I caught on it were not monsters, but several reasonable fish to about 12-14kg gave the rig a decent trial. The takes were close to the bottom foul and it was necessary to use a near-locked drag to extract them. I turned that rod inside out, the blank bending through the fore-grip under my hand, right to the reel seat. It was a bit like hand-lining in some ways, and a palm tang would have been a useful addition to make hanging onto the rig easier.

I would not recommend overloading a rod and fishing it this brutally in normal circumstances, but the point is that the rod stood up to it. The blank didn’t break, the reel seat stayed in place, the guides didn’t migrate around the rod – and it turned the kingies’ heads before they could get to the bottom. A tough and well constructed stick.



*The railing on the Senator’s bow and stern platform make them useful fishing positions.*





With a two-metre internal beam, the Senator RH690 is designed to provide plenty of fishing room in the cockpit.

## Senator RH690



At 6.9m (7.10m LOA) *Coro King* is the smallest of the three-boat Epic fleet and is a customised RH690 pontoon Senator. The cabin has been slightly shortened and, with a two-metre internal beam, is designed to provide plenty of fishing room in the cockpit. Substantial rails around the bow and the boarding platforms make these areas useful fishing positions as well.

Other custom features include: a fold-down ladder on the bow for disembarking passengers on beaches; two live-bait tanks to give extra capacity (two tuna tubes are fitted inside the smaller tank); and a swing door in the transom wall to give quick and easy access to fuel lines and filters, isolation switch, sump and bilge pumps.

Epic is obviously happy with its Senators, having bought three of them (the others are 7.5m and 7.6m models). *Coro King* is the newest, launched about six months ago. It is powered by a Yamaha 250hp four-stroke and gets along pretty handily. These boats manoeuvre well, including in reverse. Staying right on top of hooked kingfish is one of the keys to extracting them from rough country. 



# SENATOR

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