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TAGGING – FOR RESULTS

Making it easier for you
and better for science

Tagging and releasing fish is second nature for most gamefishermen these days. It's a very rewarding feeling to know that while you're catching fish and having fun, you're also helping to acquire the science to manage the future prosperity of those same species. As with most aspects of fishing, there are tips and tricks to make it all work better and more effectively. Glen Booth shows how.

AUTHOR: **GLEN BOOTH**

PHOTOGRAPHY: **GLEN BOOTH; TIM SIMPSON; GLEN CRAWFORD; JARAD BOSHAMMER; PHIL BOLTON I&I NSW; GEORGE TRINKLER**



The sport of gamefishing would probably have been lumped in with foxhunting and bullfighting, as a socially unacceptable pursuit by now, if it wasn't for the modern anglers' ethics and the advent of tagging. As we've seen, gamefish handle the stresses of capture, tagging and release pretty well. They survive and are capable of travelling huge distances after liberation – up and down the coast, across oceans and even around entire continents. Everyone wins; the fish get to go free and, if they're recaptured, we get to learn a little more about their growth rates, age, distribution, movements and the overall health of their stocks.

Even commercial fishermen have been supporters of the program, returning tags from fish they've caught, often with the relevant weight, length and location details included. That said, one of the most disappointing sights I've seen in 30

years of gamefishing was a coffee cup on the dashboard of a longliner, full of used yellow spaghetti tags...

DO IT THE RIGHT WAY

There's a right way and a wrong way to go about tagging. A rushed tag shot is almost as bad as no tag shot at all, especially if the tag later falls out or your haste results in the death of the fish. The secret is to take your time, wait for the fish to present itself properly and make the release count.

There's nothing more frustrating – or nerve-wracking – for an angler, observer or captain than to watch a tagger making ineffectual swipes at a fish. Deep dipping with a tag pole rarely works, with the tag hardly ever ending up in the right spot. Guys who have been helping out with the pop-up satellite tag program really know how to do the job right, especially since these computerised tags cost \$US4000 each. There's no room for error!

For tagging newbies, the biggest mistake is having the tag held in place with tight, multiple wraps of rubber band. This means that the tag is *never* going to detach cleanly, if at all, and aside from poking a hole in a fish for no good reason, it often stirs it into making another long, panicked run. This is usually when the hook falls out, the line breaks or the sharks tear into the fish. If it's a high-stakes tournament, the newbie tagger could find himself swimming home!

The tag should be secured to the pole by a *single* wrap of rubber band, not five or six. It must detach easily when the fish is hit. A single size 32 band, positioned down near the end of the tag, is usually sufficient to get the job done. Once in contact with water and sea air, rubber bands perish and have a limited shelf life. Replace the band with a fresh one every day to prevent the tag falling off at an inopportune moment.

Now that the NSW program has switched to Billfish Foundation-style heads for



billfish tagging, you'll need to be sure that the tag isn't too tight a fit on the needle applicator.

GLOVE TRICK

Here's a question: Have you ever tried to replace or realign a tag in a hurry while wearing tracing gloves and with the skipper and/or angler yelling in your ear? Pretty difficult, isn't it? Well, if you hitch a loop or a 30cm piece of light Dacron around the rubber band securing the tag, it gives those gloved fingers something to grip on to and makes the task ridiculously easy. It's a very good idea.

If you've got a tag pole with a machined, detachable head, also get into the habit of removing it from the pole after a day's fishing and keeping it in a safe place. This way it protects the applicator

needle and in the event of the tag needle getting bent or broken, a replacement part can be easily fitted. *After* the fish has spooked and blasted off for the horizon from a blundered tag shot is not the time to discover that the head is corroded solid to the rest of the pole. A thin smear of grease will keep the threads clean. This is a good habit to get into with multi-piece poles as well.



A length of light Dacron looped on to the rubber band makes it easy to reload a tag, even while wearing gloves. Note also that the tag is held in place with a single wrap of rubber band – so it releases easily. With too many wraps securing the tag, it will either not release all, or could be partially pulled back out of the lodgement hole so that it falls out of the fish soon after release.

PLACEMENT IS CRITICAL

The correct position to tag a marlin is in the fish's shoulder, below the dorsal fin and certainly above the lateral line – not just anywhere on the fish's body.

Incorrect placement can also lead to a tag being overlooked when the fish is recaptured. We've all been trained to look for tags in



Get into the habit of removing tag heads from poles and break down multi-piece poles when not in use. A thin smear of lanolin or waterproof grease will keep the threads clean and corrosion-free.



Mini poles are excellent for hand-tagging smaller gamefish in the boat. They are also a great option for travelling anglers who are unable to carry a full-length pole with them. In this case, they can easily be strapped to a pole to make an effective, full-length tagging stick.

Don't hold the tag pole like a javelin or spear, as it offers less control if the fish makes a sudden change of direction. Long tag poles (up to 15ft) can allow you to tag a fish much sooner, but they make accuracy and underwater motion much more difficult. For long poles, a telescopic or multi-piece handle makes it easier in situations where a fish suddenly ends up close to the boat.



the shoulder region, but an algae-covered tag placed elsewhere might easily go unnoticed or be dismissed as a parasite.

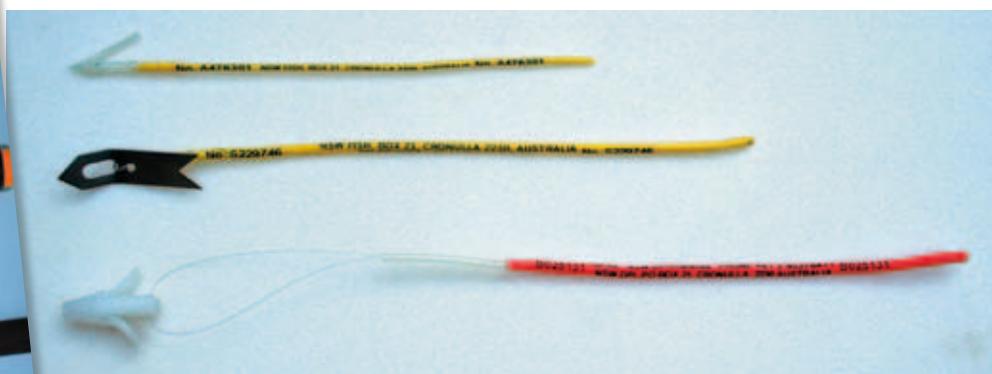
It's not a bad idea to check out any fish you catch for tags, because they do end up in some peculiar places at times. A striped marlin we caught at Bermagui some years back had a 10/0 stainless steel game hook in its jaw. After recovering the hook, a closer examination of the fish revealed a tag that was almost completely hidden in the recess the dorsal fin slots into.

Occasionally you'll see a cluster of weed-encrusted tag-like shapes protruding from a marlin's back. These are not actually tags, but copepods, a parasitic life form that drills into a marlin's body when in larval form and then remain in place for life. That said, a single 'parasite' might actually be a tag,





Above: Three types of tags and applicators.



Above right: In the huge Australasian tagging program run by the I&I Department of the NSW Government, there are three types of tag being used. The top one is a plastic dart tag that is used for small species that are hand tagged within the boat. To stay in the fish, these tags rely on the barb being hooked around a spine beneath the fish's second dorsal fin – so require careful placement by the tagger. The middle tag has a metal head and is for use on sharks. The lower tag is for billfish species only and Australian gamefishing rules stipulate that they should be used on a tag applicator that inserts it close to, but not more than, 68mm (2.5 inches) into the fish.

Right: If you take the time to accurately measure your fish before release, the information will be much more valuable to the scientific research should it ever be recaptured. For small species that are hand tagged, a measuring tape attached to the bait board can make the process very quick and easy.

so always have a close look just in case. If you removed a pseudo tag, the marlin would still be thankful!

When it comes to tagging a large fish in the water, your 'reach' is key. Hold the tag pole out at full stretch – not over the shoulder as some people do, as if they're about to throw a spear or javelin. Allow the skipper to literally 'drive' the tag pole to the fish. Then it's just a short, sharp jab in the shoulder and the job's done. Try not to hit the fish so hard that the tag pole itself damages or severely bruises the fish. A bruise, which is very easy to do, may soften the flesh holding the tag in place and lead to it falling out at a later date. It doesn't take very much pressure at all to embed a tag through the skin of a marlin or tuna.

AUSTRALIAN RULES

In Australia, tag applicator needles for nylon dart tags and metal shark tags cannot extend more than 50mm from the end of the pole. This length is increased to 76mm for billfish tags as they are more effective when locked deeper within a big fish.

A Mold Craft Bubbler Head – often used for rigging over the nose of a skipping garfish to give it more action in the water – makes a great buffer or stopper to sit at the base of the needle. These are 25mm long and 25mm in diameter and can be slipped down the applicator needle to sit as a cushioning pad for impact with the fish. Ensure there is still the correct needle length exposed to penetrate the fish.

According to Australian gamefishing rules, poles cannot be any longer than 15ft. But unless you've gone for the thin and lightweight, high-tech graphite or glass composite option, the upper lengths can actually be too long and hard to control, especially in a small boat. Realistically, 10 to 12ft is a more manageable length.

TAGGING SMALLER FISH

Small fish, like dolphinfish, yellowtail kingfish, albacore and other tuna up to about 15kg, are best carefully lifted out of the water and tagged in the boat. Then the tag can be placed accurately in the base of the second dorsal fin, with the tag's barb correctly locked in place around one of the spines. Bigger fish that have lots of gnarly teeth or are going to thrash about wildly when lifted aboard may pose a danger to themselves and the crew, so are best tagged in the water.

Years ago, I made a mini tag pole out of a 20cm piece of broom handle, with a nylon tag applicator on one end and a shark tag applicator on the other. This has been perfect for in-boat tagging. It can also be taped or hose-clamped to a longer pole for in-water use if need be. Something like this is the perfect tool for the travelling angler who can't take a full-length pole with him. Neat, commercially made versions with interchangeable needles are available from the Australian tackle suppliers Hookem Tackle or Black Pete (www.blackpete.com.au).





EFFECTIVE ORGANISATION

Efficiently tagging a lot of fish in one of those dreamt of (but all-too-rare) hot bites is all about being organised. On one memorable trip to Middleton Reef we tagged something like 90 yellowfin tuna, from 4kg to 40kg, in a single day. Sorting out the paperwork on the way back to the anchorage with only one working pen was a nightmare! We had cards on the galley table, on the floor, behind cushions, tucked into crevices, in people's spray jackets and on the dash. Often, the info was only hastily scrawled – 'G, Y, 15' for

instance – and some cards had no info at all, so the important weight section and who tagged it became little more than a guess. This did not optimise the research potential of the occasion!

In hindsight, one of our crew should have been designated 'keeper of the cards'. A few seconds spent filling out a bit more detail can avoid headaches at the end of the day. In a tournament situation this may even mean the difference between winning and losing, especially the time of release in the event of a countback. You don't need to completely fill out cards at the time of the catch, but you do need to immediately record the crucial information such as species, size, condition and angler – at least in workable code. You can fill them out properly and fully later in the day.

When it comes to organising tags, a tag wallet is an invaluable piece of equipment. The good ones have a pocket for new tags, another for used tags and one for the tag currently in the pole, along with a pen holder. Remember to always have a spare pen!



A tag wallet, like this model from Black Pete Marine, is the ideal way to keep track of used and unused tag cards and the tag in the pole.

MAKE THEM COUNT!

A tagging program is only as good as the information entered into it. If you've got used tag cards filled out, but still in your possession, get them in the post *today!* It may seem like a small matter after the fishing session is over, but it is a serious matter if you care about the research benefits



from your tagging efforts. Tagging is not just for competition points!

Due to the vastness of the ocean and the numbers of fish scattered out there, only a small percentage of tagged fish ever get recovered. Each recapture is treasured! However, a distressing number of recaptures have no corresponding tag card details on the database. If you're going to get involved in tagging, then please follow through and fill out the cards and post them in – diligently and quickly!

Almost as importantly, if there are tags in your possession that are unlikely to get used, give them to someone who will put them to good use or, more correctly, return them to your club or to the tagging program itself. Australian tags may not cost you anything, but they are expensive, and unused tags soak up very limited tag program funds that could be put to better use – for all of us.

Above: Take your time and get accurate placement with your tag shot. To get the maximum effectiveness from your participation in this important scientific research, the tag must be secured in a highly visible location, where it does not damage the fish. Make it count!

Above left: The tag pole should be loaded at the start of the day and promptly reloaded after every fish. Filling in tag cards the minute the fish has been released prevents those 'who tagged what and how big was it' headaches at the end of the day.



Hand-tagging smaller gamefish

In the case of most tuna and especially any of the smaller gamefish that are able to be lifted from the water and hand-tagged, the tag should be carefully positioned in the second dorsal fin. It should also be angled back towards the tail – to minimise water drag, which can dislodge your tag.

The single-barbed, plastic-headed tags used for smaller gamefish are designed to lock behind spines – not anchor in body muscle (as the metal-headed ‘shark’ tag and the nylon arrow-head ‘billfish’ tag are designed to do).

Inserting the plastic-headed tags straight into the muscle of the fish (as many anglers do) has been proven to stand a good chance of falling out, wasting the tag, the potential for research and perhaps endangering the fish. Instead, they must be positioned close in below the second dorsal fin where the fin rays extend into the fish’s body. Carefully insert the tag into the fish’s back, close to the base of the fin and angled in so that it passes through the spines. Then twist the tag pole before removing it. In effect, you should be trying to hook the barb of the tag around one of these spines, which then locks the tag in place. 🐟

– Tim Simpson



This photo shows the tag’s barb locked around a spine. By pushing the tag needle diagonally through the base of the second dorsal fin, then rotating it before removal, the tag’s barb is caught around one of the spines extending beneath the fin. This is essential to lock this type of tag into the fish.