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Tackle Box for the Modern Fisherman: Rod, Reel, Drone

Anglers use the flying machines to drop bait where the big fish swim; ‘Lots of things could go wrong’

By Mike Cherney
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PERTH, Australia—When fisherman Robbie Riches laments the ones that got away, he means his $1,000 drones.

He belongs to a school of anglers who have swapped the seaside tranquility of surf fishing for the motorized whine of drone fishing. The flying machines ferry baited fishing line from the angler’s reel far from shore and then lower the hook to where the best tuna, mackerel and snapper are said to lurk.

If all goes well, the drone releases the line, and the fisherman reels in the catch when a fish bites. If there is a problem, a hooked fish can yank the drone into a costly crash landing.

“Lots of things could go wrong,” said Mr. Riches, a geologist-turned-fisherman. “A bird could get tangled in the line or something, and then pull it into the water. That’s probably the worst thing.”

Mr. Riches, 36 years old, has crashed three drones over the past year or so for various reasons: a balky release mechanism, low battery, bad luck. He has insurance but is out the deductible.

The risk is outweighed by a shot at bigger fish farther offshore. Mr. Riches said he once bagged a 42-pound mackerel.

Other times, drones yield only trouble. Last week, Mr. Riches lost track of how much line was left in his reel. When it reached the end, his fishing rod bent forward, and he saw the drone falling into the water.

He pulled in the waterlogged drone and two small snapper.

“Once they’re in the drink, mate, they’re write-offs,” said Mr. Riches, who runs a fishing-tour business called Perth Fishing Safaris.
The impressive catches have drone-fishermen hooked, according to Frank King, owner of the Elk Fish Robotics drone shop near Perth. It “really went bananas about six months ago,” he said.

To keep up with demand, Mr. King ordered several waterproof drones—the SplashDrone 3+, which sells in the U.S. for anywhere from $1,200 to $2,300.

“People are posting on Facebook that they catch big fish,” he said, “and people are like, ‘How have you done that off the beach?’ And then it turns out they’re using drones.”

Mark Derwin, a construction supervisor in Perth, nearly lost a drone when the fishing line snagged on a friend’s finger. He managed to keep the drone out of the water and return it to shore.

“It’s not a relaxing time between dropping the bait and bringing it back,” said Mr. Derwin, 34. “My heart is always in my mouth.”
During a flight over the shimmering blue waters of the South Pacific, a flock of seabirds once surrounded his drone, said Jaiden Maclean, 29. The birds batted the fishing line with their wings.

“I was just like, ‘Oh my God, I can’t even move the drone,’ ” he said. “I was lucky I had enough battery to stay there until they settled down a bit.”

Mr. Maclean, a former lobster diver in Australia, said he and a friend developed a release mechanism called a Sky Rigger. The contraption, made of marine-grade brass, nylon and stainless steel, uses mechanical pressure, instead of batteries, to release the fishing line, reducing the chance of the line getting stuck and dragged down by a hooked fish.

In Florida, Josh Jorgensen, who produces YouTube fishing videos, began using a Sky Rigger this year. Since then, he said, he hasn’t lost a drone while fishing and planned to sell them online.

Mr. Jorgensen, 29, uses a video feed from his drone to spot fish. “I literally drop the bait into the fish’s mouth,” he said. “It’s like a videogame.”

Drone fishing is legal as long as fishermen follow standard flight rules, such as keeping the device in sight, according to Australia’s Civil Aviation Safety Authority. It also is legal in the U.S., as long as the drone is registered, and the pilot follows applicable operating rules.

A video that went viral online—and showed a drone carrying a person in a chair while fishing and drinking a beer—is under investigation, the Australian regulator said.

Australia is a hot spot for drone fishing, but the sport has spread to the U.S. and elsewhere. The Florida-based International Game Fish Association said it would certify a record catch that used a drone as long as the fish was reeled in by hand.
“It was originally just people taking regular drones and customizing them in their garage,” said Jack Vitek, the association’s marketing director. “Now you have specific products being made just for drone fishing. I wish we had thought about this when I was a kid.”

Other anglers aren’t as welcoming. “I’m a purist,” said Greg Prowse, preferring the thrill of luring fish the old-fashioned way. He is president of the New South Wales Rod Fishers’ Society, a fly-fishing club in Australia that dates to 1904.

On a drone-fishing tour last month, Mr. Riches’s four customers caught more than half a dozen fish from a beach about 6 miles west of downtown Perth. The drone made about 15 to 20 flights over four hours. It made its beach landings on an orange mat that looked like a small helipad.

One catch that day was a 3½-foot gummy shark, which is commonly served in fish-and-chip shops. Between flights, Tracey Lawrence said the first time she drone fished, it seemed risky to send such a pricey piece of gear over water.

Now, her only concern is that the drone drops bait into a “big pile of fish,” said Ms. Lawrence, a 46-year-old administrative assistant. She planned to prepare a gummy shark she caught with panko breadcrumbs.

Mr. Riches high-fived another customer reeling in his drone-assisted catch.

“That’s 21st-century fishing!” he said.
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