

PREP SCHOOL OF KELAH FISHING

By Aznir Malek

Close encounter of the furry kind

The incident was as brief as could be, but it was enough to set the hairs at the back of my neck bristling.

I was leading this bunch of eager anglers through the tranquil forest of Sungai Jasin, occasionally showing them interesting flora like the jungle durian, luminescent fern and the now-famous Bintangor tree. A few hundred yards from Lubuk Bong, I was stopped on my tracks by a loud snorting sound followed by the rush of breaking twigs and crackling dry leaves. A huge boar, busy with its wanton task of digging for worms, was startled by my heavy footsteps.

All I could see was this dark shape zooming through the dense undergrowth, even though it passed mere feet away from me. I was in reflex mode, shouting terse nonsense and swinging into a 'silat lintar' stance, rods now turned into temporary spears. Weirdly, my mind was pondering how both the pig and I would have felt if it had charged and received a thousand ringgit's worth of graphite.

When the danger had passed, I turned back to my group to find rock statues peering from behind trees, faces etched with fear and bewilderment. Later, they confided that they had feared the worst: that we had stumbled upon a 'Maybank'. Each guy had selected a tree to climb up to, just in case!

A club outing

It all started when I received a phone call from a Sean Bahrin, organiser of the MNI Fishing Club, months ago. A group of them were planning to go fish the Endau-Rompin Park, and they were wondering if this silly angler could guide them to the choice lubuks. Oh well, it's a dirty job, but I guess I could!

As it turned out, seven hearty souls made the trip, myself included. Three decided to climb the mountain all the way to the Buaya Sangkut Falls. That was a story in its own right. By the time they reached Batu Hampar - halfway to the top - Anuar was pooped out and had to stay in camp. Nasha and Hussaini managed to reach the magnificent falls, but on the way back, the latter ran out of Duracell, barely able to return.

Each went through their own hell, trying to reach our base camp of Kuala Jasin, their burdened bodies wracked with pain and beatings from sundry wood and stone. It was such that the numerous leeches that clung to lacerated legs were literally forgotten.

They loved it.

An introduction to kelah fishing

I was left with only three charges for the fishing sessions. All wanted to catch a kelah. I warned them that it's easier said than done. Everything had to be right, tackle, rigs, and especially skills and

patience. To be blunt about it, they were newbies – one even fixed his hook to a snap swivel! They were still game, mind, so what could I say?

Our first venture was at Lubuk Bong, scene of previous encounters with large red missiles. I arranged the anglers in a line, showing them the choice swims, before I started fishing myself. The rig was interesting enough: whole soft sawit on #2 suicide hook; one-metre long leader of 20 lb. Vanish to a large Rosco swivel; #4 running barrel sinker cushioned by a small brown plastic bead (bought in a girlie trinket shop!); mainline of 18-lb. Maxima.

The guide shows the way

Wouldn't you know it: twenty minutes into the fishing, the silly guide had a bite, the Kelah Stalker rod dancing on the rod rest (dead tree branch, actually). Of course to Sean and Al, it was to be expected! Little did they know that it was mostly luck!

I was prompted to battle stations, striking gently a couple of times to set the hook, then giving terse instructions for the others to reel in their lines and stay away from the water.

Everything okay so far. I expected the fish to turbocharge towards the distant sunken balak, but this guy was different, just like they were all different. It zoomed to the middle depths, then took a U-turn and streaked up into the inlet stream of the pool. It stayed there for a few minutes, doggedly resisting my efforts to turn its head.

I finally got him back downstream. By this time, everyone had been instructed to stay well away from the water and in the shadows of the trees. I decided to close the fight early. I brought my rod low to the water and gave it some side-strain. The guy followed. I retrieved with all the speed I could muster. The fish planed across the shallows and up the bank before it realised what was happening.

Two kilos of golden-red heaven lay quivering on the pebbly sand. Sean and Al were lying prone, giving the fish kisses of joy. I wish I had the presence of mind to get my camera! Sean requested permission to release the beauty. Apparently, he was on a mission: to prove to his club members that it was cool to release fish, especially the endangered ones like our red mahseer. The result is the picture hereabouts.

Getting one's licence

The guys were all fired up after that catch. Each was a picture of concentration, hoping that the next turn would be theirs. The next few hours were quiet, however, so we decided to trek up to Kuala Marong, another good kelah pool.

On reaching the confluence, however, we found a large group of tourists camped by the banks, complete with ugly yellow Sevyolor kayaks. I knew that Marong was a no-no.

We stayed away from the confluence, fishing this small pool that once gave a 4-kg. beauty. Al landed a tiny ten-inch kelah, but he was ecstatic all the same! Minutes later, the kayaks came, led by a huge American girl who had the honor of falling into the water right on top of my bait. Time to leave.

We trekked back to Bong, stopping at this secret tengas pool for some quick fun. What turned out

was a kelah bonanza.

Sean had the first strike, ten minutes into the act. The small kelah (about a kilo) pulsed all over the pool, then dived under this sunken log. Stalemate. But the fish was still on. I decided to go for broke, wading out with the line. Mercifully, the fish came out, fighting for the second shift. Sean finally landed it.

I had difficulty taking photos of Sean's trophy: his hands were shaking terribly! For hours after that, he had this silly smile, like he had just met Naomi Campbell...

I thought that the pool would have been thoroughly spooked by then, but you can never be smug with so-called knowledge: mere minutes later, my Fenwick Eagle GT rod had a good bite. A 1-kg. kelah was landed. The next hour was Al's show, with a small kelah and tengas on the scoreboard.

Needless to say, everyone returned to camp with wide smiles and buoyant spirits.

Completion

The next day saw Lubuk Bong playing host to four keen anglers. Pak Wan had joined us, after recovering from a bout of diarrhea. Again, the fishing was spoiled by the pesky yellow kayaks. Lubuk Bong was absolutely zilch for the rest of the day.

Pak Wan and Al decided to try the tengas pool upstream. The former was bent on catching his first kelah in twenty years.

Two hours later, they came running all the way back, two small kelah in the keepnet. They were not sure whether they were kelah or tengas. Anyway, they wanted the essential photos taken. When I confirmed the fish to be kelah, they quickly revived the fish, to be released after a couple of photos.

Well, there we have it. It had been a perfect trip. All my charges were happy. Everyone had received their kelah-fishing 'licence'. All were amazed by the supreme power of this beautiful red missile. All had learned the basics of tackle and techniques for this difficult quarry. Most importantly, all the kelah were released, willingly, without my proddings.

What can I say: I was happy too!