

New book captures Canberra Game Fishing Club's 60-year history

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July 25, 2026

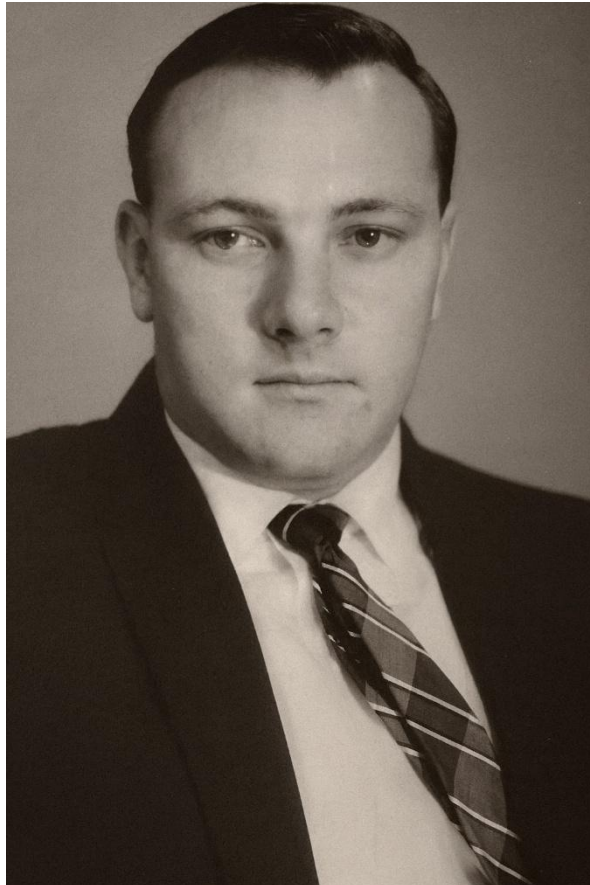


Judy Sillis, author of Lines in the Water, a history of the Canberra Game Fishing Club. Photo supplied

Six decades ago, Australia's only game fishing club based away from the coast was founded here in Canberra, 150 kilometres from the nearest boat ramp.

Now, long-time member Judy Sillis has chronicled its history in a new book, *Lines in the Water*, which collects 60 years of stories, photographs, and archival material, much of it never seen before by the public.

"It was important to keep the history alive, but also to acknowledge some of the great achievements from the past," Ms Sillis said.



*Ken Edwards, the inaugural President and main driver int he establishment of the club
The Canberra Game Fishing Club was founded in 1964.*

Ken Edwards, a former member of the Moreton Bay Game Fishing Club, moved from Queensland to Canberra in 1962 to work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Lake Burley Griffin hadn't been built in those days, but Edwards wanted to continue his favourite sport.

He placed an advertisement in *The Canberra Times* inviting people interested in forming a game fishing club to a meeting at his Griffith home.

Eight people attended, including Air Commodore Vincent Hill, a decorated war hero who flew during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

The club gained affiliation with the NSW Game Fishing Association in 1964.

From those early beginnings, the club has grown to between 80 and 100 members today.

Game fishing was once largely an élite sport. Timber boats were expensive and labour-intensive to build, and many anglers hired vessels. The introduction of fibreglass boats made the sport more affordable and accessible, and the club's membership gradually broadened.



Club boat Blue Marlin moored in Bermagui Harbour in the 1960s

“We’ve had every kind of people from every background in the club,” Ms Sillis said.

Its members have included doctors, dentists, farmers, pharmacists, police officers, firefighters, and paramedics. Today, many are tradespeople who enjoy both the fishing and the club’s social side.

“The camaraderie of game fishing in general is amazing,” Ms Sillis said. “Everybody helps everybody else.”

The appeal of game fishing, Ms Sillis says, is pitting yourself against big marlin, tuna, and even sharks, and trying to outsmart them.



A beautiful Bermagui striped marlin in full flight

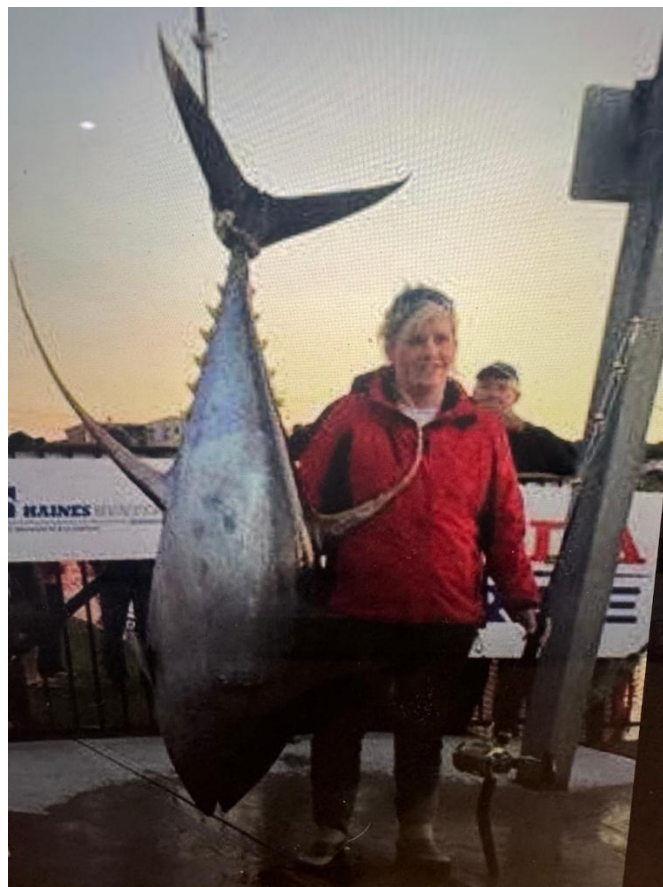
These days, few fish are killed; modern game fishing is predominantly based on tagging and releasing them. She estimated that club members released about 99 percent of fish they caught.

“We’ve gone through seasons where not one fish has been weighed in the club, where every single fish that’s been caught has been tagged and released,” Ms Sillis said.

J-hooks, which hooked fish in the gut and often mortally wounded them, have been replaced with circle hooks, which hook them in the corner of the mouth, improving their prospects of surviving after release.

Club members have tagged more than 8,000 fish since the NSW government established its game fish tagging program in 1973. Data collected when tagged fish are recaptured can help researchers understand their movements and growth.

The club has twice received a national award for meritorious achievement in tag and release, while three women from the club have won the NSW prize for the leading female tag-and-release angler a combined seven or eight times. Their exploits are described in ‘Here’s to the Ladies’, a chapter about the club’s history of encouraging women in a traditionally male-dominated sport.



Club member Clare Lopardi with the 80.6kg yellowfin tuna with which she won the 2015 Canberra Yellowfin Tuna Tournament – the first female angler to achieve this honour

Members have held three world records, including two saltwater records set by women, while one record set during the 1980s remains an Australian record today.

A club member caught the first yellowfin tuna weighing more than 100 kilograms recorded by a Game Fish Association of Australia member; the fish held the Australian record for nine years.

Another member caught a black marlin that was, at the time, the fifth largest recorded in the world and the largest caught anywhere that year.



Club member Sammi Courts with her World Record southern bluefin tuna

The idea for the book came from Richard Edwards, the founding president's son, who felt that the club's website did not adequately recognise his father's role in establishing it.

Ms Sillis wrote several historical pieces for the club's 60th anniversary in 2024. When president Matt Crampton suggested collecting them in a book, she decided it should be done properly.

"That started me into two years of research and getting it together," Ms Sillis said.

Few records survived from the club's first 14 years, so Ms Sillis interviewed veteran members and trawled through decades of newspaper fishing columns and club newsletters to reconstruct its early history.

The wider game fishing community has welcomed the book, Ms Sillis said. The president of the Game Fishing Association of Victoria told her he hoped the book would encourage other clubs to record and preserve their histories.

Members fish chiefly from Bermagui, where the club holds fishing weekends, barbecues, and events that pair newer anglers with experienced members.

It inaugurated the Canberra Yellowfin Tuna Tournament in 1982 and, with four game fishing clubs in other states, the Alliance Tag and Release Tournament in 1990.



Club member Peter Deas with his 102.5kg yellowfin tuna that won the Canberra Yellowfin Tuna Tournament in 1993. This is the heaviest yellowfin weighed in the tournament.

It also holds monthly meetings at the Hellenic Club in Woden, with guest speakers and demonstrations, and runs a children's Christmas party at Lake Burley Griffin.

Ms Sillis said the club hoped to attract more young members and “teach them the joys of what we’ve got out of game fishing”.

She and her husband joined after attending a club barbecue in the 1980s, and said it was one of the best decisions they ever made.

“It’s been an amazing ride for myself and my husband. We’ve met so many wonderful people through the sport... It’s the encouragement you get when you catch a nice fish or win an award at state level. So while we compete against each other, it’s really about getting out on the water, enjoying what you see and do out there, and encouraging everybody else to have that experience.”

Lines in the Water is available in a limited run of 200 signed and numbered copies for \$40. Copies can be ordered from club secretary Debra Kemp at deb.kemp@pkis.com.au or Judy Sillis at judysillis@bigpond.com.