Richmond begins to stir
Tony Zann  September 2011  Area Articles / New South Wales / Far North Coast / Evans Head /

After a cold winter with not much life in large upstream sections, the estuaries should be awakening well this month as bass head back up to the freshwater and school jew and flathead become more frequent in the lower reaches.

But thanks to the river being in an almost constant state of turbidity for the past couple of years, there’s so much fine silt in the Richmond that it really takes very little to muddy the waters again.

In fact, the spring high tides around the new and full moon are enough to murk up the proceedings on anything from half tide up to sometimes all the way down to the low. Tidal run is all it takes.

If there’s a lot of run and a high tide the river fills with a ‘dusty’ sort of suspended sediment that the fish don’t handle too well – you hardly ever catch anything in it.

And there have been rafts of water hyacinth drifting up and down the tides for almost a year.

Nonetheless, the flathead and bream should be working from Woodburn to Coraki this month – if we don’t get any more rain. Considering the area copped 250mm in a day on the October weekend in 2010, that’s a big ask.

There’s even talk doing the rounds now of another La Nina, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves just yet.

July was quite dry and August started out in similar fashion so there’s still hope for one of those typically dry springs we haven’t seen for a few years.

A dry spell before it gets too hot helps kick-start the river. In clearer water there can be increased weed growth and even the poor old seagrass that has almost disappeared from the Richmond can get a little revival.

There’s no shortage of nutrients to help plant and invertebrate life flourish and it would be just great to see the freshwater shrimp and the brackish school prawns take off to provide a solid food base for bass, perch, bream, flathead, school jew and others.

The stretch from Pimlico to Wardell should prove a happy hunting ground for the flathead and soapies and this area can also offer plenty of food and shelter for herring and whitebait, along with those prawns.

MOVING BASS

This month the bass should be turning left or right at Coraki and heading up the Richmond or the Wilsons rivers.

Those turning right reach tidal influence just upstream of Lismore as the river branches into three or four feeder tributaries, and the fish in these watercourses can travel relatively unimpeded to their sweetwater abodes.

It’s a different story in the Richmond proper, where the bass now are able pass by the rehabilitated sites of the former Norco and Manyweathers weirs at Casino but then run into trouble at the Jabour Weir, upstream of the rail bridge.

The fish ladder there is unsuitable at best and dysfunctional and neglected at worst, and there seems to be some argy-bargy between the local council and Fisheries as to who is responsible for its upkeep.

I know Fisheries would like to see this obstacle join the other two in oblivion but some locals say that would leave the area upstream shallow and weed-clogged, where it now is relatively deep and navigable all the way up to the low Cooks Weir. Migrating bass seem to be the sad pawns in this power struggle.

A lot of these fish come from stockings in Toonumbar Dam that travelled over the wall during flood time.

SNAPPER GROUNDS

Back on the coast, the north-easters begin to take more of a hold on the sea conditions, leading to some choppy rides home from the offshore reefs around midday.

After reasonable winter aggregations in the shallows, the snapper seem to prefer depths of 30-50m and many good fish in spawning condition are taken from the shell and gravel grounds, rather than over hard reef.

It’s been a reasonably good year for the snapper, although they have been patchy at times, rather than consistent. This is the time that the bigger fish tend to come in, although Evans Head isn’t exactly famous for its monster reds.
Fortunately there have been other attractions, mainly in the form of teraglin and cobia, but that scourge from the south, the leatherjacket hordes, are also about. The jackets are mainly in 50m-plus although some days, depending on the current or lack of it, they’ll come in a lot closer.

The other southern invaders, the salmon, have been less conspicuous than they were in early winter but beach anglers would be foolish to think they’ve moved on. They were about in numbers until November last year; it’s just a matter of where the pickings have been best.

They’ve been moving in and out of the Richmond River at Ballina and as far upstream as Burns Point ferry, scaring the hell out of sleepy luderick anglers by busting up in a churning, seething mass as they demolish hapless baitfish.

So far it’s looking like a pretty decent season on the blackfish, which should be at a peak in the next week or so before they spread far and wide in the increasingly saline estuary or head back to the ocean rocks.

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