Winter estuary patterns

Dan Selby | June 2012 » Feature Articles / New South Wales /

In Winter many forms of fish life go through transitions. Some species completely shut down into hibernation, some migrate to more favourable climes and others move into our estuaries to take advantage of seasonal food, favourable water conditions or urges to reproduce.

Let’s look at what Winter can offer those fishing NSW estuaries, focusing on common species, techniques that work for them and the best times to hunt them.

Australian salmon are highly rated sport fish and venture into estuaries when conditions are favourable. They most commonly can be found on an incoming tide in the lower reaches of your particular system, favouring areas of strong current adjacent to major points, drop-offs and reefs.

Salmon are easily located by monitoring bird activity around the lower reaches. Flocks of birds sitting on the surface are a good sign and a few prospective casts around the general area with a soft plastic or small metal slice should alert you to the presence of salmon.

Gulls and terns that are wheeling and diving are a far better bet when looking for active salmon. These fish generally respond best when casts are made to the leading edge of the feeding school.

A selection of metal slices from 5-40g, some small soft plastic stickbaits like the Berkeley 3” Minnows and small poppers and walkers will cover most bases.

TAILOR

Tailor are regular inshore visitors throughout the cooler months. Although large schools head north to Fraser Island to spawn in early Spring they can be intercepted off the headlands, beaches and in the lower estuaries as they stop off to terrorise local baitfish.

Tailor at times can mix with the salmon schools or can be found in their own surface-feeding schools where diving birds also will give away their location. Here they are best targeted with metal slices, poppers or hard diving lures – all give some protection against the tailor’s serrated teeth.

When there are no visible signs on the surface, trolling is a very productive way of finding concentrations of tailor and salmon. Hardbodies that run shallow (.5-2m) or medium depth (3-4m) and 40-80g metal slices allow you to cover the water column and get in close to the washes where the better class of tailor and salmon wait in ambush.

Alternatively you can slowly drift at a safe distance out from the washes and cast poppers, metals or ganged pilchards/garfish for good results.

Chopper tailor (below the legal 30cm) are regular Winter visitors in the estuary and can play havoc with soft plastics aimed at other species. All is not lost, because these ravenous juveniles create a natural berley trail as they crash through the bait schools.

School jewfish, bream, silver trevally and flathead are all quite opportunistic and sit beneath the feeding choppers to pick off scraps – and the odd chopper tailor, too!

Casting soft plastics around the edges of feeding tailor schools can turn on some great fishing with a different species on each cast.

You must resist the urge to strike at the vibrating bite of the tailor, though, because this will tear the soft plastic. Just let the lure sink all the way to the bottom where a bigger predator hopefully will engulf your lure.

It’s common in this situation to catch good bream, flathead and jewfish on the stub of a 4” or 5” stickbait after a tailor has bitten the tail off while it’s sinking. This is exactly what these predators are looking for beneath the choppers, a disabled baitfish that is an easy meal.

BREAM

Yellowfin bream are highly sought after year round and Winter generally yields a better class of fish for those prepared to go a little lighter and a lot deeper.

The washes around headlands and breakwalls are great places to start prospecting for Winter bream.

Casting small soft plastics tight to the washes and watching the slack braid for a take is an enjoyable way to spend a Winter’s day.

Another successful approach is to berley up with stale bread and fish lightly weighted bread, prawn or cunjevoi baits in the whitewater.
Don’t be surprised if a rock blackfish/drummer or silver trevally gets in on the act, too. It may pay when using bait to fish a little heavier to minimise tackle losses to these brawlers.

This type of fishing is great because it’s available to shore-based and boat anglers and requires a simple rig of just an unweighted hook or a small pea sinker free-running to the hook.

Further into the estuary is where some big resident bream lurk deep on the rock walls and reefs. They really kick into gear when the last of the flood tide peaks, because this will be the warmest water of the daily tidal cycle. It may only be 0.5° warmer but it can be the trigger to get them on the chew.

The key is to get small offerings down deep, where the bream feel comfortable in the clear water that’s often associated with winter, especially the lower morning high tides.

Blades are great tools to find deep-schooled bream in these conditions, allowing anglers to cover plenty of ground and put their lures in the strike zone for longer.

**PLASTICS, SCENTS**

When the fish are not responding and seem shut down, the addition of artificial scents can be advantageous. Soft plastics in natural, translucent colours tend to be more effective in the clear, cool conditions.

When fishing water of 6m or more, it pays to select lures that have minimal resistance in the water, such as stickbaits, minnows and wrigglers. They will get down deeper with the lightest possible jig head weight, resulting in more bites/hook-ups.

**FLATHEAD**

Flathead are highly regarded table fish and although they may not be as aggressive as they are in the warmer months, they too have to eat at some point.

Flatties prefer the sun-warmed flats in the backs of bays in the late afternoon, where the bait gathers in the slightly warmer water.

They can also be found on major drop-offs and next to reefs and deep rock walls in the lower estuary and will be at their most active during the last of the flood tide.

Drifting live or dead bait is quite effective, as is slowly hopping soft plastics and blades. The key is to slow everything down to give the fish time to react to your offering.

It may pay to try several locations until a few fish can be found, as they tend to gather where conditions are at their best. Most of my Winter flathead are by-catch while targeting bream and jewfish but they can be consistently found throughout the lower third of all estuaries at this time of year.

**MULLOWAY**

Mulloway are still active through Winter for those willing to put in the hours. Long, cold nights aren’t required because these fish also seek that slightly warmer water on the incoming tide.

Their peak feeding activity coincides with the turn of the tide when they take advantage of any morsel that happens past their noses. They especially like the migrating species such as mullet, bream, blackfish, whiting, estuary perch and herring.

All of these species concentrate in the lower one-third of the estuary to feed, stage and spawn, giving the predatory mulloway ample opportunity.

I find fishing with soft plastics is most effective because it allows you to cover several spots during a tide change and negates the need to secure live bait before a session.

Smaller presentations like 3”-5” shads and minnows are readily engulfed because they emulate an easy meal to digest in the cool waters with a slow metabolism.

Move around and find where the concentrations of bait are and the mulloway won’t be too far behind.

**PATTERNS**

You will note a few consistencies throughout this article. The main point is to concentrate your efforts around the incoming/flood tide. If that so happens in the afternoon after a nice sunny day, then all the better.

Fish as light as the conditions allow and take plenty of warm clothes because conditions can change rapidly on the water at this time of year.

There’s nothing worse than blasting to your spot first thing in the morning and then needing an open fire to thaw out before you can feel your hands enough just to tie on a lure! There might be a need to fish the half-light if the water is crystal-clear at the front of the estuaries and around the headlands but further inside the estuary conditions can be more suitable for a leisurely day in the Winter sun.
Banker’s hours (9am-5pm) can be most productive and conditions happen to be far more comfortable for us anglers and there’s certainly no danger of heatstroke, although it’s wise to keep applying sunblock.

**Facts**

**GEAR BOX**

- **Salmon and tailor**: 6'6"- 7'2", 3-6kg rod, 2500-size threadline and 6-8lb braid.
- **Bream and flathead**: 6'6"- 7'2", 2-4kg rod, 1000-2500 threadline, 3-6lb braid.
- **Bream in the washes**: 7'-10' 4-8kg rod, 2500-4000 threadline, 8-15lb braid.
- **Mulloway**: 7' 6-8kg rod, 4000 threadline, 15lb braid.

**Images**

Quality school jewfish are available in the estuary during Winter. Concentrate around the top of the tide for best results.
Sinking larger offerings around chopper tailor schools can yield some great results. Tommy wasn’t so lucky this cast!

Big blue-nose bream often hold deep on the reefs and rock walls. Fish as light as conditions allow to score thumpers like this one the author is holding.

Good flathead are still on offer in Winter. A slowly worked 4” shad was the undoing of this 68cm flattie.
Salmon are a great way to warm up on a Winter's morning.

Hopping a soft plastic down a drop-off resulted in this neat soapy jewfish for Trevor. A slight temp rise on the flood tide triggered the bite.

Trolling hardbodies around the headlands and washes is a productive way to find Tailor.
Be sure to rug up if leaving early. Greg displays a salmon caught trolling the washes first thing in the morning.

This double hook-up was the result of timing an incoming tide late in the day on a deep reef. Both fish were caught using 3” soft plastics.
Metal slices to ‘match the hatch’ of baitfish are an essential part of the Winter tackle box.