Hopes for a dry Spring

Tony Zann  |  September 2013  »  Area Articles / New South Wales / Far North Coast / Evans Head /

A lot of people around here are hoping for a dry Spring and it would certainly do the estuary fishing a lot of good.

But given recent conditions and expert predictions, there’s a fair chance our hopes could be dashed.

In the first seven months of 2013, Evans Head received almost 1.3m of rain, with 17 more wet days than dry ones. That’s a little above the average annual total rainfall, so it’s been wet.

And unofficial data for Upper Wilsons Creek, in the headwaters of the Wilsons River in the Byron Bay hinterland, came up with a staggering 3m-plus of rainfall for the same period!

A dry Spring is the key to a productive Richmond River estuary, allowing fish like flathead, mulloway and bream to spread out and prosper as the weather warms up.

For the wet season (most of the year these days), the Richmond River fish populations loiter well downstream of Wardell, avoiding the muddy freshwater runoff. But when the tidal waters in the fertile upper reaches of the estuary clear enough to promote strong plant and aquatic life, the fish move in and feed vigorously until the rains come again early in the New Year.

Flathead can work all the way up to Lismore and almost to Casino, mingling with bass, bream, school jew and estuary perch in a good year.

It all depends on the food chain becoming established, and a dry September forms the basis for it all as the weed starts grow again in the clearing water and the shrimp and prawns multiply.

In 2012 a comparatively dry Spring allowed fish to spread out in the Richmond/Wilsons estuary. We had a very good bass season (the fish could see the lures) and caught plenty of flatties, school jew and bream well up-river.

Most of the good fishing from Woodburn downstream occurs on the neap tides, when the river has less tidal run and less chance to stir up the fine mud that can quickly cloud the water.

It isn’t just reduced visibility for lures that hampers good fishing when the river is turbid. When a big high tide is running fast, the water becomes ‘dusty’ with suspended particulate matter that many of us feel the fish try to avoid.

Whether it irritates their gills or something else, as soon as that ‘dust’ appears in the water you might as well pack up and go home, because you’ll rarely catch fish in it.

The lower estuary, around Ballina, suffers less with this problem but you still see it from time to time.

LUDERICK

The Ballina luderick season is shaping up quite well, with some encouraging schools of large sea-run grazing around the breakwalls, especially when the seas are rough. There are also schools of smaller fish taking up residence in the river and grazing the rock walls.

This month marks the peak of the season and if the weather is dry enough, there should be some green weed growing in the farm drains around the place. And if it’s wet, you’ll have to source the weed from elsewhere or rely on the sea cabbage from around the rocks.

Prime spots include the southern Prospect Bridge approach on North Creek, the rock wall near the Ramada in the CBD, the big and little gaps on the southern side and the northern ferry approach at Burns Point.

You can get a fair indication of the way the estuary season is going by the colour of the water below the Pacific Highway bridge at Wardell.

If it’s jungle green to a transparent stained brown, it’s a good season and eminently fishable. If it’s khaki to latté, it’s a freshwater mess so look farther downstream or well upstream, where the fresh might be clearing.

The Evans and Brunswick rivers fare far better in the runoff stakes, thanks to their smaller catchments.

The Bruns can drain an immense amount of rainfall but seems to clear relatively quickly, at least in the lower half. It should warm up reasonably fast this month and the bass should have a clear run back upstream.

Down lower, the flathead should come on quite well over the shallow flats on sunny days and if some warm current gets into the bay maybe even a mangrove jack.

The Evans River warms up of its own accord as the days become warmer. There’s little tidal exchange in the middle reaches so the temp
rises as Spring develops.

There have been flathead, bream and school jew in the Evans and significant numbers of bass and estuary perch were washed over the weir that separates Rocky Mouth Creek at Woodburn from the Tuckombil flood canal that links it to the Evans River headwaters.

As the tides eventually flush out all the salt water in the Evans, the suitable habitat for the perch and bass is reduced to a few warm, brackish pools and the health of the fish declines. Some of us are hoping to be able to legally relocate these fish before the poor conditions, and the local black marketers, take their toll.

**OFFSHORE**

It’s another snapper month out on the gravel, with spawning reds of all sizes likely to be in attendance.

Catches in close were sporadic, to say the least, before the cold water moved in during mid-July – possibly a month later than normal. Early August was showing indications of better times, with some cracking reds busting up the soft plastic gear over reefs in 20m or less.

The north-easters can get a start on this month, especially in the day or two before another cold front moves in, so it will pay to consult the weather oracles before contemplating an afternoon/evening outing.

1

It’s peak season for luderick in the Richmond River. Pete Cheadle, of Ballina, scored a double of small fish on his first drop of the morning – not a bad way to get off the mark – and ended up with a good number of keepers.

2

If there’s plenty of food available, many bass will stay in the lower reaches after spawning, especially if there’s a fresh coming down the system. Greg Adams, of BlueScope Steel Port Kembla, picked up this plump fish on a blade and quickly released it.

3

The Evans River estuary perch are overflow riders of the Autumn Richmond River floods but during the dry season they can run out of good habitat. Dave Sales caught and released this one after it took a plastic.

**Images**