Winter estuary tips
Jamie Robley | July 2007 » Area Articles / New South Wales / Central Coast / Central Coast /

There might be plenty of fish in that cold, clear water but they’re not always easy to catch. Here are a few ideas to make things easier.

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With marine parks, rising fuel costs and declining fish stocks to contend with, simply heading out and catching a few estuary fish certainly isn’t getting any easier. To make matters worse, the cold, clear waters and westerly winds we endure through late Winter and Spring each year can be extremely testing.

Even though everything can seem to be against us at this time of year, there is usually some quality fishing to be had in our estuaries if some thought and effort are applied.

Being aware of the movements of different species and the way they react to changes in weather and water quality is a starting point. Then we can work out the most effective ways to bring these fish undone.

Water temperature is one of the more crucial factors to look at. Most species have a certain temperature range that they feel comfortable in. If temperatures suddenly rise or fall above or below that comfort zone, the fish will shut down and be extremely difficult to catch or move on to find temperatures that are more to their liking.

For example, through Summer our average upper estuary water temps hover between 23° and 26° and in late Winter can be 16° or 17°. So when the water drops below 16° fish may start to become inactive or move elsewhere within the estuary. Of course, the further south we go, the lower the average temperatures may be and the further north, the warmer.

Those of us who fish from the shore or don’t have a sounder in the boat may not know the exact water temps but if you’re struggling to get a bite, dip your hand in the water and see how cold it feels. If it’s really freezing that could be why you’re not catching much.

So what to do? Even water that’s one degree warmer is worth seeking out and that can often be found in areas that cop the most sunlight. A shallow bay with plenty of weed growth, to help insulate the warmth, could be the shot. Or even one side of a river that receives more sunlight than the other.

Ocean currents pushing water into the lower reaches of the system are another thing to consider. If there are freezing currents moving in along the coast, they’ll certainly penetrate the lower few kilometres of an estuary.

On the other hand, water moving down from the upper reaches on an ebbing tide could be colder than the average estuary temperature. So in major river systems like the Hawkesbury or the big northern rivers, the tides can play a large role in the temperature factor.

WATER CLARITY

Cold water is one thing but when it’s crystal-clear as well, fishing can go from bad to worse. Already we are seeking out the more desirable temperature zones so now we’ll keep doing that as well as dealing with the clarity.

Most species, especially bream and blackfish, are not easily fooled by our baits or lures if they can see the hooks, line or even the shapes of boats or people above them. Yes, fish can see us, just as we can see them. A big moving shape could be a predator in their eyes, so they’ll be very cautious if they can see you.

The first thing to consider when the water is too clear is to move upstream in search of a bit of colour. It doesn’t matter if you can see into the water a metre or so, but if it’s not crystal-clear it should be OK. If you are still trying to catch fish in the gin-clear stuff, use light lines or leaders, small hooks and more natural presentations like subtle lure colours or the freshest of baits.

Fishing during low light periods like dawn, dusk or at night can also be more effective in clear water. Low tide is also generally not as clear as high tide.

Barometric pressure can influence fish behaviour as well, although it’s not always the most important factor to consider. However, a very
low or rapidly falling barometer would normally mean that fish will shut down or become harder to catch.

A steady reading, even if it’s a bit low, should be OK, as will a rising barometer. For those of us without a barometer, just keep an eye on the weather maps to see when the high or low pressure systems are moving over NSW.

The very worst scenario at this time of year is when a high pressure has just moved off the coast, causing strong winds to blow from the north-west, because the barometer is likely to be falling rapidly. Forget fishing when it’s like this.

Moon phases also have some effect on estuary fishing, although that’s probably the last factor worth thinking about. The main thing I’ve got to say here is the worst part of the moon phase when the water is clear and cold is right on the bright full moon and one or two days either side of that. The more shallow and clear the water is, the worse the effect of bright moon light on estuary fish. This is no more evident than on the morning after a bright full moon.

BREAM

Bream are available to estuary anglers right through the year. In my experience some of the biggest bream are caught at the coldest time of year but they certainly aren’t that easy to catch. Even if the bream are actively feeding, they generally won’t be as fast in their movements as they would be when water temps are higher.

When using good quality natural baits like pink nippers, bloodworms or mullet gut, that factor doesn’t mean much. When lure casting however, it means a lot.

In short, this is the time to slow your lures right down. Move around the estuary fast to find the fish in the first place, but when you do hook a bream or at least locate some water that shows promise, work your lures slowly and methodically through the water column.

The majority of big bream will be closer to the bottom, so you can almost crawl a lightly weighted plastic across the bottom in a series of very small hops and short jerks.

Very fine 2kg fluorocarbon leader and highly sensitive graphite rods are a must when it comes to this style of fishing. Bream tend to gently pluck or pick at the plastic rather than smash and grab as they do in Summer. So keep and eye on your rod tip and line and be ready for any sign of a timid bream bite.

I’m using a Loomis dropshot DSR8200 for this style of plastics fishing and it has the perfect combination of a very light, sensitive tip with plenty of bream-pulling power in the lower section of the rod. The more alert you are as you fish, the more fish you’ll hook, especially when using super-sensitive tackle.

BLACKFISH, FLATHEAD

Blackfish are one of the more abundant cold-water fish but they require pretty much the same approach as the bream. We may not be using light graphite rods and soft plastics for the blackfish, but that all-important fine fluorocarbon leader is every bit as crucial as it is for the plastics bream fishing.

A common saying among luderick aficionados is ‘if you can see the fish, they can see you’. In such circumstances, good catches are rare. Better to come back on the bottom of the tide when the water may be slightly discoloured or when the sun is not high overhead.

FLATHEAD

Often regarded as a Summer species, flathead are actually quite common at this time of year but they may be further up the system or perhaps residing in a smaller feeder creek that runs off the main part of the estuary.

They are nowhere near as finicky as bream or blackfish but you’ll still catch more by employing fine leaders and sensitive rods. Things can get a bit tricky with fine leaders for flathead. The best advice here is to take them nice and slowly towards a landing net.

If you try to rush proceedings with a flathead on the end of your light gear, the fish will most likely react by thrashing on the surface, cutting the line and swimming off with your lure.

You should also concentrate your flathead efforts later in the day in the shallows after the water has been warmed by the sun. Shallow, darker, muddy banks tend to fish well for flatties in Winter on sunny afternoons.

BASS

Most estuary systems along the NSW coast are home to some sort of bass or estuary perch population. From about June through to September both species move further down the system seeking out desirable salinity levels for spawning.

Bass move from the freshwater into the brackish middle reaches of the system, while estuary perch move from the brackish areas down towards the mouth, sometimes within sight of the ocean.

At this time both species can congregate in large numbers but they aren’t always easy to catch. In reality, that’s a good thing because we wouldn’t like to see heaps of bass or EPs being caught and killed while they’re trying to make babies.

Jewfish, trevally and tailor are other common cold-water estuary fish. Of these, the tailor are the easiest to catch but overall the same
angling theories should be applied if you want to succeed with these species.

Seek out the fish’s natural comfort zone, avoid super-clear water and a falling barometer and don’t forget to use the lightest line you can get away with.

**Facts**

**WINTER ESTUARY TIPS**

- Avoid ultra-clear water, especially at high tide on bright sunny days and around the full moon in clear weather. Fish clear water at night, dawn, dusk or on cloudy days. If you can see fish, they can see you.

- Low tide may have water that isn’t as clear.

- Use fine lines and leaders.

- Keep an eye on water temperature. Look for water that might be slightly warmer, such as over shallow mud flats or where warmer water upstream or from the ocean enters.

**Images**