Beautiful Barrington River bass
Toby Grundy | December 2016 + Regular Features / Hot Spot /

I first heard about the Barrington River from my brother-in-law, a dairy farmer who lives just outside the town of Gloucester, an hour from Newcastle. We were talking about his farm and I asked what kind of fish lived in the local rivers. He said there were mullet, herring and perch. When I pressed him, he explained that locals call them perch but most others call them bass.

I have visited Gloucester about a dozen times and fished the Barrington three times. For me, it’s one of the most exciting, challenging and frustrating bass fisheries in NSW. For those who are up for an adventure, it is absolutely sensational when the bass are on the bite.

Facilities
Tackle is hard to come by in Gloucester. In fact, the only indication that you are in a bass town is the wall of Australian timber lures, which sit in a back corner of the general store. You’ll need to bring your own gear and lots of it, as there are heaps of snags in the river, while the larger mullet and bass bend hooks and sometimes completely destroy lures.

That said, the town has all the usual amenities including cafes, restaurants, a couple of good supermarkets and a petrol station, along with kayak and canoe hire at Barrington Outdoor Adventures on the outskirts of town. We hired a canoe here and found the process really easy. I also took my own kayak.

The Barrington River runs right near Gloucester and intersects with the Gloucester River about five minutes from town, meaning there are good launching spots scattered around the local campgrounds and near the main bridges with parking available. Getting the kayak in the water is relatively easy.

One of the most exciting things about the river is the white water. The place is packed with kayak enthusiasts when the river is high, because the rapids are a lot of fun. However, they can also be dangerous if you are inexperienced. Make sure you use all necessary safety gear including a life jacket. If you’re unsure, grab a guide for the day and explore the river before you fish it.

We hit the rapids in a two-man canoe and didn’t tip. I’ve also run the river in my Native Slayer 13 and it handled the rapids with ease. It’s important to remember that farmers in the region own properties which extend right up to the centre of the riverbed. They don’t own the water, but they do own the riverbed. If you decide to get out of your kayak, either do so in a public section of the river or get the landowner’s permission.

I’ve heard of some nasty confrontations on the river and the bottom line is that the river represents the farmer’s livelihood and their ownership should be respected at all times. Besides, there are plenty of public areas to stop and rest.

Species
The Barrington River holds healthy populations of Australian bass, freshwater mullet, herring, catfish and eels.

The larger eels don’t seem even remotely frightened of humans. I had one follow my kayak for about 20m and at one stage, he gave my rudder a nudge before swimming away.

Techniques
At this point, I want to stress that I’m no expert and am still very much learning to fish this river. I’ve pulled a dozen fish from the Barrington and lost a similar number. These techniques are the ones that have worked for me so far, but there are so many more I can’t wait to try.

Soft plastics work well in the 65mm and 80mm sizes. Wrigglers and shads seem to get the most bites, but prawn imitations also get the fish on the chew. Allowing the plastic to sink next to the snag and then twiching the lure on the wind in with a few added pauses along the way can get some good results.

Crash divers are also an effective lure, especially ones that dive to around 3m. Bass seem to favour divers with a wide sway rather than a tight shimmy, so AC Invaders and other Aussie brands like GR are always my first choice. Give the lure three quick cranks to get it swimming at the right depth and then slow roll the lure back to your yak. Usually the bass hit on the first few winds, especially if you cast your offering close to a good snag.

I’ve had two hook-ups on surface and converted neither. In the first instance, I was casting a Jackall Hamakuru in rainbow trout and then slowly winding it back to my position. On the other occasion, I cast out a Tiemco soft shell cicada and was playing with my line when the bass hit. Locals have told me the surface bite can be incredible, but I’m yet to experience it.

Hot tip:
The first time I fished Barrington I came back with a donut and was lamenting my experience to a local farmer who I met on my way home.
He asked me what colour lure I was using and when I told him, he laughed and said it should be green or nothing. Since then, I’ve mostly used green coloured lures or slight variations and done quite well.

**The Kayak or Canoe**

I use my Native Slayer Propel 13 on the river, but I leave the pedals at home and use a paddle. The large boulders which sit in the middle of the river come close to surface and would destroy the propeller. The kayak was very stable, able to cope with the rapids and also had a lot of storage, which is important as you tend to use a lot of gear and need to pack plenty of food and water.

We rented an old Coleman Canoe and though it was heavy and a bit of a nuisance, I could see its value after the first set of rapids. They’re very sturdy and simple – perfect for this type of fishing. It was great to have one angler casting in the front while the other steered into or away from snags.

**Locations**

If you see a snag, give it a go. Even the smallest, half-submerged shrub can hold a fish. Bass seem to favour the slower pools and hold more off the logs than the stones, but don’t go past a snag without trying it out. If you think it looks fishy, it most likely is. Not a lot of people fish Barrington, so many snags remain untouched for months. It pays to try them all.

**Tackle**

The Barrington River is about as unforgiving as it gets. Tight snags, rapids and over hanging trees can destroy rod tips, leader and reels. If you tip, your reel and rod have to be able to survive and have to work as well wet as dry. I recommend using a stiff rod with plenty of power in the butt. It doesn’t have to be particularly expensive but should be able to cope with an absolute hammering while still having a bit of finesse for working plastics.

I use a Generation Black Pinster by Daiwa because it’s short at 6’4, so it doesn’t clip as many of the branches. It’s as tough as they come and doesn’t have a lot of bend, so I’m able to engage the fish almost instantly – this is important as they can get back into a snag very quickly. I coupled the rod with a Daiwa Freams 2000, which again, isn’t very expensive but has a smooth drag and can cope with the odd dunking. I use good quality 8lb braid and 10lb fluorocarbon leader.

Bring along a good pair of polaroid sunglasses. The water is crystal clear and with a good set of sunnies, it’s possible to see right down into a snag. The visual aspect of fishing the Barrington is one of the reasons why it’s so amazing. Watching a bass charge from under a log and belt a lure is heart stopping stuff. I use Spotters Grit with penetrator lenses. These are great for low light fishing both at dawn and dusk, right when the bass are usually biting.

**Timing**

Barrington fishes well from November through to February with another flurry again in April. Speaking to some of the locals, it became clear that the really big specimens to 45cm+ are usually caught once the water warms up and the river slows, which is after Christmas. Most of my fish have been taken around these times.

**Conclusion**

If you’re up for challenge, enjoy fishing in remote locations and are prepared to spend a few days searching for Australia’s best freshwater fighting fish, the Barrington River is for you. I can’t say that it’s easy, but it’s genuinely exciting and the scenery is some of the most beautiful stuff I have come across. This is one of those areas where you take only photos and leave only the wake of water behind you.

1 A good pair of polaroids is important, especially when fishing dawn and dusk.

2 A selection of lures with bit of green works well.

3 The author hooked-up to a solid bass that shook the hooks near the canoe.

4 A small bass caught using an AC Invader.

5 A stunning bass as it’s released.

6 The Barrington is one of the clearest, most picturesque and challenging rivers that the author has come across.
There are plenty of public areas to take a break and cast from the bank.

Tough rods and tougher reels are needed for fishing tight areas.