The Eildon Pondage: an all year trout option

Rod Grotaers | August 2007 » Feature Articles / Victoria & Tasmania / Freshwater / Eildon /

For trout fishers looking for an off-season fix, the Eildon Pondage has several advantages. It's close to Melbourne, it's heavily stocked with trout and, best of all, it's open for fishing all year round. VFM's Rod Grotaers – himself with plenty of experience – caught up with some other Pondage experts. Together they've spilt the beans on how to maximise your success on your next trip to 'The Pond'.

There are not many people who are truly at one with their favourite fishing destination. I’m talking about anglers who know what to do and how to do it, as well as how to stay productive through the good times and the bad. I happen to know a few anglers who can do just that on one of the hardest trout fishing destinations in Victoria – the Eildon Pondage.

I can hear you already – the Eildon Pondage a hard fishing destination? But it constantly receives liberations of those big brood trout from Snobs Creek Fish Hatchery? Last time you were there you nailed a 6 pounder?

Sure we all hear stories about these one off captures, but I’m talking about anglers that can land several fish every time they hit the water, which is a difficult thing to achieve. This article draws largely on information gleaned from these Pondage specialists, and is mixed in with a fair bit of my own experience. Hopefully the following tips will get you on to more of the monster trout this water is renowned for.

BAITFISHING

Anyone who’s ever visited the Pondage will know that baitfishing is very popular here. Most of my baitfishing information comes from Brian Fullwood, a well-known angler who haunted 'the Pond' a few years ago. I haven't seen Brian for a long time, but many of us can’t deny he was one of the most productive anglers on the banks. Even better, he was always willing to pass on his secrets to struggling anglers.

Amongst the most popular baits at the Pondage are mudeyes, which can be hard to get, but they’re worth their weight in gold. Both spider and couta mudeyes can be fished productively with a tiny weight underneath a quill float. Alternatively try using a piece ice as your casting weight. A small slipknot around the ice with the mudeye 50cm below it will get the distance you need. The ice will then melt, leaving you with a free-swimming mudeye in the middle of nowhere!

Keep your line greased to help keep the mudeye near the surface, and fish it with an open reel bail and a good nibble tip rod so there is nothing to spook a cruising fish or hinder its take.

One more thing, never hook the mudeye through the body. Instead, put a small size 16 hook through the wing of the bug so they swim straight and don’t die.

When fishing gents and mealworms, most anglers go straight for the berley and the berley cages. This can be a great way to fish, and if you can get the fish stirred up and feeding you are set for lots of action. But what if they are in one of those moods? You know that they’re down there, picking and choosing their next meal, but they just don’t want a bar of your bait.

The answer may not lie in your choice of bait but the way it is presented. Try scrapping the big berley feeder and lighten up the rig with a small sinker, long leader and tiny hook. Take the five gents off your size 12 hook, cut it off and retie on a size 18 or size 20. For starters this forces you to use a maximum 3lb leader. Then thread on one gent or mealworm. This is definitely a better option with finicky fish.

PowerBait is really productive commercially available bait and the coloured nuggets seem to attract anglers as well as they do fish. The pungent odour is dynamite as an attractant, and the ability to fish it at different depths makes it productive. The coloured nuggets actually float, so use half a nugget on a #12 hook on a running sinker rig with your leader set at about 1m. This means the bait will sit 1m off the bottom.

When fishing two rods, have your second bait at 2m. Keep chopping and changing until you have found the depth the fish are cruising at.

Fish with an open bail as the fish will generally run with the bait and the slightest resistance will cause the fish to drop it. When you notice the line peeling from your spool, then it is time to set the hook.

LURE FISHING

There are more lures on the market than you can poke a stick at, and for the right fish they will all be productive. The lures of choice for most anglers in the Pondage are the winged and spooned varieties. All anglers have their favourite colours, but most use the darker colours when the water is tainted by run-off from inflowing creeks. The lighter colours come into their own on those bright sunny days.

My information comes from a Shepparton angler who really pulls some big fish. Brett pretty well sticks solely with Wonder Wobblers or Wonder Crocs. There is a good selection of colours available from pink and orange through to subtile gold or silver.

It was Brett who unknowingly converted me, an avid flyfisher, to the way of the lure for a short time last year. For starters I didn’t know that lures could be cast as far as he does. The combination of quality graphite spin rods, 2kg braided line and monofilament leaders allows a 10g
Although Brett has several spots that he visits regularly, he usually relies on a number of factors to decide which area of the Pondage will be most productive for lurefishing.

The first factor is water height and flow and whether the power stations are causing the tailrace to flow. When the water is high the lower Pondage is generally the target for lure casters. Don’t feel compelled to stick to the deep water of the Goulburn River bed though. All the water is an option as a lot of fish cruise above those extensive weed beds near the island. This is where a 10g lure far outweighs the 10g winged ones. You can get great distance and with a steady retrieve bring the lure in above the weeds. Last year I caught a 10 pounder using exactly this technique.

When the tailrace is flowing, fishing off the bottom point or around the cemetery will be productive. The turbid water brings down all manner of food and stunned fingerlings to the waiting fish. Often it almost puts them into a feeding frenzy as they gorge themselves.

The second factor is when and where the latest liberations occurred. Years ago Fisheries used to dump the fish from the truck into the water near the boat ramp. It was great fishing there for the next few days as the fish seemed to take time to disperse and look for new feeding grounds. Thankfully the times have changed and now they are liberated throughout the Pondage by boat. However, there are times when the liberations are larger than usual, for example 500 fish up to 3kg.

These liberated fish usually sit and sulk in sheltered bays for a while before they gain the confidence to explore. After a big liberation, Nursery Corner is a great place to target.

The third factor is time of year. In particular, anyone who fishes the Pondage late in the season will tell you about those huge fish that jump and slap themselves on the water. Trout need running water to drop their eggs, something that the Pondage generally lacks. To break these up so they can resolve them and not become egg bound, these big fish slap themselves on the water.

I always thought that these were not worth targeting as they were not feeding. Brett proved me wrong! He not only cast at these fish but can usually entice a strike from them. I shudder to think how many opportunities I missed over the years by not casting at them.

**FLYFISHING**

Finally the area where I actually can give some first hand advice. Most flyfishers target the top Pondage, with favourite spots being the cemetery, out from the cricket oval and in towards the drains and the bay on the opposite side. All these areas offer great wading opportunities when the levels are lower. On clear days these areas also become great polarising possibilities with some very large fish cruising the shallower water.

If levels drop extremely low, as they often do during the closed season, knowledgeable anglers can negotiate their way out to the old Goulburn River bed. There is a maze of gutters and channels to navigate as you fish your way out. Keep in mid that trout use these gutters and channels as their road map, so carefully fish each one, no matter how deep or shallow, before you wade through it.

An area on the bottom Pondage worth a try is the bank parallel with the road from the bridge heading back towards the island. The bay towards the island and the road out to the island also produce some great fishing. There are large expanses of weed beds providing a smorgasbord of food for cruising trout.

There is a huge variety of food in the Pondage, from stick caddis, gudgeon and midge pupae all the way through to a healthy amount of smelt and yabbies. This is where fly selection can play a big role in an angler’s productivity.

Firstly you have to watch to see how the trout are feeding. If you get those telltale signs of large fish rushing the shallows and crashing through schools of fleeing smelt, then a smelt pattern is the obvious choice. A couple of good commercial patterns are BMS and Zonkers. A personal favourite is Mick Hall’s Laser Minnow, look it up on www.flyflickers.com.

If the trout are slowly porpoising, they can be feeding on small stick caddis or midge pupae, both of which can be imitated with smaller nymphs or buzzer patterns. Fish these slowly in front of rising fish. Anglers in the know say that fast, accurate casting and presentation, is more important than exact fly choice. This means when you spot the fish, get your fly on its nose fast.

Finally, there are those days when nothing is moving. You know the fish are still feeding, but what on? This is when I turn to Woolly Buggers, Mrs Simpsons and Bushys Horrors. All are great flies for a bit of exploration during those ‘chuck it and chance it’ moments. Days like this when you get into that mindless retrieve, and you have fished for two hours for not one pull, can more often than not produce the trophy fish. Just hope you’re still switched on enough to do your job!

For flyfishermen the Pondage can really turn it on some days. I have had days of 23 fish – and this is not just a fisherman’s story! When the fish are honed in on a food source and you hit the right pattern, retrieve, and cast, then you can get some amazing tallies.

There are many anglers that talk the Pondage down using phrases such as ‘stupid fish’, ‘fish bowl’ or ‘hatchery hacks’. In five years of owning a local tackle shop, I heard them all. These people reminisce about the ‘good old days’ when hatchery fish were big but were also missing tails, noses and fins due to spending their lives in concrete ponds. Those trout were not even a shadow on the majority of fish liberated over the past five years. There are many Pondage trout donning the walls of suburban houses that are equally worthy of their place as any lake or river fish.

Generally those who are negative towards the Elidon Pondage are the ones who are unproductive. For mine, it’s a great water that receives a fantastic stocking programs. Like all waters it has good and bad days, and takes a lot of homework to figure it out properly.
So, with the river trout season closed, why not give the Pondage a try? It is open all year round and by happy coincidence it usually fishes best during the river closed season.

Facts

1

A FAMILY FRIENDLY FISHERY

The Eildon Pondage is one of five designated ‘Premier Lakes’ in Victoria. It is approximately 150ha in area and comprises an upper and lower pondage. The water is regularly stocked with ‘ready-to-catch’ trout of 1kg or more, as well as thousands of smaller trout each year. No boating is allowed on the Pondage.

The Pondage is located immediately below Lake Eildon, right next to the township of Eildon, approximately 160km northeast of Melbourne. Family friendly facilities have been established around much of the shore, including Futurefish Fishing Trails navigating the entire bottom pondage and access roads around the top pondage. The banks slope gently and offer a relatively safe environment for kids to enjoy and learn about fishing. There are also toilets, barbeques, picnic tables and playground equipment, plus a purpose built pier that provides fishing access for disabled anglers.

2

2006 TROUT STOCKINGS IN EILDON PONDAGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Brown Trout No.</th>
<th>Average Weight (kg)</th>
<th>Rainbow Trout No.</th>
<th>Average Weight (kg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>965</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3

GEAR FOR THE PONDAGE

Baits: Mudeye, gents, Power Bait

Lures: Wonder Wobblers, Wonder Crocs, Tassie Devils

Flies: Laser Minnow, BMS, Zonker, nymphs, Woolly Bugger, Mrs Simpson, Bushys Horror

Images
A great view of the Eildon Pondage from the top of the spillway.

The Eildon Pondage provides peaceful water to fish for trout using either fly, lure or bait.

A trout this size will test your gear to its limits so make sure you're prepared.