Land of the giants
Stephen Booth | October 2006 » Feature Articles /

Lake Awoonga developed such an outstanding reputation in 2005 that catching a metre-long barramundi there barely raises an eyebrow. The true target these days are the 1.2m beasts that call this massive lake home – and there are plenty of them in there!

How to get there

Lake Awoonga is located just 30km south of Gladstone. Its nearest town is Benaraby, a short 5km from the boat ramp. If you’re travelling from Brisbane, drive along the Bruce Highway, pass through Benaraby and take the well signed turn-off to the lake on the left, just north of Benaraby. Then just follow the road to the recreation area and boat ramp. From Brisbane, Lake Awoonga is a comfortable seven-hour drive and roughly 550km.

If you’re travelling from Gladstone, follow the Bruce Highway south until you reach the 80km/h sign on the outskirts of Benaraby. The turn-off is well signed and is located on the right before you reach the main part of town. Follow the road to the lake and recreation area.

Facilities

If you travel to the lake and forget your food or tackle, there are limited supplies available in the small convenience store so you can still have a fish and a meal. The campground has communal showers and toilets and plenty of space, but be aware that over the warmer months most sites are booked a year in advance.

Awoonga has an excellent boat ramp with two lanes of concrete extending well into the lake. The ramp’s information board reminds anglers of the rules and regulations and what they may catch. There is plenty of parking, but this can fill up when the campground is full and there are a lot of day visitors. Trailer theft isn’t unheard of here as the ramp is a fair distance from the campground, so take the necessary precautions.

The recreation area has picnic shelters and plenty of open space so you can relax and enjoy the surrounds. Walking tracks start from the recreation area and are popular with day visitors. The tracks are well signed and are not too difficult for most people. But let’s be serious, we’re going there for the fishing – and the fishing has been absolutely amazing for the last 18 months.

One option for anglers is to book the modern houseboat that operates on the lake, although you’ll have to book very early if you want to fish during the warmer months. The houseboat is self-contained and gives anglers a great chance to live on the lake and be close to the barra action for their entire stay.

Boating restriction

The boat ramp and water access is open 24 hours a day, so anglers can launch and retrieve whenever it suits them. The recreation area, however, is only open between 7am-8pm daily. Entry is free to both the ramp and the recreation area.

There are no limits to horsepower or outboard type on Awoonga, so most anglers can use their current craft to access the far reaches of the lake as they fish for the barra. There is however a 6-knot zone near the recreation area to keep boaters away from swimmers and day trippers. It is clearly marked with large buoys, so do the right thing and keep out of the zone or abide by the speed limits.

Available Species

There are heaps of fish in Lake Awoonga, consisting of plenty of popular species and lots of baitfish for the bigger ones to grow fat on. The species present include Agassiz’s glass perch, bony bream, snub-nose garfish, fly-specked hardhead, long-finned eel, eel-tail catfish, forktail catfish, Hyrtl’s tandan, sea mullet, gudgeon, banded grunter, mouth almighty, eastern rainbowfish, spangled perch, longtom, barramundi, mangrove jack, saratoga, silver perch, sleepy cod, sooty grunter and golden perch.

Anglers come to Lake Awoonga to catch some of the two million plus barra that call this lake home. Many of the barra are now over the magic metre mark, with the largest caught weighing in just over 30kg – an awesome fish anywhere let alone in a freshwater lake.

Skilled anglers have recently developed methods to target barramundi all year round, making Awoonga a true 12-month fishery. Almost 300,000 fish are released each year into Awoonga, including barramundi, mullet and mangrove jack. It’s believed that Lake Awoonga is the highest stocked lake in Australia for mangrove jack. Anglers certainly encounter the occasional jack when chasing barra.

Three successful techniques

Swim baits in the shallows

Fishing soft plastic swim baits for barramundi has taken a little while to get noticed by mainstream anglers. Good anglers like Steve Morgan, John Schofield, Matt Mott and Rod Collings have been developing and mastering swim bait techniques for a few years and their results...
speak volumes about this technique’s viability.

Fishing swim baits can be very easy. At its simplest you find a good looking bank, cast your swim bait out, let it sink to the bottom or to the top of the weed and wind it back in with a medium paced retrieve. Most of the swim bait converts will tell you there is little need to wiggle and jiggle the rod tip or to do fast rips followed by pauses. Simply cast the lure out and wind it in while hanging onto your rod.

The key to success is finding the fish, and to do this Matt Mott suggests you brush over a bank quickly. If you get a hit or a hook up, go back 50m and really work over the area 50m either side of the strike. Barra, like most fish, will position themselves on the best bank and, while they don’t really school, they will hang in close proximity while they are up on the flats and feeding.

**Trolling deep divers**

Trolling deep diving minnows is all about finding the fish. You will need a good sounder and you will have to be able to interpret sounder readings.

Most barra trolling is carried out during the day when the fish in the shallows have shut down. Finding lone trees on an open flat, clear thermoclines and edges of old riverbeds are all good clues for catching barra on the troll in Awoonga. Barra love to hang where they can easily obtain food or, if they are not feeding, where the water temperature, oxygen level and a hundred other influencing factors are at their optimum for the fish.

Choose a lure that runs just above the depth the fish are holding at, and troll at a slow pace. There is no huge need to work your lure while trolling, but many anglers believe this makes a difference to overall catch rates. I prefer to work the lure a bit to just give it a little bit more action than the flat cadence of a steadily trolled lure. Bear in mind that the wind at Awoonga will often create waves that alter the lure’s troll depth and speed, so you may not have to worry about adding extra action to the lure.

**Casting hard-bodied lures**

Casting hard-bodied lures is the most used technique for catching barra in Awoonga. It’s a direct result of angler conditioning from the inlets and estuaries where casting lures catches plenty of fish, and it works in Awoonga too – plenty of fish are caught here by anglers casting hard-bodied lures.

Unlike swim baits, almost every angler believes you have to work a hard-bodied lure hard for best results. The basic technique is to cast your lure out, crank it down to the running depth and then really start working the rod hard. This will make the lure appear like a wounded fish struggling for its life and the barra, being a lazy creature, will take the opportunity to have a feed.

Having said that, most good hard-bodied lure casters have a repertoire of several retrieves for different scenarios.

Jason Wilhelm is considered one of the best at lure casting in Awoonga and he changes retrieves from a flat-out wind with shallow diving minnows to a real rod-working affair with deep diving minnows. Jason explained that when the barra are chasing the garfish, a fast paced retrieve with a shallow diver in amongst the weed beds can get you plenty of strikes that almost jar the rod from your grasp. But if the barra are a little sluggish and feeding on bony bream or mouth almighty, a deep diver worked hard around the trees and drop-offs produces better results.

**Best times**

While many anglers will say the best time is the warmer months of the year around a full moon, there are many others who believe the fishing can be good at any time of the year and at any moon phase. To be in with the best chance though, look to fish Awoonga from September-March and if you can coincide this with the lead-up to a full moon, all the better.

Night fishing is popular with lurefishers as it’s commonly believed that barra move from the deeper water into the shallows in the low light periods to actively feed. Hard-bodied minnows like Halco Scorpios, Bombers, Leads Lures and Lively Lures all work well in the shallows, but it’s the plastics like Tsunamis and Squidy Slick Rigs that have been finding increasing favour with many lure casters.

Lure trolls have amazing success during daylight hours trolling deep divers in relatively open water, and there are few better lures than the Halco Crazy Deep Scorpion, Killalure Classic Barra 20+ or the Richo’s Deep Diver.

As local fishing gun Jason Wilhelm says, the best time to fish Lake Awoonga is when you’re there. He says you shouldn’t be put off by wind, water temperature or time of day because you can’t catch a fish if you’re not fishing.

That’s definitely worth considering given the limited time that we get to fish these days. When you can get away, seize the opportunity and fish hard and you will be rewarded at this lake.

**Accommodation (on or off-site)**

Lake Awoonga has a range of on-lake and off-lake accommodation options to suit any budget.

On the lake you can stay at Lake Awoonga Caravan Park (07 4975 0155) where there are limited self-contained units, powered and unpowered sites and an excellent amenities block. The other option is to hire the houseboat from the operators (07 4975 0155) or through the Caravan Park.

If you don’t mind a 10-minute drive to the lake you can stay at several motels or caravan parks in Benaraby. The Benaraby Hilltop Motel (07...
4975 0211) has self-contained units and motel rooms as well as an excellent diner that serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, and you won’t be hungry if you take on the rump steak. The Hilltop is about 200m from the turn off to the lake and provides very easy access.

Willowgrove on the River (1800 002 234) is a large caravan park with self contained units, powered and unpowered sites with one of the best camp kitchens you’re likely to come across. It’s at the southern end of town next to the petrol station and the Boyne River Bridge.

Greenacres (07 4975 0136) is a motel/caravan park right on the turn-off to the dam. It has limited units that are air-conditioned and plenty of powered and unpowered sites for those looking to camp. There is a communal kitchen or, for those in the units, meals can be delivered to your door.

Facts

Pros and Cons

Pros
- Heavily stocked
- Easily accessed
- Within reach of most Queenslanders for a weekend trip
- Guides available for hire
- Big fish
- 24-hour access
- Can troll or cast
- Plenty of sheltered bays
- Range of accommodation

Cons
- Close to coast and can be very windy
- A solid seven-hour drive from Brisbane CBD
- A massive lake with big arms full of timber
- Main basin can be treacherous in high winds

Facts

What to pack

Tackle
- 6-8kg baitcasting or threadline tackle
- 30-50lb braid line
- 40-80lb monofilament leader

Lures
- Halco Scorpion Crazy Deep
Lively Lures Arafura Barra
Killalure Classic Barra
Richo’s Deep Diver
BS2
Bomber Long A
Leads Lure Barra
Squidgy Slick Rig 80mm
Storm Wild Eye Shad
Tsunami

Facts

PROFESSIONAL Guides
Matthew Mott Sportfishing Charters
Ph: (07) 4168 4811

Images

Marc Ainsworth with a great barra caught casting a 80mm Squidgy Slick Rig into the shallows at night.
Releasing fish in impoundments is a debated subject, but if you're not going to eat them, then letting them go to provide another angler the chance to catch them is fine.

Another barra falls to a Slick Rig presented in shallow and hard up against a weed bed.
Matt Mott guides on Lake Awoonga and can provide a great holiday fishing experience for anglers travelling from the main population centres.