Jewfish fever is catching
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Sydney is in the grip of jewfish fever, spurred on by one of the best jew seasons in many years.

They are being caught in the upper estuaries, the lower Harbour and on the beaches. The secret is slowly leaking out that Winter can produce possibly the best jewfish action of the year.

These are probably the hardest of all fish to crack the code for consistent success but here are a few tips that should make it a bit easier.

TIDES

As with any fish, you will fluke one on any tide if they are hungry enough and you drop the right bait on their nose.

This is where we need to divide jew behaviour into two categories. They spend most of their time sitting hard up against or in structure doing nothing. They have a slower metabolism than, say, kingfish and therefore do not need to feed as much. So if you can locate one of their holding positions and drop a perfectly presented bait right on their nose then you might tempt one on any tide.

This is a very hit-and-miss technique mainly because of the pinpoint accuracy required for your bait positioning. You might only have a window of three square metres. You would have to know with exactly where the fish are sitting and then be able to position your boat and then your bait perfectly to access them.

Don’t forget, they might be right back in a cave or a wreck. There is some variation on this theory when they are in the upper estuaries and there’s less structure but I’ll go into that later.

On the turn of the tide they come out to feed. The turn of the high and the first hour-and-a-half is the prime time. The turn of the low and the first 90 minutes of the run in is your next-best bet. This is the time of least tidal flow and reflects jew’s lazy nature.

You might find jew in either their holding grounds or their feeding grounds. As an example, imagine a bommie just out behind a surf beach where jew hold. On the turn of the tide they will come out of cover and make their way to a food-rich surf gutter to feed. The bommie is the holding ground and the gutter is the feeding ground.

Being in the vicinity of the holding structure gives you your best shot at these fish. They will pass by your offerings as they make their way out to the feeding grounds and again as they make their way back. Obviously they will be hungrier on their way out than when they return after a feed so right on the turn of the high or low, when they first make their move out, is the ultimate time to be near holding cover. You will catch good jew during the day if all conditions are right.

STRUCTURE

Go and have a look at the jewies in Sydney Aquarium. They pick the darkest, quietest, cave-like corner in the tank. Divers tell me that they hang in wrecks, caves, ledges, pylons and under marinas.

Jewfish are different from kings, which hang around structure for reference, food and shade. Jew actually like to get inside the structure for security. As I said earlier, they are hard to access with a bait or lure when they are stacked up the back of a cave; this is speargun territory.

Don’t always assume that the structure needs to be deep, either. I know of at least one patch of washy, gnarly bommies within casting distance from shore that produces jew up to 17kg that sit in less than 5m of water.

What about when they move well upstream into the mangrove estuaries, where there is very little structure? This makes things a bit easier regarding all-tide access.

They will be found sitting in the bottom of the deepest holes but in generally open water. This means that you can reach them with a bait or lure through any stage of the tide.

Of course you will still do better during those tide changes when they are actively feeding. Bridges are a major source of artificial structure in an environment where there would otherwise be none. These are prime spots in the upper reaches, especially for lure-chuckers.

BAIT

There are a number of baits you can use for jew but the most important factor for all of them is freshness.

We picked up a 25kg jew the other day and a few minutes later a kingfish of about 60cm or 2.5kg. Out of interest, I wanted to see how the king fitted into the jew’s mouth and was surprised to find that it didn’t even touch the sides!
Don’t be scared to put out really big baits if you are after big jew. They have huge mouths so they can eat big prey. If you want to catch quality jew consistently you are going to have to master squid fishing. Squid are the No 1 bait and all the really good jew fishos that I know are also gun squid fishos.

Don’t make the mistake of trying to find a way around this. Sashimi-quality squid go for about $40 a kilo and they are the closest you will get to an alternative. My formula is that the squid has to be back in the water as a bait a maximum of six hours after it was caught – not bought.

Even on the beach, where you wouldn’t expect to find squid, they still rate as the top bait. Other good baits include large live baits like tailor and mullet but you will need to come up with a good method of controlling them or you can end up in an awful tangle, especially at night.

Big fillets of the abovementioned fish (leave the head on one side and the tail on the other) are also good. Most of the bigger jewies and kings that I catch have silver biddies in their guts so if you can find a way to catch them then they are obviously a great bait, too.

LURES

Soft plastics have had a huge influence in the success of luring jewies in recent years. Their main attribute over hard lures is their ability to maintain contact with the bottom.

They seem to be most effective in the shallower (down to 12m) upper reaches but I don’t know of any trials in the deeper reaches of the lower Harbour. My next target is to nail one off a surf beach and I think big heavy plastics will be most suited. Kokoda Big Eye Buffs in 10cm, 14cm and 20cm models are top producers, as are Storm Wild Eye Shads in 13cm and 15cm. Try the new luminous model at night around the bridges.

SEASON

Two major factors influence jewfish movement into the harbours and rivers in the cooler months. First is the return of the mullet from their spawning run to the beaches in May. Then the big squid move into the coastal kelp beds for breeding. This is good news because squid, so critical for bait, are big and easy to catch.

To a lesser degree May-June is also a time for big and abundant tailor in the harbours. May, June and July are your prime months but that’s not to say that November to May isn’t worth a shot.

MOON

The worst week is the week after and including the night of the full moon. The best weeks are the lead-up to the full and new moon. Its no coincidence that the perfect tides during these periods fall early morning and late afternoon in low light conditions.

WEATHER

At this time of year best bites will occur when the wind is blowing north-west and then swings south-west or south. In other words, just before a cold front.

It’s a narrow window of opportunity and it doesn’t seem to matter too much whether it’s overcast or bright and sunny. Of course, this is not the only time they feed, it’s just the best.