Jewies – the abridged version
Jamie Robley | November 2003 » Area Articles / New South Wales / Central Coast / Central Coast /

THE LITTLE blue plastic handline spool spun out of control as it hurtled across the old wooden bridge, almost landing in the drink. Luckily, I grabbed it in time and felt the light line stretching as the fish at the other end tried to swim some more.

At first I thought it to be a big bream or small ray, but within a couple of minutes a nice school jew emerged from the dark water. Not my first for the species, but the first one I had caught while fishing from a bridge.

At the same time, a heavy overhead outfit that another fellow had laid down on the old bridge growled to life. A slightly larger school jewfish had taken the live tailor he had set right next to one of the concrete pylons. At around 6kg, his fish looked quite impressive under the dim street lights. I’ll never forget that night, as it would lead me down a very long and winding road – a road full of bridges, jewfish, rain and many sleepless nights!

My partner in crime at that stage was Phil Bennett and we spent every weekend for the next year or so in search of the elusive jewie. I still don’t know if it was just a lot of bad luck or perhaps a lack of knowledge, but we got to the point of fully expecting not to catch one each time we went. One night it would be Woy Woy, the next Gosford rail bridge. Every other night it would be the ‘punt bridge’ at East Gosford and occasionally some other spot like Patonga, Putty Beach or Ettalong. We would often see a pile of fresh jewie scales or hear of a recent capture at one of these spots. One time we had to endure the sight of a lucky angler walking straight past us with a big jewie slung over his shoulder.

Some lucky anglers have caught jewfish the first time they have tried; others may have managed a big one (more than 25kg) very early in their quest for these great fish. Unfortunately, such luck has rarely been on my side. There is, however, a major benefit of doing it tough – you tend to learn more in the long run and, after a while, success becomes much more consistent.

KEY IDEAS

Nothing will ever replace experience but a few pointers along the way should help. So here are some key ideas about catching jewfish around bridges. Although most of my time has been spent fishing around the Central Coast, most of the information presented here would be applicable right along the east coast.

Without question, location is the single most important factor. Some estuaries hold large numbers of jewies while others are hardly worth bothering about. In general, the deeper the mouth of an estuary, the more likely it is to hold them. Some good examples are Sydney Harbour, the Hawkesbury River, Brisbane Waters and the big northern rivers like the Macleay, Richmond and Clarence.

Once inside the estuary, jewfish don’t necessarily seek out the deepest water. Rather, they like the spots with the best overhead cover and food supply. That’s where bridges come in. In most cases, road or rail bridges are built over the narrowest section of a river. As the tide flows through such ‘gateways’, it concentrates baitfish, prawns and squid – all perfect food items for large predators.

The bridge structure itself only adds to the situation, with big concrete or wooden pylons creating extra shelter for predator and prey. So much the better if the bridge has strong overhead lighting, which can make for quite an active marine environment once the sun sets.

Jewfish can be targeted from a boat, the adjacent shoreline or even the bridge itself. Nine times out of 10, the jewies will be found very close to the pylons and this is a crucial thing to remember. When it comes time to fish, keep in mind where to position yourself so that your bait or lure can be cast as close to the pylons as possible. Lures can be repeatedly cast, but baits may need to be held in position with a heavy sinker.

If possible, though, try to use the lightest sinker that will still hold a bait down in the current. In many spots I’ve fished a No 5 or No 6 ball sinker does the job but with a big bait and a strong current, you may have to go up to a No 8 or No 9. There are also times when a bait should be presented on or near the surface and so no sinker may be required at all.

Apart from the bridge pylons, the other place to present baits or lures is along the shadow line cast by overhead street lighting at night. Jewfish often use this line to ambush small tailor, herring or mullet. Swimming a metre or two under the surface in the dark water, a jewie can easily dart out into the lighter water and snatch a quick meal. So if you go about things the right way, that meal could be your live bait or lure.

BEST TIDES

In most cases, the best time to catch jewies around bridges is an hour either side of the top or bottom of the tide. If you were to fish for three hours, it could be most beneficial to fish the last two hours of the run in and the first hour of the run out, or the last two hours of the run out and the first hour of the run in, depending on the spot. When I first started having success on jewies around bridges, I believed that the bigger tides, high water of 1.7 metres or more, were the most productive. Now I reckon it depends more on the location. Some produce better results with smaller tides, others on the big tides and in some cases it doesn’t matter so much. That’s really something to be worked out spot by spot.
Season and weather are other factors to consider. The best months are generally from about November to May, as this is the time when prawns, squid and small baitfish are most active. At a couple of bridges I’ve fished large numbers of mullet show up in March and April, so the jewfish are also there to take advantage of this plentiful food source.

Another thing that I’ve learned over the years is that it certainly doesn’t have to be raining to bring on a jewfish bite. Too much rain will simply drive prawns and baitfish further down the system and the jewies will follow. On the other hand, the first two days during or immediately after heavy rainfall can really switch jewfish on as they ambush food items flushed down from the upper reaches. You have to be on the ball and fish the first couple of tide changes during such periods. If you leave it too late it’s easy to miss the action. Apart from rainfall, a rising or high barometer is something else to look out for.

In most cases it’s often better to target flood-time jew with lures, unless you can secure some first-class live bait like mullet, tailor, herring or pike. Catching live baits like these can be a difficult exercise in murky water, so try to bring along a couple of lures as back-up, even if you really intend to do some live-baiting.

There are heaps of lures worth considering for bridge jewfish. In the past, big floating minnows like the Bombers, Nilsmasters and Rapalas were popular and productive choices. In more recent times soft plastics have really emerged as first-class jewie lures. Plenty of small school jew have fallen to bream-sized rubber tails, although larger plastics like the Storm Wildeye Shad are perhaps more appropriate if you aim to catch fish over 5kg.

Regardless of the type of lure you use, remember to fish it close to the bridge pylons or along that all-important shadow line. You may pick up a fish or two out in open water but the closer to those pylons your lure lands, the better the chance of a hook-up. Fish the lure slowly and thoughtfully and be prepared for a bump at any time. When using plastics it may be a good idea to allow the fish a few seconds to mouth the lure properly before striking.

As for gear to use, this isn’t the type of fishing to try a light-tackle approach. Sure, there’s always a chance of a hooked fish swimming out into open water but there’s an even better chance that it will head straight for a concrete pylon. I prefer 15kg to 20kg mono on a small lever drag such as the Shimano TLD 15 or TLD 25 for live-baiting and 10kg to 12kg mono for lure-casting. This is one type of fishing where I’ll opt for mono over braided or fused line because of the extra cushioning effect it has during a short-range battle and the better abrasion resistance of nylon when pulled tight around sharp concrete pylons.

One thing that Phil and I did get right back in our early days is persistence. It may have been a bit silly to persist at the wrong times, but if you persist when the tides, season and weather are favourable, there’s a very high chance of success.

Straight from the water, a jewfish is a very impressive looking creature. It’s well worth all the effort when you do catch your first bridge jewie.

One of the best baits you could use for jewfish around bridges is the mullet. They are easily caught on small hooks and bread baits and can be kept alive for hours with the help of an aerator.

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