The Hopkins River Estuary

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Despite running adjacent to a city of around 30,000 people, Warrnambool’s Hopkins River, in southwest Victoria, is a very productive place to wet a line.

The main target species are bream and estuary perch. Yellow-eye mullet are also common and have their following of anglers. Australian salmon are prevalent but are normally small and usually nothing more than nuisance value. Mulloway, silver trevally and luderick are occasionally encountered – often enough to be in the back of anglers’ minds.

It is a year round location, as even in the heaviest floods a thinking angler can catch fish. With plenty of bank access and three boat ramps located along its 8km estuary section it is a very accessible fishery that provides a variety of different angling environments. Excellent bait, lure casting, trolling and flyfishing areas exist all in close proximity of each other.

Baitfishing

The key to successful baitfishing is fresh bait. Podworm, brown shell, crabs, shrimp and a variety of small baitfish are all easily obtained in the river itself. The only times bait gathering can become difficult are during times of a prolonged heavy freshwater flush or when water levels get extremely high due to the river mouth blocking over.

Bass yabbies (clickers) and spew worms need to be obtained elsewhere. Using crickets on the surface for perch is also popular in the late summer months. If lack of time or unsuitable bait gathering equipment hinders you then the Flaxman St store usually has a great selection of fresh local bait. If you must use frozen bait, glassies are probably the most reliable.

The tidal flow in the Hopkins is usually not very strong, even if the mouth is open, so heavy weights are not required to hold baits in place. However, a stronger line than usually used for bream fishing is needed as much of the river contains line cutting rocks and coral outcrops. There are many quality varieties of mono line in the 5-7kg range that have fine enough diameters to suit bream angling.

Sandy areas below the bridge, the bridge itself, the shoreline below Deakin from the pier and upstream, and Jubilee Park upstream from the boat ramp are all easily accessible, productive and comfortable areas to bait fish from the bank. With a boat the river becomes fully accessible, just be careful of areas of shallow reefs when travelling in areas that are unknown to you.

Hard-bodied lures

Despite being a productive baitfishing location, with a wide variety of baits on hand, the Hopkins is now becoming a popular venue for using artificial forms of tempting fish. Soft plastics dominate the thinking of most lure anglers at present, but there are still many times when a hard-bodied lure is a good option.

During low light periods the extra size and vibration of a hard-bodied lure tends to make for an easier target for the fish to find. As opposed to soft plastic techniques, which often rely on slower presentations, fishing a hard-bodied lure allows you to cover more water quickly during this peak period.

There are many shallow rock and coral strewn areas where a suspending or floating lure tends to work better than a plastic, which can get snagged on the bottom during pauses in the retrieve. Any small lure in the 5cm range will be effective. I prefer natural colours but others have success with pinks and fluoro greens.

On calm evenings, fishing with surface lures can produce some exciting action with estuary perch and even the odd bream taking the lures. Both hard-bodied and soft plastic lures induce strikes but the hard-bodied lures seem to give a much better hook up rate.

Trolling

Trolling hard-bodied lures is also a productive way of catching fish in the Hopkins. It is a relaxing yet productive way of getting into fishing artificials, without the energy or effort of lure casting or flyfishing.

When you compare trolling in the Hopkins to trolling for trout there is usually a lot more action when targeting the estuary species. There are many large open areas of water with a fairly consistent depth in the river that lend themselves to trolling.

The Bay of Biscay, around Deakin University and Kings Head all have areas between 1.5-3m deep that suit the running depths of most small diving lures. These areas are punctuated by lots of coral outcrops, small drop-offs and weedbeds that can be effectively covered by trolling.

One of the major difficulties with trolling as an effective technique, is the mortality rate on lures. With around 30m of line out, there is a fair distance between you and the fish. Anywhere between you and your recently hooked quarry, could be a line cutting piece of coral that can bring you to grief, whether the fish knows it’s there or not. Save your favourite hard-bodied lures for casting.
An electric motor is an obvious advantage when trolling, but if you don’t have one there are often other alternatives. Simply drifting with the wind (which is often blowing in Warrnambool!) and letting the lures trail out the back is more effective than having the main motor on.

**Soft plastics**

Soft plastic fishing seems to be the happy medium between bait and hard-bodied lure fishing, combining the mobility of lurefishing with the finesse of baitfishing. If the soft plastic craze hasn’t caught up with you yet, and you’re looking for somewhere to give it a try, then the Hopkins is a reliable location to get you started.

Paddle-tails, stickbaits, grub-tails, round heads, bullet heads, finesse heads, Squidgies, Berkleys, Atomics – they all work. It’s amazing how different some plastics look in different water conditions. To ensure that your plastic is rigged correctly, dangle it in the water and see how it looks. If you think it looks good enough for a fish to eat it, then it probably will.

During the brighter time of day, or when the surface water column is dirty, be prepared to use a jighead up to 3.5g to get down to where the fish are. Where hard-bodied lure sessions usually revolved around the few hours either side of dawn and dusk, soft plastics can be effective right throughout the day due to their ability to be fished through the entire water column.

As stated earlier, one of the benefits of soft plastic fishing is increased mobility compared to baitfishing. Hence, operating from a boat is almost a necessity. There isn’t a section of the river where you can’t target fish using plastics. You can cover quite a few areas quicker than if you were baitfishing and hopefully eventually locate some fish. If one depth, area or environment isn’t producing, you can quickly and easily try another. Making the investment in specialist soft plastic tackle such as braided line, fluorocarbon leaders and quality rods and reels makes a significant contribution to your ability to successfully fish plastics.

**Flyfishing**

If soft plastic fishing is a recent innovation then flyfishing has been a long established artificial method of angling in the river. Even non-flyfishers have used the fly behind a bubble float technique as a productive method of targeting perch for many years.

For the shore-bound flyfisher, good land-based locations exist below the bridge and around Jubilee Park. The boat flyfisher can usually find favourable winds or shelter along some section of the river with the many cliffs.

The proliferation of small to medium sized perch can make great targets. Before the soft plastic explosion, at times when hard-bodied lures weren’t working, a switch to the fly rod would often be successful on the perch. Surface fishing calm bays at dawn or dusk with a Muddler Minnow, or similar surface fly, can result in some exciting action. At other times subsurface presentations will result in attention from both bream and perch. The most common techniques are floating line with a slightly weighted fly or an intermediate line. Like the hard-bodied lures, natural colours work the best.

**FISH conservation**

Conservation of fish stocks is important in an enclosed system like the Hopkins. In the estuary section there are no real inaccessible areas where the fish can retreat to and they can be easily targeted pretty much 12 months of the year.

Despite this, the river continues to produce good numbers of bream, with fish of 1kg or over not all that rare. The perch population is also good with most around 400-700g. Larger fish are present but can be elusive at times.

Much research has been done in recent years, which indicates that local bream take up to nine years to reach legal size. Perch reach legal size quicker, but then growth slows markedly. Hence, making that large bream or perch you’ve just caught a very old fish.

Many anglers are tagging and releasing fish to assist fisheries with this important research. Be on the look out for these tagged fish when fishing in the Hopkins and report any captures to Southwest Fishcare (e-mail address hidden) or drop the tag into the Warrnambool DPI Offices at 78 Henna St.

Weight to length rulers have also been produced by the local Southwest Regional Fishcare Program to encourage catch and release. With the promotion of catch and release for some larger, or not required fish, the Hopkins will hopefully continue to produce quality fishing for years to come.

**CAP**

1. This 45cm bream was taken on a trolled Deception Shrimp.
2. Bream and perch often live in the same snags. These fish taken in consecutive casts to the same snag.
3. Surprises can occur when fishing soft plastics. Dan Gritti with a 4.8kg mulloway taken on a 50mm soft plastic.
4. Bream take an amazing variety of soft plastics.
5. Most perch in the Hopkins River range 400-700g, but some larger fish exist like this 1.5kg specimen.
6. This a 3kg mulloway took a hard-bodied lure off the surface when fishing for perch in about 1m of water.
7. This quality bream was taken on a Crawdad hard-bodied lure.

8. perch

Images