Barwon River estuary

Neil Slater | November 2004 » Feature Articles /

The Barwon River estuary can be one of the toughest assignments on an angler’s list of ‘to do’ areas. The lower reaches are shallow, subject to big tidal flows, laced with sandbars and have little or no structure in some areas. The upper reaches are also dotted with sandbars, subject to demoralising tidal flows and are quite open with some structure, although it’s not immediately obvious. Not to mention after periods of heavy rain – erggh... nothing but coffee for the whole tide cycle.

If that’s not enough, there are always thousands of undersized salmon, miniature mullet, finger-nipping sand crabs and terrible toadies to keep you busy!

That said, many of you are probably wondering why this estuary continually draws anglers from all corners of the state? Well, there is a small matter of 20kg mulloway, 50cm bream, 45cm+ whiting, hordes of elephant fish and the odd calamari!

Land-Based fishing

There are many good land-based fishing locations right along the lower reaches of river. River Pde ends a couple of hundred metres north of the Sheepwash Rd T-intersection and it is foot power from there. This section is known as ‘the Sheepwash’ and produces some of the best fishing in the river.

The river at the end of Sheepwash Road is close to 5m deep within a short cast. The water here is subject to strong currents during the peak of tidal flow so slack water should be timed in for fishing here.

Towards the northern end of River Pde is also good nighttime bream angling. The bank here is relatively shallow, yet after dark the bream feed in close here and it should not be overlooked. Again, slack water is the best time, plus an hour each side.

The floating jetty at the Sheepwash boat ramp (on River Pde) gives access to deeper water and you can align your rigs parallel to the flow of the tide so there is less effect on your line. The fishing platform here is also adjacent to some deep water, but can be difficult to fish when the water starts moving.

Bank fishing either side of these jetties is also very productive. The incoming tide sees an influx of clear saltwater that can bring small salmon, mullet, trevally and sometimes calamari within casting range.

The floating jetty at the Ocean Grove boat ramp is the most angler-friendly on the river and can get quite hectic if the word is out that a few fish are on the bite – even more so if someone wants to use it to launch or retrieve a boat! This fishing platform also has good access to deep water and the same species are targets here with the addition of mulloway after dark.

Further downstream there is the Ozone jetty that is a lot higher off the water and exposed to rampant tidal flows on occasions. However, good whiting can be taken here if you can hold bottom and have an extra long leader. Trevally and calamari are available here as well, but generally on the incoming tide.

The bridge over the river has a few ‘landings’ that anglers use as their own. Catches off here mainly consist of mullet, trevally and the odd salmon and fishes best on the incoming tide as lines can be played out to the angler’s desire. Lurecasting for mulloway after dark can be popular here – especially during a full moon. The water below the bridge isn’t all that deep so mulloway can sometimes be spotted here. If word gets out that there are a few of these monsters visible the bridge can get quite crowded and lures flying in all directions.

Just downstream of the bridge on the Ocean Grove side is a very large sandbar. This is a great place to sprawl out with the family and wet a line on a nice day. Catches here include mullet and salmon with the odd trevally thrown in.

Boat access

The Barwon River has two main ramps servicing the river and dropping a boat in opens up a lot more area. There is a ramp at Ocean Grove, which is accessible via Guthridge St, and the other is on the Barwon Heads side of the river on River Pde, accessible via Sheepwash Rd.

The Ocean Grove ramp is dual lane and capable of handling offshore boats. It also has a floating jetty, toilets and a large sealed car park. The Barwon Heads ramp (Sheepwash ramp) has a fishing platform, floating jetty, gravel car park and is capable of handling boats to about 4.5m. The river has many sandbars and local advice should be sought. Travel at sensible speeds if you are unfamiliar with navigating the river.

From the Ocean Grove ramp to the bridge the channel is marked, but upstream from the Ocean Grove boat ramp it is unmarked. Best bet is to do a slow daylight recon mission to check them out before any night or low light sessions.

Whiting
Downstream of the bridge and among the reef patches, just on the left-hand side of the river mouth, fishes very well for some truly magnificent whiting to 45cm+. These are best targeted when the tidal flow is at its meanest. Just about any bait will work as long as you are using a long leader (at least 1.5m) and enough lead to hold bottom.

These fish can be here most of the year, but early spring and late autumn see the larger fish more populous.

Elephant fish

These fish go like heck, can attain 6kg and can be quite plentiful around November and March. These fish aren’t too fussy about what your bait is and seem to bite best after dark. I’ve caught most of mine upstream around the Sheepwash area and never bothered to take one home for the table so can’t vouch for their performance on the plate. I’ve heard mixed reports on their table qualities, but with a head like a bag of busted crabs – I kind of feel sorry for them.

Silver Trevally

I’ve caught silver trevally all year in the Barwon estuary but they seem larger and more plentiful during the warmer months. The Ocean Grove boat ramp jetty, the jetty downstream of the bridge and the Ozone jetty are good land-based spots to start while any deep water with the addition of berley upstream of the Sheepwash can produce silvers.

Bream

Barwon River bream can be down right frustrating. I rate this river as one of the hardest I know to bag a decent (40cm+) bream. This isn’t because they are not there, either. Just last year, gun bream angler Sean Devlin from Drysdale Sportfishing Club bagged one that went 51cm and 2.1kg! Catching bag limits is almost unheard of in this river, but it does cough up some truly amazing bream.

Best times for Barwon bream seem to be around the start of spring easing into summer. If there is solid rain, the fish are pushed further downstream and bite well on bait in the discoloured water. They will take soft plastics during periods of clear water, but this river seems a lot tougher than most in taking these fish into taking artificials.

Best baits are bass yabbies and black crabs. The crabs can be caught on low-tide if you’re quick as they’re pretty slick on the footwork when it comes to retreating to their mud burrows. A small hoop net baited with a piece of pilchard soon brings them undone.

They can be taken at all of the previously mentioned land-based spots apart from right at the mouth. There are some underwater rockbars that they like to hold at when the water is slowest and who knows where they get to when the tide really starts to run.

Flicking unweighted baits close to the mouths of run-off creeks has brought a few undone as well so watch for these.

Mulloway

Ah yes, ‘mullo-fairies’. Do they exist? Sure they do! The Barwon has a reputation of some of the state’s finest mulloway fishing and with winter fish exceeding 20kg it’s no wonder!

Best time for these large brutes is a few days either side of the full moon and aim for minimal tidal exchange. For example, fish the time from a low high-tide to a high low-tide. (eg. high-tide at Port Phillip Heads 1.16m, low-tide 0.76m.) The tide times are approximately three hours after the times given for Port Phillip Heads.

The best bait for mulloway is fresh squid. This is not squid bought at Super Steve’s Servo – this is stuff you caught today or yesterday. Those successful anglers that have put the long, lonely hours in on the Barwon will all sing the praises of fresh squid as dynamite mulloway bait.

Stingrays are often taken well upstream, but don’t immediately cut off a stinger until you see those wings pop out as the fight has been compared to that of a mulloway.

Best rigs are not unlike those used for whiting, except add a few kilograms on the breaking strain! Tie in a dropper of about 20-30cm with enough lead to hold bottom and a nice long 20kg leader of about 2m with a pair of hooks snelled in so they are adjustable to accommodate different size baits.

Facts

Accommodation

Both Barwon Heads and Ocean Grove have camping and caravan parks within a stone’s throw of the river. Both towns also have plenty of hotels and other accommodation but ring well ahead during busy periods such as Easter and Christmas as the population swells considerably!
7. Wayne Tempest certain puts in the hard yards on the Barwon. The reward weighed 20kg but I think his smile weighed more.

16. Elephant fish make an appearance during the spring and autumn when nights have a slight chill.

17. Silvers can be jigged from jetties no problems. If you jetty is a long way up like the bridge over the Barwon, a yabby drop net is handy as silver trevally have soft mouths and can often fall off half way up.

Images