Estuary jewfish basics

Phil Bennett  |  May 2008  »  Feature Articles / New South Wales / Mid North Coast / South West Rocks /

For keen southern anglers there are few more highly prized fish than the elusive jewfish. Many anglers aspire to catch these magnificent fish, but very few do so with any form of consistency.

The biggest problems are usually the location fished and the methods used.

In this article we’ll look at how to target estuarine jewfish on soft plastic lures, concentrating on the all-important fundamentals of location, lure choice, retrieve techniques and suitable tackle.

When targeting estuary jewfish, you give yourself the best possible chance when fishing from a well set-up boat. Today’s tournament bream anglers know full well the importance of having a well set-up boat to consistently producing fish. Chasing jewfish is exactly the same.

You need to be able cover water quickly and effectively and make a minimal amount of noise in the process.

While a fancy US bass boat could be close to ideal for chasing estuary jewfish on lures, you can still effectively target these fish in less glamorous craft.

Key requirements are enough power to cover a decent amount of water during a session, have an electric motor (preferably a bow-mount so your hands are free at all times) and a good sounder to let you read the bottom formations like an open book.

The combination of speed and stealth is a lethal one and pretty well essential to consistently catch jewfish on lures.

Like many large predatory fish, jewfish are generally more active during low light levels. That’s not to say you can’t catch them during daylight hours and plenty of anglers consistently catch them during office hours, it’s just easier to tempt them during early morning and late afternoon periods.

Once you start catching them regularly basis you’ll gain confidence and will be confident enough to chase them during daylight hours. The three biggest jewfish I’ve caught on lures were taken between 11am and 3pm, so don’t dismiss the midday potential.

In tidal rivers and lakes it’s important to have a good working knowledge of tidal phases and how they affect the system you’re fishing.

While jewfish will feed on any tidal phase at any time of the day, timing your outing to coincide with a tide change will generally increase your chance of success. Exactly which tide will depend on water clarity and bait supplies.

Trying to tempt jewfish during daylight hours in gin-clear water is very difficult indeed, so if the water is overly clear you may be better fishing around low tide.

Conversely, if the water is mud-brown and devoid of bait at low tide, concentrate your efforts on the cleaner water around high tide.

Large predators need good food supplies and species like jewfish will often hold station in locations that offer the best chance of securing an easy meal.

They’re not exactly built for speed (although they can certainly move when they need to) and will quite happily lie in wait for any mullet, bream, blackfish or pike that foolishly head their way.

From an angling point of view, locations that hold good bait supplies, have noticeable drop-offs and ledges and offer some depth during daylight hours are likely to be good spots to start looking for jewfish.

Bridges and jetty pylons, rock retaining walls and deep outer river bends, especially with rock bars, are all prime locations and well worth a throw around dawn and dusk.

Location is everything when chasing jewfish and fishing from a well set-up boat will allow you to position the craft for unrestricted access to every likely jewfish possie.

Ideally, you want the boat sitting so you can present your lure in the most realistic manner possible and in most tidal systems this means casting up-current and bringing the lure back to the boat.

CASTING TACTICS

Virtually all fish lie nose to the current (this is where they expect potential food items to come from) and a well-weighted lure cast up-current and worked back presents far more realistic offer than one dragged from behind.
As you’d imagine, it’s beneficial not to have your boat directly over the area you plan to fish. If spinning a breakwall, for example, move the boat slightly wider and drift over the sand.

Cast the lure up-current and close to the rock wall and allow it to sweep through the rocky zone and over the sand. Ideally you should be casting at roughly 45° to the stones. This way, the boat is drifting over sand, not the fish, and will give you a much greater chance of success.

Spinning bridge pylons is similar. Position the boat down-current and cast upstream and allow the lure to sweep past the pylons. For jetties, cast close to cover and allow the lure to sweep past, keeping pace with the lure to reduce the amount of slack line.

This method presents far more naturally, and you’re far less likely to spook any fish as the boat is effectively behind them.

Jewfish are responsive to a wide range of lures and retrieve techniques and it’s hard to say one method or lure is better than another.

Some of my mates fish large rubber shads and use a slow, rolling retrieve, while others favour stickbaits and whip them around quite wildly.

The big trick to lure fishing is presenting the lure right where the jewfish are likely to be. Just like spinning for flathead, your lure needs to be right in the strike zone to tempt fish. You need to swim your lure right into the strike zone to find them consistently.

LURE CHOICES

When it comes to lures I have my personal favourites. At the moment it’s the 8” Squidgy Flick Bait, which has been a star performer for me for quite some time. While these larger stickbaits are deadly, so too are sizable paddle-tailed shads like the new lightweight Slick Rigs. I know from years of using large shads that the thumping tails certainly draw the attention of nearby jewfish.

I guess it comes down to confidence. If you first start off using stick baits and score fish, naturally you’ll use them again. Start with shads that produce and you’ll confidently use them in the future.

Having caught jewfish on a wide range of plastics and hardbodies I now confidently experiment during a session and try to work out what’s the best approach on the day. Basically any 4” to 8” rubber lure presented in an area that’s known to hold jewfish is likely to work.

Contrary to what many believe, most jewfish takes are quite subtle. There’s very little difference from a kilo flathead to a 20kg jew. There’s no comparison once you set the hook, but that first strike can be very subdued and has many anglers thinking the bumps are little more than small flathead or even chopper tailor.

When fishing rubber lures, jewfish tend to casually pick them up, not crash tackle like they do live baits or hard minnows. If they sense all is not well, they’ll spit the lure in a second.

Anglers have to be very in tune with the lure and avoid too much slack line. Loose line is a real no-no. Hold the rod so you can strike super-fast; too high with slack between you and the lure will pretty well guarantee you’ll head home fishless.

* Next Month: Jamie Robley gets his hands dirty and tells how to catch jewies on bait.

Facts

THE RIGHT JIG HEAD

Choice of jig head is very important. For most waterways you’ll cover your bases with a range of jigs from 8g to 30g with 5/0 to 8/0 chemically sharpened hooks. Heads such as those from AusSpin and others all work, just make sure you choose jigs with hooks that match the size of the plastic being used.

When rigging them, make sure you leave enough gap exposed. My guide is to simply run my thumb sideways along the lure’s back. If I can’t get my thumbnail under the hook, it’s probably too small or too deep in the plastic.

Facts

THE RIGHT TACKLE

The subtle strike and the ability to spit the lure mean you have to be pretty specific about your tackle choice. I much prefer small baitcasting reels matched to punchy 6’6” to 7’ rods. Today’s high-quality reels and high-modulus graphite rods make short work of setting hooks on
sizable fish.

Rods in the 6kg to 8kg class have considerable power to land even the biggest jewfish. In a boat you have to ability to chase the larger fish and with quality tackle and sustained drag pressure you’ll find most fish are boatside within 10 minutes. Fish over 20kg are a little different, slugging it out for some time before throwing in the towel. I once fought a 26.5kg jewfish for 45 minutes before it gave in.

On the wrong gear they can be damn hard work. A mate battled a 30kg-plus fish on 2kg line for over three-and-a-half hours before finally losing it at the boat – cruel indeed!

While you don’t need super-heavy gear to land big jewfish you do need quality tackle with a smooth drag. Most regulars use 7kg to 9kg braid with a 15kg to 18kg mono or fluorocarbon leader joined by a bimini double and a 14-turn albright knot.

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