

Barra

Rod Harrison condenses thirty years of barramundi experience

The popularity of barramundi seems only exceeded by trout. It's an issue decided by demographics as much as anything. More fly fishers reside within easy reach of temperate freshwaters than along the barra belt.

Barra appeal on grounds far removed from traditional sneak and subterfuge playing fields that have endeared trout for so long. They grow bigger, fight harder and, by and large, are less fussy. There's nothing downhill about hooked fish. Fifty pound leaders are always a chance of running foul of the fishing gods; chaffed through by big fish mostly, but the gill spur responsible from a recent cut-off belonged to a cheeky five pounder.

WHERE

The six barramundi sub-races identified in Australia range through estuaries, rivers and billabongs from the Sunshine Coast to the Pilbara. Some twenty plus man made lakes through Queensland have been stocked with 'southern strain' barra, biggest and most temperature tolerant of the breed. Darwin's Manton Dam has also been stocked. Were it to be seriously stocked, the trails of the barrabound would lead to Lake Argyle. Mainland Australia's biggest lake, Argyle can hold Awoonga times thirty and has a baitfish biomass that borders on the incalculable.

Barra range through the Gulf of Papua and Indonesia but unfortunately those waters are now heavily netted and the safety of visitors cannot be guaranteed. Barra have an iconic status in fishing mad Singapore where visitor ponds do huge business. Queensland cane farmers are value adding by taking stocking farm dams and inviting paying visitors.

A complex combination of factors is involved in barramundi distribution. These include habitat availability, water temperatures, salinity levels and competition with other species. Barramundi are catadromous. Mature fish migrate down to the saline zones of river mouths to breed. This activity coincides with the seasonal arrival of the South East Asia monsoon, generally during December. Fish movement also occurs along coastal fringes and out to inshore islands and reefs.

Of academic interest, but significant in that it hints of what we do not know about barra movements, are clusters of big fish, barra to 1.5 metres, hauled aboard from time to time in the cod ends of prawn trawlers working the Timor box. That zone, water averaging 40 metres in depth and over

300 kilometres from anywhere, is accessed by ocean going Australian trawlers licensed by the Indonesian government.

The classic barramundi strongholds occur in the river systems fed by swamps and floodplains. These overflow during the wet season and drain into adjacent rivers through drier months via networks of creeks and channels. The extent of this run-off, both in terms of volume and duration, are major factors in determining the barramundi population. Rivers linked with hinterland wetlands carry far greater fish numbers than those with hilly catchments.

STICKS AND STONES

Distilling those broad locations down to specifics, we're confronted by snags, rock bars, tides, weed beds, junctions, and intangibles like water temps.

Snags are like single malt whiskey. They get better with age. Depending on their size and location, snags are utilised as semi-permanent barra shelter or they can mark temporary



Wading is a productive impoundment option.

stopovers by moving fish. Those in estuaries and tidal reaches tend to be the remains of mangrove trees, along with larger logs washed down from upstream.

The size relationship between the snag and the fish it will attract goes to extremes. Snags need not stand out like



The periods of half light are prime times where there aren't any tides. Where there are, it's the hour either side of low water.

dog's balls to attract barra. The horizontal cover afforded by fallen timber is more likely to attract barra than dead trees still standing. Indeed, Great Dane big barra will sidle up to a branch that's a relative Chihuahua.

The amount of snags in some lakes places one in the same situation as the mosquito at a nudist colony. The search can be narrowed by staying away from 'juicy' looking timber. What happens when dry land trees are inundated is that they go into a crisis mode and overproduce sap. That substance permeates the surrounds and, altering the Ph, discourages fish.

Trees that are still green, or browning, do not support the algal growths that attracts bony bream. Leafless trees with blackened branches do. Barra often wait in ambush against the bases in the shallow lake fringes.

BARRA ROCK

Rocks fulfil a couple of basic barra needs. In many locations, especially along travel routes in rivers, estuaries and inshore waters, they offer a buffer against tidal currents where barra will lay up.

Rocks also attract and harbour food. This is particularly true of exposed rock bars. The mullet that arrive on the leading

edge of a new tide sift through the surface scum forming as sunbaked rocks are covered; barra at the heels.

JUNCTIONS BIG AND SMALL

Those merges, rivers with the sea, creeks with river, drains with creek have a special significance. They form the major intersections for barramundi travels. But unlike real traffic control where both directions get an even go, junctions are a better proposition when the flow is coming from the smaller water. Where the flow is wet season runoff, the bite can rage indeterminably.

For reasons probably obscured somewhere within the safety of numbers, baitfish in tidal situations wait until the last minute to begin their peak hour rush back to the mainstream.

FINDING AN EDGE

An edge can be any one of a number of features. Some are in your face, others require a keener eye and fish nous to find. Whatever their substance, edges attract fish and provide an indispensable angler aid in that they establish a boundary.

Look at things this way: the search for fish is a three dimensional affair. How many anglers would want to

The DK Dancer is more a tying style than a specific recipe.





A spectacular barra fight, to say nothing of prodigious sizes, place barra in the world's top ten.

overlook a starting point feature where the odds are 33 percent easier? Classic edges include lily pad 'verandas', the channels that cut through wetlands and the drop-offs in stocked lakes that were formerly river and creek banks.

EDDIES AND THE CRUISERS

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Eddies are created where waters travelling at different speeds collide. The effect becomes more pronounced where there are physical features such as bends in the river or points jutting into the flow. An eddy provides an area of relatively still water where fish can temporarily locate while expending a fraction of the effort that's required in the teeth of the main flow. Every eddy where there's an associate feature is worth a cast; baitfish seeking relief from the current wander into these calmer patches only to be victim of an ambush.

TIDES THAT BIND

On tidal waters, the timetable is much more defined. The reduced flows of neap tides offer better conditions for fly fishing than the in-out rush of the springs. Happy hour covers those during the final stages of the ebb, however tend to build to a crescendo with the very first intrusion of a new making tide.

SALAD DAYS

The barramundi concept of cover includes objects solid and fluid. Water weeds play an essential role in their life cycle. The shady patches afforded by lily pads are a favourite day time lay up. A stillwaters scenario during the cooler months, water temperatures will determine where fish will be and their mood. Unlike the sea and estuarine zones, where water temperatures are static, zones will develop in man made lakes where the water is degrees warmer. Such locations form in spring around shallow fringes where the warming

effect of the sun is greater. A thermal blanket is created by the darker background of extensive weed beds. During the coldest parts of the year, barra will seek out those comfort zones.

The capture of lake barra in winter 'high teens' temperatures is an established fact. In water that can barely cover their backs, those fish are nervous as a dog passing the turps factory. Lots in the way of sight fishing skills, tacklecraft and long range deliveries are called for. Lakes are happier hunting grounds as barra metabolisms crank up when temperatures climb through 25 degrees centigrade.

DON'T SPARE THE ROD

Firstly, firepower. A 10 weight will handle any barra swimming. If it's 'stop or pop' situation with big lake fish, simply load up with heavy leader, point the rod at the fish and hang on. Recover line when you can. More importantly, a ten will deliver the weighted and bulky flies that barra like. Remember, it's the size of fly that you wish to cast that should be foremost amongst rod selection criteria.

Given the repetitious casting that's all part of the barramundi business, a 10 weight, moreso when saddled with a lightweight reel, is a viable tool for long and demanding sessions. When using big calibre flyrods Lefty Kreh casting, aka sidearm, uses less elbow grease than the traditional overhead style. On long, hot days and still nights, every false cast all adds up.

LINES OF COMMUNICATION

In catering for a market that's become increasingly specialised and will pay premium prices for product that performs, line makers are now making species and situation specific types. These feature tapers, weighting and finishes that bring

about superior castability. Amongst the latest of the genre are integrated shooting heads, floaters and sinkers all in a one piece format. Makers have revised their line weight a size or so over the old AFTA scale – well within the capacity of modern graphite rods and a boost to rod loading with bulky flies.

There are top to bottom barra situations that call for various density lines. Floaters are pretty much mandatory on billabongs carpeted with lily pads. This type also makes much sense when probing lake shallows. There, it important to ‘fish down’ to any sheltering barra. Like flats golden trevally, the fly needs to be the first thing spotted.

Intermediate lines are a versatile workhorse. Not only do they nicely cover the two to four metre slot, a level where most barra are encountered, but presentations are enhanced by a relatively slow sink. Moving water, drifting boats and fishing holding at deeper depths are better confronted with a faster sinking line. The increased density allows for a quicker delivery and faster overall cyclic rate. Of today's crop, I'm mightily impressed with the Scientific Anglers Express series. I've purchased two of the 400 grain versions at around \$120 each. These work beautifully on TFO TiCr-X 10 weight rods, and allow effortless casting with bulky flies. Rather than spend time changing lines, I carry two rigs. The ‘Express Streamer’ has a clear intermediate tip, 30 foot head and sinks at 2 inches per second. The ‘Tropic Express’ bombs down at 8 inches per second.

Leaders are straightforward; just a metre or so of heavy mono or fluorocarbon, the latter being used for it's sink rate rather than dubious subterfuge. Breaking strains between 40 and 70 lbs are appropriate to most situations. The complex IGFA and ANSA leader rigmaroles aren't something I'd bother about. To kill a fish for the sake of a record? No thanks.

Most barra, but not all, hook themselves in the side of the mouth as the line tightens. Some fully engulf the fly thus placing the leader in peril. It's not always the big fish that escape that way. Barra going ballistic are always at risk. The flared gills of leaping fish are lethal cutting instruments that'll also make short work of stout leader material. No other fish has so many ways of getting away. Barra personified would be called Houdini.

CREATION AND EVOLUTION

The array of new tying materials that he arrived in recent years rivals the dazzling bewilderment of the fashion world. Patterns of sartorial splendour have taken counterfeit baitfish to new heights. For shape and profile, the latest synthetics are the way to go. Bear in mind however, that barra have plainer tastes. For strike-getting sway and pulse, no substitute past present or future, exists for fur and feathers.

Topwater? Topwater fishing is entertaining but at what cost? Bulky patterns like Dahlberg divers, foam poppers and

silicone sliders are taxing to cast over the same distances as subsurface types. Many fly fishers further tax themselves by working surface presentations too aggressively. Think slide and pause, and subtle bloop. The couple of the type I carry are reserved for situations where weeds are so close to the surface as to preclude other options. Otherwise and anyway, it's subsurface patterns.

The veritable fowl houses and deer farms of barra flies that will, given enough watertime, take fish can be safely culled down to a handful. These become situational tools that do their best work with specific retrieve pattern. The most effective routine - whatever the water - is a couple of very short and sharp strips, followed by an indeterminable pause. The intent should be is to make fly do as much as possible over the shortest possible distance.

A couple of oldies but goodies fit the bill. Dan Blanton's Whistler is as relevant today as it was 30 years ago. When Dan first designed the fly, the intent was for it to behave much the same as a bucktail jig, that most universal of all lures. He could just as easy have designed it for barra. That Whistler action - head up/head down undulations and lifelike kick and pulse as dressings flare – perfectly dovetails with the cadence already described. A fairly recent enhancement, something I'm sold on, is the ‘flashtail’ concept where a core of flexible flash material is extended a couple of centimeters.

Colour by itself isn't a strike trigger but there's a positive feel good factor that goes with being happy about what's in the water. White and chartreuse is an excellent daytime and deep water combination. Jet black, black/purple and the black/grizzly grouping popularised in the Black 'n Barred, simply a Whistler derivative, have a silhouette value in dingy water, but that's just a close range sighting mechanism. The sonic signature is what really counts.

Lightweight reels and differing flies allow fishing in all conditions.



Buoyant patterns that will hover – sitting there sparkling with a big unblinking eye – invite a king hit. Those sudden whacks reinforce the point that one can never work a well proportioned fly too slow. Baitfish profiles tied from optically enhanced synthetics don't quite have the breathing action of bucktail but retain a constant baitfish shape integrity.

Though taking up a minor proportion of a retrieve compared with the horizontal coverage the vertical water column is too important to be ignored. Straightaway, this raises the question of weight.

Flies are more effective when built as weightless as possible. Rather than rely on the unnatural sink of overly weighted flies, it seems more sensible to use lines with a more substantial sink rate and use a countdown approach. To that end, I've pretty much abandoned lead eyes and gone back to bead chain. Whistlers having a modicum more buoyancy are to the liking of all.

DANCES WITH DOLAN

The Dancer is an innovative collaboration between Paul Dolan and Lionel Kemp. Tied in DNA, a positioning of the hook eye on the underside of the body makes this fly uniquely different. Given the old one, two, pause...the Dancer suddenly darts upwards then flutters down. In look and deed it's a dead ringer for a wounded bony bream.

Size matters. Hooks of 2/0 and less struggle to fit over that prominent beam like bone in the jaw hinge. Implosion feeders can reject a fly without the angler even knowing where it's been. That quick; the only sign an almost imperceptible chaffing on the leader. For that reason, simple straight-point J hooks are the ones to tie on.

Barra are superbly equipped for night feeding, easily able to detect the strong sonic signature from a slow retrieve with a bulky fly.



KEEPING PACE

The paddle tail and body shape of the barramundi blueprint is optimised for explosive movement and maximum manoeuvrability in shallow, turbulent water. And, periods in a relatively motionless state. Tides generally determine when free range fish are travelling and the times they're likely to be laid up. Lake-living fish aren't the same open book. But inasmuch as fly possibilities are concerned, the trend is to rest amongst cover when the light is strong and go on hunting patrols around sunset. Those timetables – and forces of nature like current and wind – determine a fly fisher approach. Whether to anchor, drift or mooch around on the electric. There's not a lot of flexibility with the latter approaches. It doesn't take much boat movement to compromise a dead slow retrieve.

CONCLUSION

There can be an extraordinary difference in the reaction intensity of barramundi. Fish strike lures with what seems to be unnecessary force. Conversely, swimming and pulse generating flies are taken so matter-of-factly that the first sensation is a tightening of the line. There's not a lot of time to reflect on that; things start to happen pretty quick. I think there's a message there. Rod Harrison guides on Lake Awoonga and can be contacted on 0418 892600.