



BARRAMUNDI FEVER

By Eddie Riddle

It's no secret that that fishing is without a doubt the most popular recreational activity in Australia. In fact, in Queensland alone more than 660 000 recreational anglers over the age of 15 wet a line at least once a year while in 1996, more than 125 000 boats were registered for recreational use in the state.

Townsville is considered a great 'steeping off stone' to perhaps some of the most magnificent and diverse recreational fisheries in the world and this is supported with a common adage, "every second household in Townsville owns a boat...and every other one would like to".

There is little argument that the most sought after species, both recreationally and commercially, in northern Australia is the barramundi.

'Barra Fever' is an affliction well known to anglers the country over - southern anglers often making the distant pilgrimage year after year to tangle with the countries most revered sport and table fish. And testimony to the popularity of the barramundi is an annual closed season where the taking of the fish is prohibited. This extends from midday November 1 to midday February 1 the following year on the Queensland east coast whereas a similar closure exists in the Gulf of Carpentaria. In addition to these closures exists minimum and maximum legal size limits for the species. On the Queensland east coast this is 58 centimetres and 120 centimetres respectively while a 60-centimeter minimum legal size replaces the east coast minimum measurement in Gulf waters.

The greater Townsville region boasts all of the diverse habitats within which the barramundi is likely to be found. *Lates Calcarifer* inhabits shallow headland studded

inshore waters, deep tidal river and creek systems, salt flood plains, freshwater coastal lagoons and rivers as well as pristine mountain streams.

Of much interest to both local and visiting anglers are the efforts of the Twin Cities Fish Stocking Society who in recent years have introduced in excess of 100 000 barramundi fingerlings into the freshwater reaches of the Ross River. Aplin, Gleeson and Black Weirs are now renowned for yielding world record class barramundi for recreational anglers targeting the species. Fish to and exceeding the maximum legal size for the species or approximately 24 kilograms are regularly encountered. These Ross River weirs are easily accessible with many choosing to fish close to the weir walls, where big fish are often found. Boating access is a little more difficult although a canoe or small tinny manhandled into these weirs is often well worth the effort. These anglers often choose to troll large shallow running lures along the vast weed banks and lily pad beds that line a good majority of the rivers banks. This is where big barramundi hunt. Many others prefer to offer the fish live bait, which are usually caught in live bait traps which must comply with Department of Fisheries regulations. Banded grunter, mouth almighty and freshwater shrimp are all superb baits and are easily caught in these traps with baits of pilchard, mullet or fish flesh. Speed restrictions do apply on much of the weir waters, which come under the authority of NQ Water Inc.



Aplin Weir is approached via either O'Reilly Street or Burt Street in Mundingburra or Fairlight Crescent off River Park Drive in Annandale. Gleeson Weir can be accessed by taking Arinya Street off Ross River Road in Cranbrook while Black Weir offers good options for land based anglers when approached from grounds adjacent the Weir School in Kirwan, also on Ross River Road. Aplin weir separates the salt water reaches of the lower Ross from the remainder of the river, which was originally the domestic water supply for the city. It is here many anglers choose to fish – especially during the wet season when barramundi line up below the weir wall to feast on tarpon, banded grunter, freshwater herring and a variety of other food sources that is washed over. Fishing here can be hazardous during heavy flows. Fishing off any of the weir spillways is prohibited and is policed by NQ Water rangers.

The Bohle River to the northwest of Townsville yields for recreational anglers perhaps more barramundi than any other major river system on the Queensland east- coast. In fact one experienced local fishing guide assisted clients to more than a staggering 225 barramundi – each measuring over one meter long – during 2001. Most of these fish

were released supporting the recreational fishery and testimony to this practice were a further 1900 barramundi of varying sizes caught by the guides clients in the same year. Barramundi may be taken throughout the entire Bohle River system however a favourite spot is an extensive submerged rock bar at the mouth of the river. The Bohle is reached via a single lane boat ramp situated in Stoney Creek, which joins the Bohle approximately one kilometre upstream of the river mouth. The Stoney Creek ramp is accessed via Marina Drive off Mount Low Parkway, Bushland Beach.

Cleveland Bay situated immediately southeast of the city boasts a myriad of tidal creeks conducive to good barramundi fishing. Of these Crocodile Creek and Alligator Creek prove most productive. Both of these creeks share similar habitats although Crocodile Creek is more easily traversed at low tide. Access from the bay to all other creeks, with the exception of Alligator, is difficult if not impossible at low tide. Crocodile Creek boasts a prominent channel, which cuts its way through vast sand and mud flats collaring the bay however care is still necessary on the lowest of tides. Crocodile and Alligator Creek waters are deep with prominent holes at the mouths of a number of tributaries that snake their way to their sources – in the case of Crocodile Creek, the extensive salt pans of Bowling Green Bay National Park while Alligator Creek originates in the foot hills of nearby Mount Elliott. The holes at the mouths of these tributaries are popular winter barramundi spots with baits of live prawn often accounting for large numbers of fish. Several minor headlands and rocky outcrops inside Cape Cleveland offer superb angling for barramundi of all sizes. These areas, also bordered by sand and mud flats, are fished with both live baits and lures by experienced anglers who prefer to fish the last third of the flooding tide and the first half of the ebb. Cleveland Bay creeks can best be approached by one of either of two ramps. A secure multi-lane ramp services the lower reaches of Ross River which is the northern most estuary of Cleveland Bay while a crude mud ramp may be found at Cocoa Creek in the south-eastern corner of the bay. This ramp is serviceable only at better than half tide and can be found in Bowling Green National Park near Cape Ferguson. The Ross River ramp is situated at the end of Barnicle Street, South Townsville.



Outside the city limits the Haughton River, Morrisey's or Barramundi Creek as it's shown on the map and the Barrattas Creek system all warrant investigation. These estuaries spill into Bowling Green Bay and provide excellent opportunities for anglers chasing barramundi. The Haughton River is accessed via a two lane boat ramp at Cromarty Creek near the sugar township of Giru or by way of a single lane ramp at the seaside village of Cungulla. The Cromarty ramp delivers all tide access while the Cungulla option is a better than half tide proposition. Commercial netting of the Haughton River has been prohibited and as such draws plenty of attention from recreational anglers. Despite the huge numbers of anglers which may be found on this stretch of water at any given time, results are consistent with anglers often able to easily obtain the maximum bag limit of five fish. The Haughton River is punctuated with numerous sandbars ensuring navigation at times hazardous, however these sandbars are a prime spot to cast lures during a flooding king tide as barramundi hunt mullet and other baitfish species in the shallow waters.

Southeast of the Haughton River is Barramundi Creek. A two lane all tide ramp is found at the end of Morris Road off the Bruce Highway immediately over the Haughton River bridge as one travels south, hence the common name 'Morrisey's Creek'. This is a much deeper creek very much similar to Crocodile Creek in Cleveland Bay. It is popular with anglers from both the Townsville and Burdekin regions and fishes best on tides leading up to the full moon. A deep hole where Combe or Big Salty Creek joins the main system regularly yields numbers of smaller but legal size barramundi whereas lures trolled along the deeper banks will often fool the bigger fish.

The Barrattas Creek system is a wondrous network of tributaries serviced by an all tide ramp known as Hucks Landing at the fishing village of Jerona. A number of fishing guides utilise this estuary with barramundi often the clients preferred target. Heavy mangrove lined banks, deep holes flanked by prominent mudbars and extensive shallow flats are all fished with varying degrees of success. The Barrattas is a little more difficult to successfully fish than the Haughton or Morrisey's system requiring a good deal of time to 'wire' the productive terrain.

While a boat or watercraft of sorts is often necessary to reach many productive spots, land based anglers pursuing barramundi in the Townsville region fare quite well. Waters surrounding the casino and harbour retainer walls give up copious amounts of barramundi, as do the rock groynes punctuating the Strand. These areas fish best on the middle third of the ebbing tide and are especially productive during the cooler months of winter. The barramundi, a recognised warm water species, hang in close to the rocks which retain the heat of a northern winter day. Here they wait ambushing prey as it swims by. It is obvious this is where an angler should cast their line. Live baits and lures work well. Anglers can easily fish one of the prominent Strand rock groynes from the designated Strand fishing jetty. A wise Townsville City Council initiative, the jetty itself acts as a FAD (Fish Attracting Device) as well as a safe place for family fishing. Kissing Point at the northern end of the Strand is a rocky headland offering a degree of protection and cover for barramundi. Two fishing platforms project from a swimming enclosure known as the Rock Pool which sits adjacent the headland. Anglers cast their offerings towards the rocks where again the barramundi are likely to wait in ambush.

Townsville's Cape Pallarenda foreshores offer a number of locations from which anglers may try their luck for barramundi. Captain Creek at Rowes Bay is extremely tidal with its access to the sea severed at low tide. Barramundi may be caught near the base of the pylons supporting the bridge on Cape Pallarenda Road. These are considered the deepest and most fishable waters in the creek. Three Mile Creek near Garden Settlement is much more interesting. Originating in the wetlands of the Town Common Environmental Park, Three Mile Creek boasts all the characteristics of a mangrove lined

creek in a far more remote locality. A deep hole on the environmental park side of Cape Pallarenda Road is popular with anglers as is a small rock retainer wall on the seaward side of the road. Live baits are generally a better prospect than that of lures however this may be reversed during flooding wet season rains. Cape Pallarenda itself is a headland of great potential. Recreational anglers catch numerous fish species here with a fair percentage being barramundi. The Cape is a mid tide to mid tide proposition with a general period of inactivity surrounding the peak of the tide. Experienced anglers choose to wander the rock strewn foreshore casting shallow diving minnow lures while others may set live baits nearby. This area is a Marine National Park 'A' Zone which allows only one line and one hook per angler. A gang or flight of hooks is deemed as a single hook as is a lure.

The Curralea Lakes system offer excellent all weather fishing for barramundi. Connected by flood channel to Ross Creek, around which the port and ferry terminals operate, the Lakes maintain a constant water level throughout the year except during periods of flood. Barramundi migrate naturally between the system and Ross Creek at selected periods when controlling floodgates are operational. Much of the perimeter of the Lakes is easily accessible from a number of vantage points throughout the city. The Lakes can be viewed from either Woolcock Street or Ingham Road. Barramundi exceeding the maximum legal size for the species have been taken in the Lakes and it's uncluttered perimeter ensures it a worthwhile location to hone ones fly-casting techniques.

Tackle and rigs for barramundi may be as elaborate or as basic as one wishes. A length of line wrapped around a coke bottle attached to a hook can be as effective as the latest plug casting reel sitting atop a delicate graphite rod. Success comes with persistence and anglers willing to try a number of different techniques will often go home well rewarded.

A short, stout overhead style rod of around 170 cm with a bait or plugcast reel capable of holding at least 150 meters of the chosen line class is generally accepted as 'barra tackle'. This outfit should be able to present live baits and cast lures with a degree of accuracy. Meanwhile a threadline or eggbeater style combination of similar dimensions will also perform admirably. The chosen line class will often be determined by the terrain fished although mono-filament lines between 6 and 12 kilograms are favoured while gel-spun polyethylene or braid lines of between 10 and 20 kilogram classes suit many experienced anglers. A heavy leader or trace will go a long way to ensuring a barramundi is only occasionally lost due to being rubbed through by its abrasive teeth or severed by the fishes razor like gill rakers. A relatively inexpensive monofilament line of around 20 kilograms will suit this purpose ideally.



The barramundi is a supreme predator relishing a huge variety of fish species and crustaceans. Among these mullet, herring, and prawns and to a lesser degree garfish are popular and effective baits for barramundi. These may be secured with a cast net or a bait or drag net. Both these apparatus fall under Department of Fisheries regulations, which outline proper use of the devices. For instance, both may only be used in tidal waters and restrictions are in place where they may not be used in some Marine Park zones.

Perhaps the most effective rig for barramundi is the Paternoster or dropper rig. This consists of a sinker or weight fixed to a length of heavy leader with a hook fixed to a 'dropper', suspending the bait approximately half a meter above the bottom. The dropper could best be described as an 'appendage' of line formed by tying one of various capable knots presenting a preferred bait a short distance from the main leader.

A variety of rigs will suffice however and many different situations will necessitate slightly different rigs.

The fish's large mouth, which is typical of most perch species, will accommodate large hooks however most professional fishing guides utilise a relatively small hook of between 3/0 and 5/0. A favourite pattern is the Mustad 37140 wide gape. Larger hooks may be used however they may prove difficult in presenting baits in a natural manner. The fine gauge suicide 9263 is also a good choice for delicate baits like green back herring.

Contrary to practices of years gone by, fish the rod and reel combination in 'strike' mode. Set the reels drag to approximately one third of the rated breaking strain of the main line and leave the rod secure in a holder of sorts, or hang on – firmly! The strike of a barramundi will initially be transmitted as a slight disturbance at the rod tip before the rod bows to the weight of the fish. A sharp hook will usually set itself firmly in the fish's mouth and from then on it's simply a matter of enjoying the experience.

Lurecasting anglers will use a similar leader or trace and often enjoy more visually spectacular strikes as the fish is drawn to the artificial bait. Trolling tactics may utilise the same tackle and can often be relied upon to produce bigger fish.

And finally there is no substitute for local knowledge and in the Townsville region several good tackle outlets are only too willing to point anglers in the right direction. After all, their livelihood depends on your successful angling.