Tuggerah is still tops
Jamie Robley | August 2006 » Area Articles / New South Wales / Central Coast / Central Coast /

Understanding the Tuggerah Lakes system can lead to great captures, as JAMIE ROBLEY explains.

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Recreational fishing havens have generally proven to be good news for NSW anglers, with improved catch rates in the systems that were closed off to pro netting back in 2002.

Botany Bay and Lake Macquarie are perhaps the biggest success stories with size and numbers of fish like silver trevally, flathead, jewfish and bream being better than at any time over the past few decades. While it’s all good news for some, other systems haven’t been so lucky and the ruthless practice of estuary netting continues.

Doom and gloom aside, some waterways seem to be quite resilient, regardless of those dreaded nets. Tuggerah Lakes is one that always amazes me. I’m a born-and-bred Central Coastie and have fished around Tuggerah Lakes since I learned to walk and talk.

My Dad used to wake me up in the small hours, chuck me in the old Vee Dub and head off to the inlet of Munmorah power station. It was a rough dirt track in with a water crossing at the final section but the fishing was worth the effort.

Big bream were in constant supply, along with blackfish, flathead, whiting and the occasional oversize tailor. We mainly used baits like mullet gut, fresh garfish and even maggots for the bream and handlines were the order of the day.

Once I was old enough to venture out on my own, a long walk or a 10-minute bike ride down to the old wooden bridge at Toukley was the next step in Tuggerah Lakes fishing. Again, big bream were a major attraction and anyone who caught one became the star of the morning’s fishing. In between the bream, chopper tailor kept us young blokes entertained.

Those early Toukley bridge days formed the basis of a few of my lifelong associations. I fished around the bridges for bream and flathead and hung out with a skinny young kid called Phil Bennett, whom we all know through the pages of this magazine and others.

I’m so glad to have grown up fishing, prawning and generally mucking around these shallow lakes. Our little group of mates, Phil, his brother Allen and cousin Deano, mad Murdle and a few other kids all enjoyed our days off school by the lakes. That’s the way it should be – none of this getting bored and getting into trouble!

Over the years I’ve gone through all sorts of stages of fishing the Tuggerah system: Learning to catch blackfish in Budgewoi Channel, taking my first boat up Lake Munmorah to fish for big nocturnal bream around the shallow, rocky points and pumping nippers at The Entrance to fish for bream, blackfish and flathead.

Then came the interest in chucking small lures for bream up Wyong and Wallarah creeks and a very serious obsession with Budgewoi blackfish. It’s all good, but what’s even better is that catching a feed of fish from the lakes is still possible.

LAKE ANATOMY

Perhaps the first step in consistently catching fish around the Tuggerah Lakes is understanding how the system works. A lot of people are put off by the fact that the lakes are so shallow and quite often a build-up of weed along the shore after strong Summer winds can become quite smelly.

I’ve heard plenty of people say they wouldn’t eat a fish caught from those dirty lakes. Well all I can say is there’s absolutely nothing wrong at all with the culinary quality of the lake’s fish, crabs and prawns.

I had an argument recently with a keen rockhopper who fishes for blackfish off the local rock platforms. After pointing out to him that the Budgewoi Channel blackfish were on the bite, he bluntly commented, ‘You can’t eat ’em, though’. I staunchly told him that I could present him with freshly caught and cooked blackfish from the lakes on one plate and a blackfish caught from the local rocks on another plate and ask him to do a taste test to see which one was sweeter. I doubt that fellow will ever try the tasty lake blackfish but that’s his loss!
Yes, there is a lot of weed growth around the fringes of Tuggerah Lakes and, yes, when strong winds blow a lot of this weed gets ripped up and pushed towards the shore. Combine this with a lack of rain and hot sun beaming down and the weed starts to rot, emitting a stinky gas. While it’s not a pleasant smell it has no relation whatsoever to the eating quality of the fish that live in the lakes.

The lakes are naturally shallow and weedy because the system is basically three giant lagoons which meet the Tasman Sea via a very narrow channel at The Entrance. There’s not a lot of tidal flow in the lakes and apart from the sandflats around The Entrance, most of the bottom is a fine, dark, silt.

The main feeder creeks on the western side of the lake system are Ourimbah, Wyong and Wallarah. The deepest parts of the lakes are in the middle to upper reaches of Ourimbah and Wyong, with one bend in Wyong 8m deep. Wallarah, on the other hand is a much shallower creek.

Understanding that the lakes are more like a system of three lagoons rather than a large tidal estuary is a good starting point. The vast weed beds are the lake’s best asset because they form a huge haven for prawns, shrimp, juvenile tailor, bream, blackfish, flathead and mullet. Weed beds provide food and shelter for fish and they thrive on it.

At times the lakes are teeming with chopper tailor and mullet of all sizes and through Summer the prawns and blue swimmer crabs are as thick as fleas on a dog’s back. That’s hardly the stuff of the dead waterway some folk would have you believe.

Visitors should also understand that tides have very little impact on the fishing beyond the area around The Entrance. If you want to fish up the creeks, over towards Toukley, Budgewoi or Lake Munmorah, don’t bother looking at a tide chart because it won’t mean a thing. Here, time of day becomes your new tide chart.

Best results for most species come early in the morning or later in the afternoon. Bigger bream tend to take baits after dark and flathead are quite active under the lights of Toukley bridge and The Entrance bridge at night. Through Winter, bream and blackfish tend to be more active late in the afternoon while during the height of Summer they often bite better in the mornings.

BREAM

You can go about catching Tuggerah bream on bait or lures.

Bait fishos should use light lines, only the smallest of sinkers and quality Mustad or Gamakatsu hooks in sizes 2 to 6.

A big mistake a lot of visitors to the area make is to hurl out a big bait on heavy tackle into the middle of nowhere. Nearly all bream are hooked quite close to the weed beds, bridge pylons, rocky outcrops and along the few small rock walls around the lakes.

Stealth is a major factor in catching Tuggerah Lakes bream on lures. Big tournament-style boats are out and small punts or canoes are in. Get out of bed early and be on the water at least 20 minutes before sunrise.

Creep along silently casting to the edges of the weed beds, rocky points and fallen timber. Some of the best results come fishing in and around the shallow weed beds. Don’t worry about the water being so shallow, the bream like it that way.

As the sun gets higher, a good pair of polarised sunnies will help you spot patches of sand between the weeds and these little pockets tend to hold some good bream. The middle of the day can be a waste of time but it’s worth casting lures again about two hours before sunset.

My favourite bream lures for the lakes include the almost magic Berkley 3” Bass Minnow in pearl/watermelon, rigged on a 1/32 oz No 4 jig head, and the 5cm SureCatch popper. Use these two and you will catch Tuggerah bream, it’s that simple!

BLACKFISH

Winter is the best time to chase local blackfish, although a few can still be hooked year round. The blackfish strongholds are Budgewoi Channel, the San Remo outlet, around Toukley Bridge and throughout The Entrance.

Generally the afternoon fishes better than the mornings but that can vary according to the season, weather and the fishes’ mood.

Tuggerah Lakes blackfish can be quite tricky critters at times and it’s easy to fail if you don’t have good quality weed and fish with light line and small floats. Towards the end of the main season through August, September and early October, a fluffy, dark brown weed can be found growing around much of the system’s shoreline. This can be a bit hard to bait up with but the fish really go for it and sometimes it can be a complete waste of time to use green weed.

FLATHEAD

There are heaps of flathead to catch throughout the system over the warmer months but don’t expect many big ones. The average lake lizard is around the legal length of 36 cm with a few up to 60cm here and there.

Once again, the edges of the weed beds are where the flathead like to wait for a meal of prawns, shrimps or poddy mullet. At night they also like to congregate under any form of street light that beams over the water. Toukley and The Entrance bridges are the best places to try for local lizards after dark - directly under the lights.

To be perfectly honest, don’t worry about baits for the flathead because small soft plastic lures are a much better option. If you want to catch heaps of Tuggerah Lakes flathead use white 3” AusSpin grubs, any colour 3” or 4” Berkley Gulps or PowerBaits and medium-sized...
Squidgy Fish or Squidgy Wrigglers.

Rig these with about a 1/4oz No 2 jig head and a length of 6kg to 8kg leader material like Schneider nylon or Siglon fluorocarbon.

Facts

KEY POINTS

Regardless of which species you target in Tuggerah Lakes, here are the key points you should follow.

• Use top quality baits (lures for flathead), light line, small hooks, minimal sinker weight.

• Fish the times, rather than tides – early and late in the day or at night.

• Fish a rising or high barometer and especially if there’s a bit of rain about.

BREAM BAITS

A lot of different baits will catch bream, including bloodworms, beach worms, pipis, prawns, steak and pilchards. They work but if you really want to get your feed of bream, use very fresh strips of tailor, very fresh strips of garfish, really dark and dirty mullet gut or fresh blackfish gut. Live prawns, live pink nippers and bloodworms will catch bream at The Entrance but the best baits are the ones I’ve listed.

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