This is a story with a difference. It’s about a fishing destination that has been around for over three-quarters of a century and has been quietly maturing into one of the best-kept secrets of Victoria’s northeast.

It’s the middle of May and the mist is just rising off the water as the boats gently glide to a stop on the glassy surface of the lake. As the sun rises above the horizon and the first worms plops gently into the water, we settle in to wait for that first bite. This venue is well known for its big summer and autumn redfin when the conditions are right, and the word was out that the fish were very definitely ‘on’.

In the ensuing silence there’s a surprising plop of a noisy rise, only 50m from the boat. The rise-form, now a 10m circle, looked suspiciously like the signature of a very large trout.

As the day progressed and the bag of redfin grew, I noticed that those rise-forms continued to occur right across the lake.

If not for the brown colour of suspended clay, one could be fooled into thinking we were on a highland lake. In fact, we were on one of northeast Victoria’s most under-rated waters, nestled in the triangle formed by Murchison, Rushworth and Tatura.

Waranga Basin is a Goulburn-Murray Water off-stream storage completed in the late 1920s to supply irrigation water to the north and west of the state. It’s a typical warm water fishery with a twist.

Waranga Basin is an impressive water. It has a capacity of 411,000ML and a surface area of 58.5km2 at full supply level. It’s one of the largest storages in the Goulburn system.

The storage is topped up via two large irrigation channels (the size of most rivers), the Cattanagh in the south and the Stuart Murray in the north – both fed from the Goulburn Weir in Nagambie.

The Basin has an embankment wall more than 12m high and 7km long so there are always plenty of opportunities to get away from the pack.

Access

The storage is serviced by two concrete public boat ramps although they are of limited use when water levels are down. At these times locals often launch from the bank. Care needs to be taken if attempting this because the water is quite shallow and has a soft mud bottom.

Access to the southern end of the lake is via Harriman’s Point Road, a right-hand turn off the Murchison-Rushworth Road heading west. There are also picnic tables and toilets available, though no camping is allowed.

Access to the northern end of the lake is via a public ramp near the main outlet channel and the Lake Waranga Caravan Park & Holiday Park off the Rushworth-Tatura Road, which is also well signposted. Care needs to be taken when leaving the channel from this ramp because there are shallow mud banks either side just waiting to cause embarrassment if the water levels are low.

While there are many areas of quite deep water and connecting channels, the majority of the Basin has extensive shallow areas between 3m and 5m deep. Like many similar waters, keep a careful eye on the weather and get off the water if it looks like changing. I’ve seen the water conditions turn from a millpond to nasty in a matter of minutes.

Once on the water however, the fishing can be sensational, particularly when the redfin are on the bite.

The fishery

The Basin has developed into a reliable mixed fishery with good bags of redfin, yellowbelly, good Murray crayfish and the occasional trout: though to be escapees from Goulburn fish farms above Seymour.

All the usual tactics work for the resident redfin. Worms, yabbies, shrimp (if you can get them) or any combination will suffice. Fished on either a running sinker rig down to a swivel with a 50cm leader, or a standard paternoster rig will usually do the trick. There are very few bottom features so 3–4kg nylon or braid will do fine. Give the redfin plenty of time to pick up the bait and swallow it before setting those chemically sharpened hooks.

Plastics in all the various colours and styles are worth a try. Bob them just above the bottom. This can be just the trick when there is a bit of a wave present because the rod can be put in to the rod holder and left to do its own thing.
On this particular trip we were also catching redfin using Baltic bobbers and ice jigs lifted about a metre above the bottom and worked repeatedly in the strike zone.

The trout

The truth about the trout in Waranga was revealed last year during survey work by G-M Water to identify the diversity of native fish species in the Basin (in case they had to drain it during up-coming summer water shortages). The survey confirmed rumors of trout to 3kg caught by anglers targeting resident redfin in the irrigation channels.

The really surprising result from the native fish survey last year was the number of quality trout that turned up in the survey nets. The evidence now available suggests that, not only do trout thrive in these waters, they are also breeding in the gravel beds of small streams leading into the Basin.

These were exceptional trout between 2kg and 3kg each. They were in such good condition that they were literally off the condition scale commonly used to measure the health of salmonids. It was reported that the researchers had never measured fish of such quality in Victoria in nearly 20 years of doing this kind of research.

The survey team found the trout were distributed in all areas of the Basin, and were chock-a-block with little redfin. Similar feeding habits have been observed when cleaning larger redfin. The research suggests that the large population of small redfin (up to about 50-60mm in length) form the bottom of the food chain, particularly for the big trout.

How is it possible that such a trophy trout water could develop unnoticed? I suspect that most anglers target the bottom feeding redfin (mostly in summer and autumn) with few anglers on the water during the winter months, the very time that these large trout are most likely to be caught with conventional approaches.

There were always a few smart few who knew of the possibilities early on. Dave Trickey, a local Fisheries Officer based at Tatura, even managed to land a few to 5lb in recent times. And just to prove it wasn’t a fluke, Neville Rogerson of Rushworth caught another beauty on a small StumpJumper in early June of this year.

It seems there have been quite a few similar captures over the years that have been kept very quiet.

Give it a go

The fishing available in this part of the world is exceptional. From Shepparton anglers can fish the Murray, Goulburn or Broken rivers and impoundments such as Eildon, Eppalock, Waranga, Mulwala, Goulburn Weir, Nullahcootie or Mokoan (while it lasts). And then there are the many kilometres of productive irrigation channels in between.

I know there a other more renowned trout fishing locations than Waranga but if you’re looking for somewhere different, somewhere with that added element of challenge, then head out to the Basin and give the trout a go before spring arrives and the water temperatures rise.

Facts

Accommodation

The Greater Shepparton Visitor Information Centre (ph. 1800 808 839) is a great place to start if you’re looking for information on where to stay and what to do. There are a number of accommodation options ranging from campsites and caravan parks to bed and breakfasts and gourmet wineries.

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