Bream of hope

Phil James  |  March 2012 » Area Articles / Queensland / Central QLD / Hervey Bay

The first months of the year haven’t exactly set the beaches on fire along Fraser Island’s coastline. Indifferent weather has had a lot to do with this as the predicted wet and blustery conditions take hold. Although the ocean water has been clear of weed, it has been quite discoloured at times; conditions that our inshore species are not keen about.

Some very welcome news is that the popular shop and fuel station at Happy Valley are now back in business. Hopefully all the other facilities at the Valley will soon be back to normal. The eastern beach of the island has four main outlets for supplies, being Eurong, Happy Valley, Cathedral Beach and Orchid Beach. The re-opening of Happy Valley fills a lengthy gap between Eurong and Cathedral Beach.

On the theme of re-opening, the Happy Valley to Moon Point Road became available again, in time for the Christmas holidays. However, there are still some difficult sections and only genuine off-road vehicles and competent drivers should tackle this track. Both the Woralie and Awinya tracks were also clear for the holiday period. Just as well, as the western beach between Moon Point and north of Awinya Creek was heavily occupied by campers.

When the eastern beach is being buffeted by strong southeasterly winds, the western beaches become calm and quite idyllic. Seasonal weed that makes its presence felt along the western beach in spring, had almost disappeared in time for the holidays, and this continues to be the situation. For the families who camped along the western beach, fishing wasn’t record-breaking but it was more than sufficient to keep the pans and barbies busy. I was delighted to see some of the best whitling in years taken near the mouths of Coungul and Woralie creeks.

It is time for another Fraser Fish File. Rather than restrict this to species caught mostly at Fraser Island, I will extend this to the waters of Sandy Straits and Hervey Bay. This month I will look at that bread-and-butter favourite, the bream.

The word, bream, is certainly over used with so many local species hanging on to it. What we regard as true bream are members of the genus *Acanthopagrus*, of which there are a number of species around the Australian coast and throughout the world. In Queensland, we need to consider just two of these, silver or yellowfin bream, *Acanthopagrus australis* and pikey bream, *A. berda*. Tarwhine, *Rhabdosargus sarba*, is often associated with the true bream, even to the extent of being grouped with bream in tables of legal length and bag limits.

**tarwhine**

Even conceding that tarwhine really don’t belong with bream, they are a particularly important species on the Fraser Island ocean beach.

It can be distinguished from silver bream by the presence of a much rounder head profile and conspicuous longitudinal bands along its body. Confirmation of the difference comes when they are filleted. The silver bream has a white stomach lining while the tarwhine is black.

They are likely to be taken in just about any gutter along the ocean beach but their favourite haunts are around the headlands and coffee rocks. Although they can be taken on a wide variety of baits, their preference is for pipis and sea worms.

Tarwhine are not common along the island’s western beach but are sometimes taken in the company of bream at the Picnic Islands and at the northern end of Woody Island in Hervey Bay.

**Yellowfin bream**

The yellowfin bream is well known to every angler along the Queensland east coast. They are widespread along Fraser Island coasts and within Hervey Bay and Sandy Straits.

On the ocean beach, the most reliable spots to search for them are around the headlands of Indian Head and Waddy Point. Here they like to spend time in the white water under bluffs and in gorges as they wait for goodies to be washed off the rocks. One of my favourite activities on the island is to float almost unweighted pilchards down into the wash.

As far as the open beaches of the east coast is concerned, I must admit to not being able to figure them out. There have been times when I have fished gutters and coffee rocks for two weeks, and not seen a bream. At other times it has been difficult to get away from them. No doubt there are many factors, including their spawning requirements, that determine how abundant they are likely to be along the ocean beach.

On the western side of the island bream can be particularly abundant in spawning congregations in and around the mouths of Wathumba, Coungul and Moon creeks from May to August. It is a similar story within Hervey Bay where bream head for winter spawning grounds such as River Heads, the Picnic Islands, north and south ends of Woody Island, Point Vernon and the mouth of the Burrum River.

Most fishers persist with a variety of baits with an increasing number, especially the competition guns, going exclusively for artificials, particularly plastics.
pikey bream

Along the north Queensland coast, the dominant member of the family is the pikey bream. It is rather drab in colouring; its fins lack the yellow in its relatives. It is a very stocky, robust fish, with a dark colouring often grading to jet black. Its most distinguishing feature is the particularly strong anal spine.

It ranges at least as far south as Hervey Bay, but probably not much further. Surprisingly good numbers of pikeys are present in the Burnett, Burrum, Mary and Susan rivers. However the only pikeys that I have seen taken around Fraser Island’s coastline came from western creeks south of Moon Point. The Susan River mouth merges with the mouth of the Mary River at River Heads and it is here that both species are taken; with pikeys being more abundant in the Susan River and yellowfin bream preferring the Mary River.

It is common when targeting bream, to catch both species side by side. Although pikey bream appear to have a later spawning season than yellowfin bream, there is a significant overlap between them, probably during August. With a common genus, one might wonder if any hybrids materialise. I certainly haven’t taken any bream from the Mary/Susan estuary that show any indication of it. I am aware that there are hybrids of the yellowfin bream and the southern black bream in Victorian waters.

Weather

On Fraser Island’s ocean beach, prospects for March are very much dependent on weather conditions. So what else is new? Perhaps one day we will see El Nino return to help make more reliable predictions. However, I would be confident that the reliable dart will not let the side down.

This is the time of the year that I would be expecting whiting catches to improve along the beach. Those who have been reading my column would know of my disappointment and frustration with catches of sand whiting in recent years. New changes to the rules governing the use of bait nets in Yellow Zones in taking of whiting, bream and flathead by commercial fishers might be seen as making a difference. We will just have to wait and see.

Images

Yellowfin and pikey bream are often caught together in the Susan River.

Floating almost unweighted pilchards down into the wash for big bream at the front of Waddy Point’s main gorge.