Mildura’s mighty Murray cod

John Menhennett | May 2014 » Feature Articles / Victoria /

There is nothing quite like camping and fishing for the mighty Murray cod, particularly around Mildura, Victoria.

Mildura is situated in the North West region of Victoria, approximately 550km northwest of Melbourne. Mildura is a semi-arid climate and the greater area of Sunraysia is home to over 64,000 people; over 20,000 of those live in Mildura.

Mildura is home to many freshwater fish species in the Murray-Darling Basin like golden perch, silver perch, redfin perch, European carp, eel-tailed catfish and the host of bait species. But the prize for many local and visiting anglers is the mighty Murray cod. While it is worthwhile targeting golden perch and redfin, it is the Murray cod that plays on the mind of anglers the most.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Arguably, the best time to visit Mildura is during the autumn-winter months from around April right through to late August or early September (Murray cod closed season is from September 30 to December 1 inclusive) as this is when the bigger cod are usually caught.

Summer can be lucrative, but long days on the water in the intense Mallee heat can be very taxing on the body and mind. A lot of smaller Murray cod can be caught on lures and bait over the summer period, but if you plan on only a quick visit and wish to catch a fish of a lifetime, winter is the go.

HOW TO CATCH THE FISH

BAIT FISHING

Bait fishing for Murray cod is a popular and viable option over the summer months. Bait fishing is a good option but the fish can get quite fussy about what is on offer, particularly when the water temperature is high or there is a plethora of natural bait foods in the system.

Some anglers swear by fishing in holes of around 5-6m in the upper stretches above Mildura where quite a number of smaller models are caught each summer/autumn.

Best rigs to use are a running sinker or ‘river rig’ with a single hook underneath the sinker. The best bait to use is arguably the bardi grub, with yabbies coming in a close second.

BAIT FISHING RIGS AND KNOTS

When rigging a yabby be sure to pass the hook through its tail as you want to the yabbie to be ‘live’ when in the water for a realistic presentation. Sometimes, especially when the fish have shut down, presentation can make all the difference.

Bardi grubs can be neatly presented on a large hook, about the same size as the grub, which can be inserted at one end and out the other. A bit of Bait Mate is needed to keep the bait from falling off the hook when cast and sitting in the water for prolonged periods. If the grubs have been preserved in milk, or any other liquid, they can be prone to become quite soft.

Rod length most suited to almost all fishing in the Murray and not limited to bait fishing can be between 5-6ft and around the 2-3kg mark is ideal for bait fishing. Of course this depends on the target species. Cod fishing would require the upper end of the weight scale.

Braided lines are popular for bait fishing now but some of the more traditional bait fishos prefer monofilament of around 15-20lb, depending on the target species.

TROLLING AND CASTING LARGE LURES

While trolling and casting lures can bring the desired result at any time of year, trolling is usually considered a summer technique. When the fish are holding deeper and moving about a bit more and casting a winter technique as the fish are sitting in shallow water tight up against structure and a better way to penetrate their hidey-holes and be in the strike-zone. Both techniques are very effective when it comes to targeting monster Murray cod.

Best time for targeting this species is early morning and just before dark, however, monster Murray cod can be caught at any time of the day, depending on the conditions.

Even though large hardbodied lures can be cast with great accuracy, it is ideal to be casting large spinnerbaits into structure in the shallow waters. They can be a very versatile lure, which can be worked fast or slow, deep or shallow and are often taken on the drop or when the lure is fluttering its way to the desired depth.

LURE CHOICE AND RUNNING DEPTH
Lure choice is vitally important, regardless of whether you are casting or trolling.

Running depth should be considered a key at the best times, but considering cod don’t usually move as far in the winter as they do in summer to chase a lure, accurate casting techniques are desirable. You would pretty much have to smack the cod on the head with the lure for it to strike. This is why trolling during winter can be very testing and mentally demanding.

Big lures are designed to catch big fish and by-catch a whole heap of smaller models too, including the popular golden perch. The large lure doing all the damage this season is the Australian-made 120mm Koolabung Codzilla as it is such a versatile lure with the ability to be cast or trolled from 2-10m+. Using big lures is a great way to try and tempt those cod lying deep on snags.

Recommended lures for targeting Murray cod around Mildura are hardbody lures for trolling and casting 100-200mm in length with anywhere from 2-10m+ diving bibs (depending on where you are fishing). The 120-150mm hardbody lures work particularly well at depths around 6-7m around rock bars and steep drop-offs.

Ideal spinnerbaits to use when targeting Murray cod in the stretches of the Murray River around Mildura are around 1/2-1oz weighted heads with large Colorado blades (faster running water above Mildura use willow blades).

If fishing above Mildura, and where the water flow is faster, it is desirable to use a slim line profile lure that swims against the current with ease but still presents well and stays in the strike zone long enough. I find the Koolabung Codbaits are idea for this situation. Colour choice is really up to the angler to decide.

Colour choice only really matters in shallow or clear water conditions, so colour choice is a personal one when fishing the murky waters of the Murray. If I had to choose a colour, it would be darker hues as they cast a larger shadow in the water column. Remember, bigger is best!

As a general rule, running depths are roughly 2-7m for trolling (depending on the water being fished) and 2-3m for casting.

**LURE FISHING RIGS AND KNOTS**

When the forces of Mother Nature are present and everything is deemed to be ‘right’, Murray cod will come on the bite, particularly during winter. It is at this point that any serious big cod angler needs to be using the right equipment and trusted knots to land that fish of a lifetime.

Line and leader choice is also another important factor when maintaining desired running depths. But more importantly, good leader material can be the difference between lading the fish or not.

Whether trolling or casting, braided lines of 50lb are usually needed to target and land monster Murray cod. Combined with a monofilament leader of approximately 60lb and the length of your rod, this is an unbeatable outfit.

The leader is usually connected via a bimini twist in the main braid line using a trusted knot. I use the Improved Albright Knot as I find this knot to have excellent strength and I have never had one let go yet. The Albright knot is also a more slim finish than some knots, which means less wear and noise through the rod guides when casting and retrieving.

There are plenty of different knots out there, which usually varies with every angler you talk to you. It is important to find the one that best suits your application and one which is relatively easy to tie. In any case, it is important for anglers to practise tying knots to minimise the time with their lure out of the water when changing tackle in the boat.

A loop knot is best to tie the lure on by connecting directly to the tow-point of the lure. I find the loop knot to be the best method as it allows the lure to swim correctly without any restrictions. I like using the Perfection Loop as it is easy to tie and its finish is nice and neat.

When it comes to tying spinnerbaits or mumblers, follow the same procedures with the bimini-twist and leader connection and length, but instead of a loop-knot, tie the leader to the R-bend lure using a closed knot like a blood knot, or something similar, to stop the leader from slipping up and down the arm of the spinnerbait.

**SURFACE and FLY FISHING**

Surface fishing for Murray cod or golden perch can be lucrative around Mildura, but is probably the most ‘out-there’ of methods to use as catches can be very few and far between.

Catching Murray cod from the surface, particularly during winter can be quite an arduous task because the fish don’t seem to move far from where they are sitting to unleash short bursts of energy to feed from the surface. However, in areas with no current or flow, food cannot circulate past the fish residence and surface fishing takes on a whole new meaning.

Shallow lakes or billabongs that contain plenty of timber are ideal to fish for cod from the surface as they provide ambush shelter not far from the strike zone. Fishing for these green machines at night with the use of no light except the distant glow of the moon can be an extremely explosive experience.

There are a few ideal spots around Mildura for this type of fishing. Summer is arguably the best time as bugs and other insects gather on the water’s surface making for a great meal for a shallow swimming fish. Koolabung Codwalker surface lures are arguably the best on the market for this type of fishing.

Targeting Murray cod in shallow lakes is also very effective on fly gear. It is a great method for presenting large, but lightly weighted lures.
into tight spots or over log jams where Murray cod like to hide or reside. Kaos Cod Flies, made by Ross Virt, are the best Murray cod flies on the market.

Facts

Baits, lures and flies for Murray cod

• Recommended bait is bardi grubs and yabbies.

• Recommended lures are hardbody lures for trolling and casting 100-200mm in length with anywhere from 2-10m+ diving bibs. The 120-150mm hardbody lures work particularly well at depths around 6-7m. Hardbody 'walking style' surface lures are needed for surface fishing in good conditions, particularly on the Murray River and associated lakes, billabongs and backwaters.

• Spinnerbaits and mumblers, such as those made by Bassman Spinnerbaits, are a favourite snack for giant Murray cod, particularly on the cast during the cooler months. A lot of the time, Murray cod will take these lures as they flutter down in the water column on the drop.

• For those with a lot of patience, flies can work a treat on Murray cod as well. Large flies made for targeting this species is needed. Kaos Cod Flies make a great range.

Facts

Accommodation, bait and tackle shops

Mildura boasts some of the most picturesque and sought after camping destinations in Australia. Several caravan parks are available for comfortable and affordable accommodation on the banks of the Murray or Darling rivers:

ACCOMMODATION

1. Apex River Beach Holiday Park
   435 Cureton Ave Mildura, VIC 3502
   Phone: 03 5023 6879
   –e-mail address hidden–
   (only a short drive from the centre of town and a very tranquil place to stay. Only a short boat ride from Mildura’s lock 11 and weir. Boat hire is also available upon request)

2. Willow Bend Caravan Park
   Darling Street, Wentworth NSW, 2648
   Ph: 5027 3213
   (right on the Darling river, only a short boat trip to the junction where the Darling meets the Murray river)

3. Fort Courage Caravan Park
   Renmark Road, Wentworth, NSW, 2648
   Ph: 03 5027 3097
   Email: –e-mail address hidden–

TACKLE SHOPS

1. Got One, Lime Ave, Mildura
2. Sunraysia Marine, 7th Street
3. Ray's Outdoors, 15th Street
4. BCF, 15th Street

Images

Marcus Hennig, from Mildura, with a very healthy Murray cod caught trolling a 120mm Koolabung Codzilla during autumn. Fish like these are very common at this time of year.

Ross Virt with a little summer yella caught on a cast 5/8 oz Bassman Spinnerbait. These lures are quite versatile when it comes to river fishing.
Ross ‘Virty’ Virt, owner and maker of popular lure, Kaos Cod Flies, with a nice Murray cod caught just before the change when the air and water temperatures are much cooler. This one was caught on a Koolabung Codbait – These work great in faster flowing s

The author, John Menhennett, holds up a nice cod caught off the surface at night during winter using a Koolabung Codwalker. These lures can be dynamite for specific areas around Mildura.

Brett Evans with a great looking summer cod caught on a Koolabung Codzilla. These lures work really well on the cast or trolled in summer or winter.

Rod MacKenzie and John Menhennett with a thumper of a Murray cod caught just before dark; an excellent time to be targeting large Murray cod.
One of the main reasons Bassman Spinnerbaits is the number one spinnerbait and mumbler brand is their attention to detail and excellent craftsmanship.

John Menhennett with a nice winter cod caught on a Balista Dyno 90. These lures boast LED technology and are regular fish catchers.

John Menhennett with a monster Murray cod caught near the end of summer. This fish was caught on a 120mm Koolabung Codzilla.
Jamie Robinson proudly holds up a beauty caught on a Koolabung Codzilla during the colder months around Mildura. This one was cast up out of an overhanging snag sitting in about 3 meters of water.