Cod on Dubbo’s doorstep
Nigel Webster | June 2004 » Area Articles / New South Wales / Freshwater / Cobar /

ABOUT 400km west of Sydney, at the junctions of the Newell, Mitchell and Golden highways and close to the geographic centre of New South Wales, Dubbo is the State’s third-largest regional centre.

While perhaps most renowned for its famous Western Plains Zoo, Dubbo is less well-known for the thriving population of Murray cod right on its doorstep.

Dubbo is on the banks of the Macquarie River and occupies a spot on the edge of the Western Plains. Those travelling inland from Dubbo quickly get the feeling they are experiencing ‘the outback’, even though they are only five hours from the coast.

The Macquarie River is host to a number of native and noxious fish. In the vicinity of Dubbo, the river sustains small populations of golden and silver perch and the endangered trout cod. Good numbers of catfish are also present, but the most commonly caught fish in these parts is Murray cod.

The river around Dubbo provides the ideal habitat for Murray cod. It is host to many deep, slow-running stretches of water full of fallen trees – an ideal environment for the cod to breed. Anglers targeting large cod will testify to being regularly plagued by captures of juvenile cod from 20cm to 45cm. This bodes well for future years on the river.

WHEN TO GO

Murray cod in this system tend to feed early and late in the day, although occasional bursts of activity can also be experienced right in the middle of the day. As a rule, aim to fish from dawn to about 10.30am; 11am to 2pm and from 4.30pm to nightfall. Those fishing through the night will also encounter plenty of catfish.

A dropping river will tend to fish poorly. A stable or slowly rising river will fish a lot better. In times where the river rises quickly, the change in water temperature and water quality can shut down the fishing.

The Murray cod population in the Macquarie River tends to be most active from September through to May. The closed cod season from September 1 to October 31 prevents anglers from taking fish during this period.

Although cod can be taken through Winter, anglers generally find the smaller fish become very quiet. An unwritten rule on the river is that the bigger fish become active following the first cold snap leading into Winter, when traditionally the biggest fish of the year are encountered.

BAIT FISHING

If your basic aim is to fish the river with minimal gear and catch a Murray cod, fishing a bait will do the job. Collect wood grubs, worms and catch some shrimp from the river (green bait prawns will make a good replacement) and you are most of the way there. These baits will all work on their day but I find grubs work best on most occasions. You could also be more adventurous and try some of the ‘newer’ baits used on the Murray River, such as processed cheese.

The Macquarie River can be fished from the bank in many areas around Dubbo and Narromine. However, a boat makes a lot more water accessible and there are good boat ramps available along at Dubbo and Narromine.

When bait fishing the river, I find more success comes with moving about. Fish your way up or downstream but don’t fish for longer than 15 minutes in any given spot unless a group of feeding fish has been located.

Remain mobile, targeting likely fish holding areas until fish are located. Be prepared to vary baits and the type of places being targeted until a successful pattern is determined.

Anglers will often find fish feeding tentatively. Because of this, I prefer to fish running-sinker rigs to allow fish to move with the bait. The rig I use more often than most is a very simple running ball sinker directly on top of a bait holder-style hook that suits the size bait being used. The rig is slightly more snag-resistant than others and is effective and easily re-tied when gear is lost.

LURES

Fishing lures or fly for cod on the Macquarie River can initially be a bit more challenging than bait-fishing but once anglers have mastered it, the rewards can be great.
Macquarie River cod are territorial and have an attitude range that typically sits between agitated to outright cranky. This behaviour makes them susceptible to big, deep-diving lures and other artificial presentations.

The controlled flows characteristic of the Macquarie river (due to it being impoundment-fed) mean the river is mostly clear enough to fish artificially. Periods of high rainfall can turn the river to mud, but these occasions are rare.

The river and its snaggly demeanour can often turn anglers away from using lures. However, with a little adjustment and a review of tackle alternatives, anglers can successfully and more cheaply fish the river. Here are some good strategies to adopt.

**DEEP-WATER FISH**

Local anglers favour casting and trolling deep-diving lures as a successful means of taking fish in the Macquarie. The use of braided lines and buoyant lures means anglers now have means of retrieving lures through very snaggly country more often than not.

Braided lines allow anglers to feel when line or lure is being pulled over timber. The practice of stopping the retrieve when obstructions are felt allows floating lures to rise over obstacles and be retrieved back to the angler.

StumpJumper lures and similar types are favoured by many for these qualities. Once anglers are more confident about putting lures down among the timber, the hook-up rate and their confidence increases dramatically.

I'm not saying you'll get all fish out of the timber consistently. Once a fish is hooked, getting it out of the timber is a whole new ball game – but one that is a lot of fun.

Lures that will consistently take fish on the Macquarie share a few traits. The fish in these parts like bigger lures with big, wobbly actions. Lures that fit this bill are typically StumpJumpers, Oargee Plows, Kno's native and the like.

Lures that will quickly get you down and bounce and rattle through the timber are the best. For this reason, spinnerbaits are also worth carrying. Their single upward-facing hook renders them as close to snagproof around timber as you will find.

Typically, darker colours will do well, although this is not always the case. Try starting with reds, blacks and purples and then work up to brighter offerings.

When targeting fish on lures, first look for suitable fish-holding country and fish it thoroughly. This entails casting at the same set of snags for 15 minutes or more, or trolling the same run eight or 10 times over.

Anglers often find lures getting hit after a likely area has been worked over several times. Sometimes, trolling upstream may be more successful than downstream, or vice-versa.

When trolling or casting lures, aim to get them right into where fish may be holding. This may mean using the rod or boat to direct lures under overhanging banks or trees or through log jams or tree roots. Quite often anglers will find they feel lures bumping over timber obstructions, only to get nailed as the lure swims over the obstacle.

**SURFACE ACTION**

Locals in the know enjoy some quality surface action every year on the Macquarie. From January to March the cicadas appear and cod will come to the top to feed on any that fall onto the water. Fishing surface artificials of an evening is an exciting and productive way to take these fish.

Any brand of crawler or fizzer should get some interest. Aim to target deep, slower-running sections of the river around dusk for best results.

A successful pattern is to let the lure sit once it has hit the water. Wait until all splash rings have totally subsided before slowly retrieving the lure. Watch for any surface activity and check to see how fallen insects, frogs, etc. behave once they have hit the water.

**SOFT PLASTICS**

The abundance of soft plastics has produced some innovative products and techniques now being used to take many native fish. Just as conventional lure-fishing techniques have been improved by local anglers to the point of consistently taking fish in the Macquarie, I have no doubt we will see the same with soft plastics. It will take only a few anglers experimenting with new products and techniques to start a new trend.

The Macquarie River has a well-established population of Murray cod that are thriving, even in currently dry conditions. The influence of the impoundment on the river (maintaining water flow in dry spells) has had much to do with this.

This top-class fishery is on the back doorstep of the great inland centre of Dubbo and is very accessible for anyone visiting the Central West. There is plenty to do and see in Dubbo, so it is easy to keep the family occupied while not on the river.

The Macquarie is a very attractive river to fish and there is no shortage of good fish-holding structure and offers much for all segments of the angling fraternity.

If your aim is to score your first Murray cod, or you like the new challenges associated with a different cod fishery, this area definitely has a
lot to offer.

Although the cod population seems to be booming, this is no reason to stop protecting it. Anglers will encounter a lot of undersize Murray cod (less than 50cm) and through releasing these fish unharmed we will see this area continue to prosper and grow.

**Facts**

**Where to fish**

The Macquarie River has no shortage of deeper, slow-running pools and fish will hold where there is plenty of fallen timber and overhanging willows. Always keep an eye out for big tree trunks that extend down into the water. These nearly always hold a fish or two.

Undercut banks and large tree root systems extending into the water are also always worth a look. Any weed beds or log-jams where shrimp like to congregate are also worth targeting.

Whether to fish upstream or downstream of Dubbo will depend on the volume of water being let out Burrendong Dam. Check out the dam levels section in NSWFM for monthly readings and www.waterinfo.dlwc.nsw.gov.au/sr/StorageSummary.html to find how much water is in the dam and whether it is rising or falling and other websites to find river levels. The temperature change experienced by the fish when cold waters are released from the dam generally shuts down the fishing somewhat. When this is the case, aim to fish downstream of Dubbo in areas adjacent to Narromine and Gin Gin. The cold waters have usually warmed up by the time they reach these parts.

**Facts**

**Tackle:**

Due to the potential of encountering some large fish within a lot of structure, 10lb to 20lb Berkely Fireline and 15lb to 20lb mono is virtually a must. When casting lures, a 6kg to 8kg flick stick will suffice. I get my rods made locally by George Loudon Custom Rods in Dubbo (e-mail address hidden--) and have been very impressed with their performance. If casting lures, baitcasters in the mould of the Shimano Chronarchs or ABU Ambassadeurs will do the job nicely.

A bait fishing assemblage consisting of a 6kg rod paired with any threadline that will hold 125 yards of 12lb braid will hold the angler in good stead.

1 The author with a juvenile Murray cod, which are plentiful in these reaches of the Macquarie River.

2 Golden perch are infrequent captures on the Macquarie around Dubbo but those who put in time on the river will encounter them.

3 Boat anglers have days when it is difficult to get away from the juvenile fish.

4 Most species of fish in the river will fall for a well-presented grub. Fishing half-grubs often extends the bait supply and allows fish to more readily take the bait.

5 An assortment of popular deep-diving and surface lures used on the Macquarie around Dubbo.

6 Anglers using their rods to direct lures under overhanging structure and through logjams will find they encounter more fish. They won't
necessarily be able to extract the fish but they’ll have more encounters.

Targeting midstream structure like the logjam in the background is an effective technique.

This Murray cod fell for a large StumpJumper worked through thick timber.

Macquarie River cod frequent shoreline structure. Casting to this structure from a boat is a good way of extracting them.

Swano and Chris seem pretty happy about getting this fish out of dense structure – the ‘Codfather’ strikes again!

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