A week on Wagonga

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Steve Williamson is better known for his guided trout fishing but before moving to Jindabyne he was well acquainted with Pittwater, the Hawkesbury and Georges rivers and Botany Bay. He approaches each day with a different mindset from most anglers and in this article Steve and friends experience a tough week at Narooma. Steve’s open-minded approach produced when most other anglers would have had a terrible week.

My game is different from most anglers because I like the challenge of working out a new system by myself; catching fish is not so important to me.

Wagonga Inlet at Narooma was my choice for a new adventure so I phoned my fishing friends, told them what I had in mind and so evolved the ‘Steve Williamson’s Kill and Grill Fishing Tour’. Why ‘kill and grill’ I have no idea because most of us don’t even eat fish and friend Steve Tooley would faint if anyone killed a fish on his boat – he hates blood!

So with all the experts about to hit the water, no fish at Wagonga would be spared from our onslaught – we meant business! Well, we would like to think so, anyway.

In the Snowy Mountains I have the best trout fishing in Australia at my doorstep but only two or three hours’ drive away I also have the many South Coast estuary systems. To work out all of these would take the average angler more than a lifetime.

Winter is probably Not the best time of the year to target most estuary fish and I guess the fact that the area had just had over 150mm of rain didn’t help, either, but what the heck, we were in it for the challenge!

This was the third year that I had a weeks holiday at Narooma and on arrival at our chosen Black Bream Point Holiday Cabins we were eager to get onto the water.

Black Bream Point is on the western side of Wagonga Inlet, opposite the main town, and an excellent base for a fishing holiday. Our accommodation was one of the seven cabins on several acres of private land which included the resort’s own launching ramp and jetty – a perfect location for those who don’t want to jostle with other anglers at the local launching ramp each day.

Steve Tooley had fished the area many more times than most of my group so with his advice, looking at all the local maps and fishing reports as well as talking with local fishing guides, you would think we had a reasonable chance of catching a few fish.

We were also joined by my son, Jason, Barry Hein from Merimbula, Bruce and Eleanor from Wodonga and Robert Webley and son Cameron from Wollongong. Glen, who works in my shop, would also join us for a few days on condition that he put on his other hat as trained chef.

With five boats we should also be able to cover a lot of water and find the fish easier.

SOUNDER ADVICE

I launched my ‘Yellow Peril’ Polycraft on a cool to cold afternoon and had a run around to check out what I could see on the fish finder. In all honesty I would have to say that the single most important item that you need if fishing new waters is a quality, reliable sounder that you know how to use.

I use a Lowrance colour X18c which is a pretty decent type of sounder and while the average angler doesn’t have to spend quite so much, you do at least need to spend about $500 to get a unit that actually sees fish.

I were to jig a 2” lure in about 10m under the transducer, I would expect to see it on the screen and have photos to prove it.

Catching fish is a different story to seeing them on a sounder because there is just so many variables. Should I use a bait and just what bait? What about a lure, but what lure and want colour? Not so easy, is it?

When I arrive on a new waterway, I check it out first looking for the most likely spots that may hold fish. A fish needs two things, food and protection from predators and sometimes the environment.

We normally find a lot of saltwater estuary fish in snaggy locations and these provide the protection and quite often the food. Look at bream, for example, they like the cover of oyster racks but the racks also provide food.

That afternoon I noticed on the sounder large bait schools out in open water. Again the sounder was able to tell me something I could take advantage of at a later time.

I headed to the top of the inlet to check out the oyster racks and the water was crystal clear and not too fresh so we made a not of that
scenario as well.

On day two Tooley and Baz decided to head up to the leases. Tooley could cast lures at snags all day if he could, but for me it was still too early, too cold and too foggy to be travelling up a lake in freezing conditions. If I wanted to freeze, I would have stayed home in Jindabyne!

We were to meet back at base for lunch to compare notes.

I had been mucking around with some small soft plastics I had glued onto a fly hook and wanted to give them a try.

I had been using some Berkley 1” Micro Nymphs on trout and they looked just the type of thing that a bream would just love to eat and, to be honest, I am a better fly caster than a lure caster when it comes to accuracy.

Fly fishing with plastics is nothing new, we have been doing it for many years but the new plastics are so much better and the fish just love the smell, taste and feel.

At lunch not a lot was reported by this group of self-confessed ‘expert’ anglers. I managed a couple of small bream on fly and Baz a couple of small flatties on Eco Products Eyeballs. Tooley said he had a couple of boofs from bream around the leases. We had all seen good fish, they just didn’t co operate. After much discussion we all decide to blame it on the approaching cold front.

After lunch we hit the water again and by 4pm I was ready to give it away with only couple of reddies and a few small tailor. Time to head back to a warm cabin.

That night when we reflected on the day’s fishing, we were all a little disappointed but had come to the conclusion that between us all we had just about done everything that we could have, given the shut-down conditions.

BLOWN AWAY

That night all hell broke loose with strong winds and rain and it wasn’t any better the next morning. By mid-morning the rain had gone but there was still a very strong, cold wind from the south so it was time to go into town for a hot meat pie and a talk to Darrel Bond from The Ocean Hut.

The Ocean Hut has a great range of gear and there isn’t anything that they haven’t got for your fishing holiday. If you want to know what’s happening on the fishing side then call and talk to Darrel.

The weather didn’t improve much that afternoon and while the rest went out to try their luck, Robert and I decided it was a good time to test some new fly lines I had brought along with me. The boys came back frozen and fishless, although Tooley said he had another couple of boofs.

Next morning we woke to a surprisingly beautiful morning although the boats were covered with ice from a heavy early morning frost. Hey, come on guys, this is the coast – if I want frost I’ll go home!

But we had a better day and all anglers caught at least a few fish. It was very pleasant being on the water and to get fish was great. It was more tailor than anything and it was only a matter of finding the bait balls and you could usually hook up.

Casting lures and flies resulted in only small fish. Trolling lures resulted in small reddies and small but hard-fighting tailor on light tackle.

Using the Lowrance, we were also able to find a bait ball and a big school of salmon and although they were not often seen on top busting up the baitfish, we could often see them under the boat.

Tooley managed to land one 3kg salmon and then it was on for young and old as other boats turned up after seeing the action.

MORE CHALLENGES

It is possible for me to get bored with catching fish and when I fatigue, I look for another challenge. Baz suggested we try for a flattie on soft plastics so we used the sounder to find a good drop-off on the retreating tide. We slowly lifted the plastics off the bottom and let them drop, waited a little and lifted and dropped again as we drifted along.

You know when you get hit by a big flattie. The lift becomes slightly heavier when there is a fish hanging onto the end. Our best fish wasn’t a monster but we had some great takes using pink or white Eco Product Eyeballs.

While I was working a few plastics, Baz tried out his Berkley Gulps for a couple of reddies, a small flounder and a few small flatties. It would seem that these things really do catch fish better than real bait but they don’t smell much better than prawns after a day in the sun!

We agreed that we were saved by technology; If it wasn’t for a good sounder and good smelly soft plastics and Gulp, we may have been skunked. Baz was really impressed with the pink Gulp 3” Minnow Grubs and the newer Malibu Blue 3” Minnow.

Later in the week as the weather and water cleared, the fishing around the lake edges dropped away so plan B came into effect. Earlier in the week we had seen those bait balls down to about 6m so we soon discovered that if we wanted to catch fish, the way to do it was to troll through the bait schools and wait for the hook-up.

But we had only limited supplies of lures that would get us down to the depth we wanted and there was no guarantee that the lures we had
were what the fish wanted.

DOWNRIGGING

After a few runs we managed to hook up a couple of chopper tailor on a StumpJumper, which is more of a trout lure, but we did catch a variety of fish on them. We didn’t have any silver Stumpies and we knew we could catch more tailor using a lure that we could troll quicker so broke out our favourite metal tailor lures and ran them off downriggers.

Downrigging is totally underestimated in a saltwater estuary and the results we achieved that day, with over 20 fish an hour, convinces me more and more that as long as there is not a weed problem then downrigging is an option that more anglers should use.

A good sounder to find where the fish are holding and a downrigger to get your favourite lure down and the action is on!

Downrigging is not a method only for deep trolling, it’s also a way to get your favourite lure down to whatever depth the fish are holding.

Given our prior experience fishing Wagonga Inlet and taking into account the area’s recent rain and the bad weather we experienced while there, I can only say that we were probably lucky to catch what we did.

We all had a great time and feel that with the new Bateman’s Bay Marine Park the estuary system of Wagonga Inlet will only improve and we can enjoy many years of fishing this productive little inlet.

The good news is there is always another estuary somewhere and another boof for Tooley!

Facts

ACCOMMODATION

Black Bream Point Holiday Cabins: Riverview Road Narooma, 02 4476 1759, www.blackbreampoint.com

Inlet Views Holiday Lodge Motel, Fosters Bay Road, 02 4476 2483

RECOMMENDED GUIDES

(Members of the Professional Fishing Instructors and Guides Association)

• Stuart Hindson, Aussie Fish Estuary Adventures, 02 6495 9902, 0400 062 504, www.ausfishing.com.au • Bill Falls, Calm Water Fishing Charters, Narooma, 02 4476 2483, --e-mail address hidden--

BAIT AND TACKLE

• Ocean Hut Narooma, 123 Princes Hwy, 02 4476 2278.

Facts

WEEK’S BEST SPOTS

• Barlows Bay for flathead and bream along the northern shore and salmon in the middle of the bay

• Forsters Bay for bream along the weed beds

• Ringlands Point for tailor

WEEK’S BEST LURES

• 3.5” StumpJumper

• Rapala Deep Tail Dancer colour SF

• Rapala Shad Rap colour BHO (caught a huge variety of fish species)
• Eco Products Eyeballs, mostly in pink for big flathead
• Berkley Gulp baits in various types but the Malibu blue 3" Minnow was exceptionally good.
• 40g Salty Tasmanian Devil for salmon and tailor
• Gillies 25g Phazer for salmon and tailor
• Gillies Pilchard for salmon and tailor

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