Do come the raw prawn!
Darren Redman | February 2009 » Regular Features / Area Report /

There was movement in the town for the word had got round, there are prawns down in the lake and they are easy to be found!

Well, sometimes they’re not actually that easy, but it is still a tradition that dates back to early settlers which fed many families over the years and hopefully for many more years to come.

No matter whether you catch a prawn or a bucket full, in these modern times it is mainly done for fun. You can go alone or with some mates, take the family or introduce someone special to this great old past time.

And this is how we go about prawning in the modern area.

The Gear

As a fishing guide, I try to emphasise to my clients the old adage ‘KISS’ (Keep It Simple Stupid) when dealing with gear. It works a treat in fishing and also in prawning. You can travel as simply as you like or as sophisticated as you can. I like to be somewhere in the middle, travel light but practical.

At the lower end of the scale, a net, torch and bucket will often yield a taste, while at the other end, car batteries floated in tubes combined with underwater lights, waders, buckets will go to the extremes.

My preferred practical gear is a pair of waders with a front pocket that you can place a sealed motor bike battery (which on average will give you around four hours prawning), a light weight floating underwater light, a prawn net plus a bucket with a sealed lid tied around my waste behind me allowing access to freely move around.

Drag nets are also still legal, but with these nets you need two people to operate them. They are sometimes only allowed in certain areas and in my mind are not as much fun as scooping.

The Rules and Regulations

When prawning you must have a NSW Fishing licence if over 18. Exemptions apply to under 18, Pensioners or of indigenous background.

The following nets can be used to catch prawns.

• 1 hand-hauled prawn net (max 6m long, mesh 30-36mm),
• 1 push or scissor net (lead-line to 2.75m, mesh 30-36mm),
• 1 dip or scoop net (mesh 20mm min, handle 1.2m max, 1.25m drop max, diameter 0.6m max).

Prawn nets must be hand-held and not staked, set, or towed by a boat. They cannot be joined or used with any other net. Hand-hauled and scissor nets must be registered at a Fisheries office.

where to go and when

If you don’t know an area you are visiting go to a local tackle store to ask advice, once they have told you where to go (in the nicest possible way) have a look at the area in day light hours so as you can plan your night attack.

Sometimes the prawns will be in shallow water but at other times you may have to go deeper. Whether the system you are in is open or closed to the ocean will have a bearing on how you go about it.

If you are in an estuary that is tidal, chances are you can stay stationary allowing the prawns to come to you on the tide. Combine this with an outgoing tide and you can intercept them as they make their way to the ocean. For systems that are closed to the ocean you may have to move about. Sometimes these prawns won’t be swimming so you may have to force them off the bottom.

If you have an underwater light use it to chase the prawn into your net. Place your net behind the prawn then give it a little prod with the light, remember most prawns will kick backwards. Even though the estuary is closed, prawns will detect tidal movement, combine this with a falling tide and prawns will start to swim making the catching a lot easier.

Prawning is best done on the lead up to the dark of the moon phase or leading off it, very rarely will you have good prawning when part of the moon is visible, however, in nature there is always exceptions.

Usage
Apart from human tucker, things in the wild also have a taste for the old raw prawn and, let’s face it, if you go prawning you’ll probably fish as well. And fresh prawns make excellent bait.

There are many ways you can look after your prawns for bait. My preferred method is to put the prawns in a sealed container with saltwater and then place in the freezer. Once placed in the freezer, the water will not freeze but become extremely cold, and can be kept for weeks.

Live is always best for bait and you can go about this in different ways. To keep them overnight, place moist seaweed in a bucket then put your live prawns in the weed, most should survive. But the best way would be to go out before daybreak to gather your prawns and place them in an aerated live bait tank.

Cooking

For those of us who like to eat prawns, we all know that there are numerous recipes out there.

School prawns caught in estuaries are best cooked with the KISS system. My two favourite ways are simply boiling or crumbing to make cutlets.

To get the best out of boiling your prawns don’t cook in freshwater. Bring saltwater home from were you have prawned, enough to cook them in and enough to dip them in once cooked. The cooking process is simple, bring your water to the boil, once done place the prawns in and bring back to the boil, then allow one to two minutes of cooking (depending on the size of the prawn). Place some ice in the rest of your salt water, remove the prawns from the boiling water and dip straight into the iced water. This process separates the flesh from the shell making peeling much easier.

Once cooked place the prawns in a container lined with a tea towel, sprinkle a little course salt over them, then wrap the prawns in the towel ready for the next day, or do as I do and get stuck straight into them.

Images

Memories that will last a lifetime. Prawning is simple and great fun for the family to enjoy.

Green prawns prior to cooking.
Prawns brought to the boil.

The end result – a meal fit for a king.

A prime prawning area; sand flats dropping off into a channel funnelling towards the entrance.
The author’s preferred prawning equipment – simple but very effective.

Cuttagee Lake is a prime prawning spot. This photo was taken in June 2007 when there was no prawn stock in the lake.
Cuttagee Lake in July 2007 was in full flood – a prawners delight! The lake stayed open to the sea until May 2008 allowing prawn stock to enter the estuary. This became a prime prawning spot during October, November and December 2008.