

Mitchell River

Its not often that I can get away during the middle of the "high season" but an offer to go bush - to fish the wild Gulf waters on the Mitchell River out of Kowanyama was an offer too good to refuse. I had never been that far west (its about 860ks due west of Cairns) and being Aboriginal land, access is denied to all but a few in the know.

Val Johs of Fig Tree Lodge was my companion and in no time flat we had loaded the 12 ft Savage Jabiru punt on top of the racks and loaded the camping gear into the back of his Toyota drop side ute. It was a red one so I guessed it would go faster!

We left Cairns at about 4.30 pm last Tuesday and headed up the range to Kuranda, through Dimbulah and on to Chillagoe where we stopped for a hamburger and fuel at 8.30 pm. The road out was all dirt, bloody miles and miles of bumpy corrugations, big bull dust pot holes, bone dry creek crossings and once we made Kowanyama at around 12.30 we headed north through the scrub.

I have never seen so many dirt tracks going in all directions, with no moon and the spotties on full beam, Val somehow followed the right ones and delivered us to the waters edge. It wasn't the right camp spot however but its was good enough at 1.45 am. We bedded down for a few hours sleep and would back track in the light of day.



We only missed the right turn off about 20 ks back and after a short rough ride we pulled up on the banks of Surprise Creek, a tributary of the mighty Mitchell.

It was a delightful spot, it had the only green grass on the whole system (the previous failed wet season has certainly left its legacy) and we soon had the boat in the water, the gear unpacked, bedding organised and after lighting the fire, headed off to try our luck on the barra. Now this is how you sleep in luxury out in the bush, a swag / camp stretcher and a mossie net - that's it.

Val had been here a few times before and

knew the right spots to fish - the gutters were the go he noted and off we went. The tide, only one a day in the Gulf and running out 3 metres all day, was perfect and just down stream from our camp we landed four nice barra and a king salmon from the fist drain.

At low tide we noticed some activity near a small sand bar gutter so we motored over, dropped the pick on the edge and fished back into the current. After a few active strikes I decided to try a surface popper - it worked a treat and the 80 - 90 cm queenies hit the blooping lure with gusto. After landing a few they went quite so I switched to a new metal jig that I had promised to field test for the Lazer Lure Company.



These metal slices did the trick and on the very first cast I was hooked up to a solid queenie, jumping and gyrating all over the place. In all I landed over a dozen queenies on these jigs (the metallic blue colour proving the best) while other anglers hardly raised a strike - I was impressed and can highly recommend them for these situations as well as the blue water stuff.

The first few days were a bit of a reckon for us, having been joined by another party from Cairns, Phil & Chris (the owners of Tusa Dive) and we decided to take the long trek down to the mouth, set some crab pots and see where the big barra were

hiding. The best fishing for the day however was had back at the queenie spot so I wasn't complaining. That afternoon we headed inland to try and put a dent in the wild pig population. As I mentioned, it was bone dry apart from a few well hidden water holes and you realise how hardy nature is when you see it in this state.

So they days went by something like this - up in the morning, a fish for a barra or six, back to camp for a rest, some lunch, a few beers, a swim to cool off, a pig hunt, some more beers, a great evening meal, some more beers and then to bed beneath the stars. The camp site was fantastic, right on the waters edge, easy access to our tinny's (boats not cans), and we fished from miles down stream to a few ks upstream.



And guess what, after five days we found the best fishing right under our noses. By switching tactics to working the snags as opposed to the gutters the fishing improved dramatically. The barra ranged in sizes from 50cm juveniles up to quality 80cm fish - often three to four coming off the same snag.

Late on the last evening however we were back at our favourite gutter for one last try. Having dropped a 20 pounder right at the boat a few hours earlier and lost another quality barra to a bust off in the snags we thought we'd give this spot a going over on our way back to camp. A dozen fruitless casts and as it was getting late I suggested we head back to freshen up (ready for a few more beers).

Now Chris was the skipper and as he said "just one more cast" I sent a long one down stream parallel to the steeply sloping bank. Funny, but I usually work a lure with lots of action while fishing the rivers around Cairns but I found that on this trip, the absolute dead slow straight retrieve seemed to work much better in this new water. Anyway, the lure had worked its way back to the boat and was arching towards the surface when an almighty strike had the reel spinning, my thumbs burning and the line zipping off back downstream. I tried to stem the tide to no avail, must be a monster G.T. I thought as I yelled panic instructions for Chris to untie us, start the motor and follow the bolting fish downstream.

It stopped about 150 yards away, just before heading into a big pile of snags and crashed the surface in a wild explosion of foam - a bloody big barra! I went weak at the knees, my fingers tried to turn the baitcaster and the fish kept surging away. By applying side ways pressure with the rod and having Chris steer the boat towards the centre of the river we finally made some headway.

It seems like a blur now, but somehow the monster just slid into the grossly undersized landing net and she was safely onboard. Whoops and cheers followed, I thanked Chris for the tenth time and shook his hand again - this was the biggest barra I had ever landed on a lure and I was excited I can assure you.



We didn't even weigh it or officially measure it but guesstimates put it well over 30 lb.

What happened for the rest of the trip didn't matter, I'd had my barra fix in one of the most beautifully wild places in Queensland, with pleasant company to share my joy, a few beers to wash it down and help savour the moment.

The trip home was uneventful for Val and I, after taking a new track out and saying good by to Hobbsey & Chris (they just wanted to camp for one more night before getting back to reality) we arrived back at Smithfield dead on 1.45am - stuffed but contented.

Footnote: Next morning I went over to Val's place to help clean the bull dust off the gear and unpack the truck. He needed to drop into the Fig Tree first to make sure everything was under control so I decided to go with him for a cuppa before starting the task. Can you believe that after travelling for over 10 hours each way on some of the roughest roads imaginable, through all that bull dust and ditches and corrugations etc - the truck suddenly stopped 300 metres from Val's home - dead as a door nail.

As it turned out a wire lead had shorted out and wore completely through, but it could have been worse - we could have been stuck alone in the bush for hours or even days!

Sorry Hobbsey and Chris, I heard a little rumour that someone got bogged for three hours on their way home!