

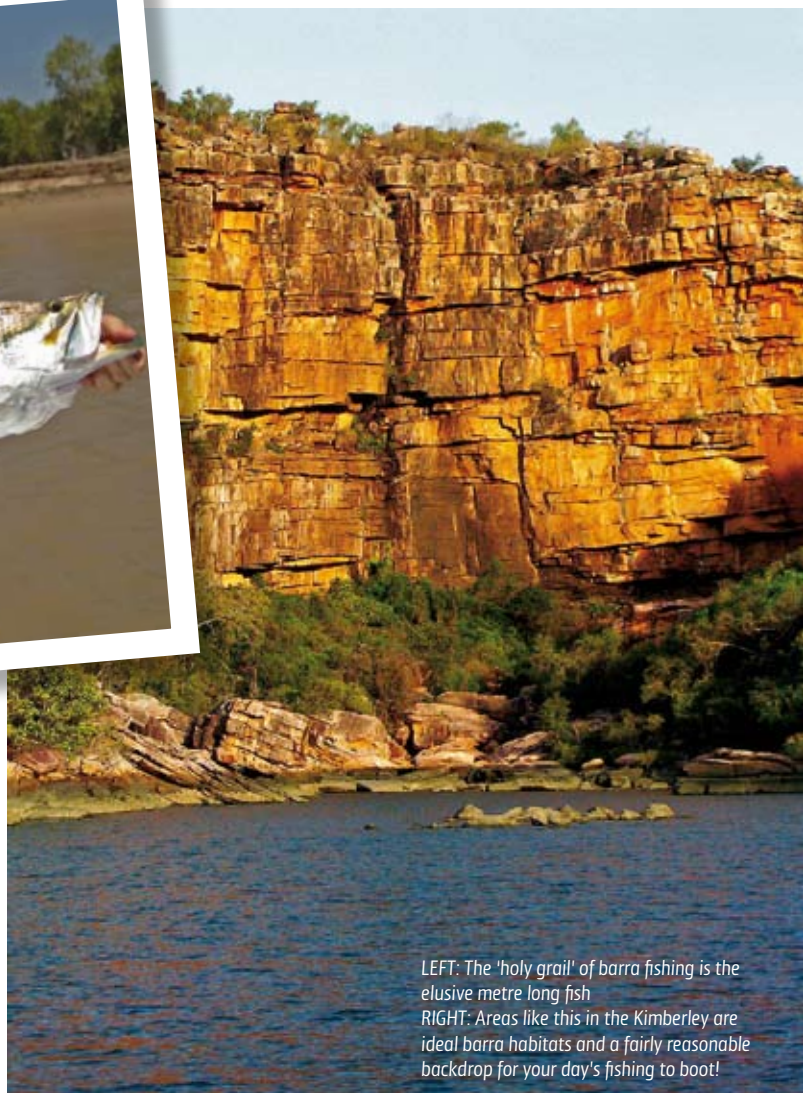
High leaping highlight film



Barramundi

Lates calcarifer

The word "BARRA" instantly brings to mind a powerful, silver fish with mythical strength, agility and eating qualities. It is a rare angler indeed that harbours no ambition to catch a big barramundi at some point in their life. As much as the fight is something to be savoured, the whole experience of chasing these fish in their natural environment is equally as enjoyable as barra make their home in some of Australia's most pristine wilderness areas.



Scientific Information

Barramundi are a native fish and prefer the warmer waters of estuaries. Both salt and fresh water environments are suitable for them and they are attracted to submerged timber, rock bars and other snaggy areas.

Far from being only native to Australia, barramundi are found in the Indo-West Pacific region from the Arabian Gulf to China, Taiwan and Papua New Guinea.

In late summer or the "wet" they travel from fresh to salt water to spawn, congregating toward river mouths. The reason breeding takes place in river mouths is the fact that eggs will only survive in salt or part salt water and eggs are generally laid during spring tides and heavy rains of the wet season.

The females of around 100cm breed with the small males which will be aged between 2 and 3 years. The tide changes during dark new moons or full moons (night time) are thought to be the peak breeding periods so these times should be avoided when fishing.

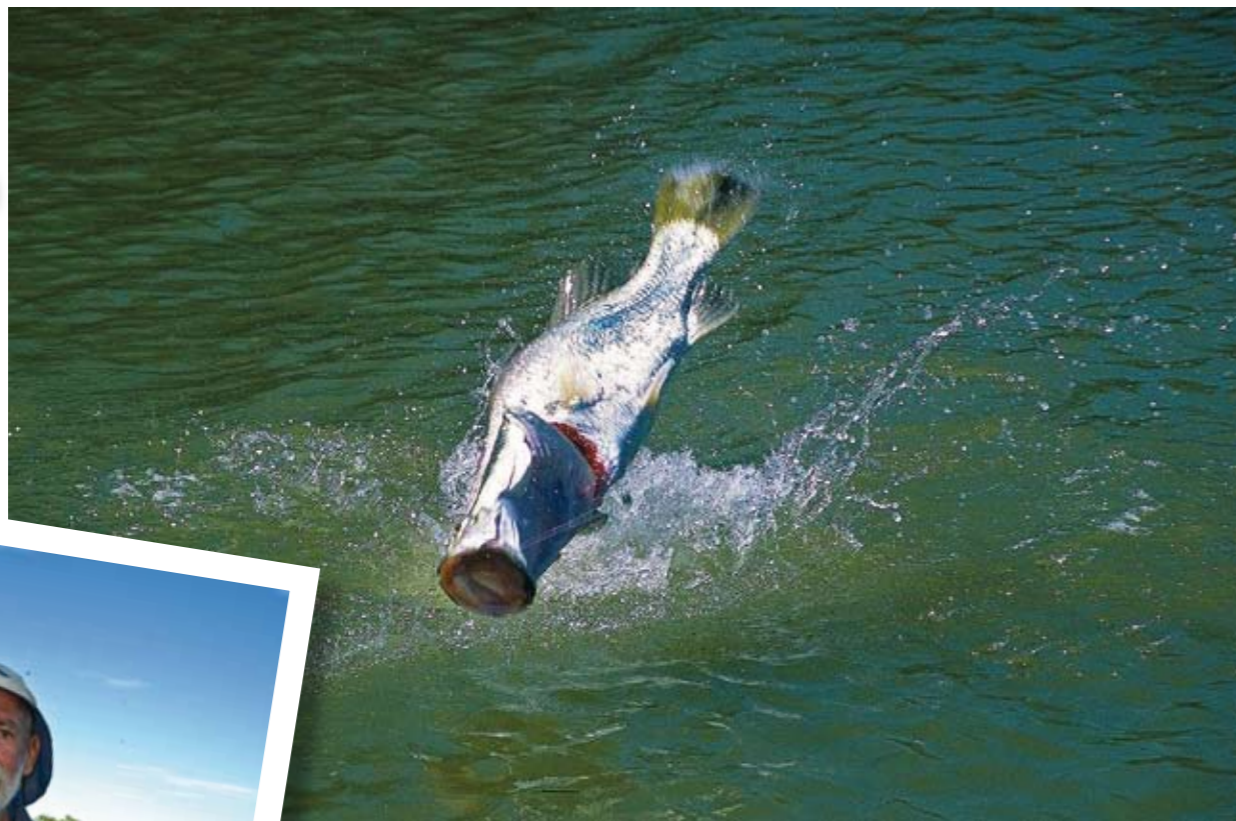
November and December signal the first wave of spawning while another will usually occur during February and

LEFT: The 'holy grail' of barra fishing is the elusive metre long fish

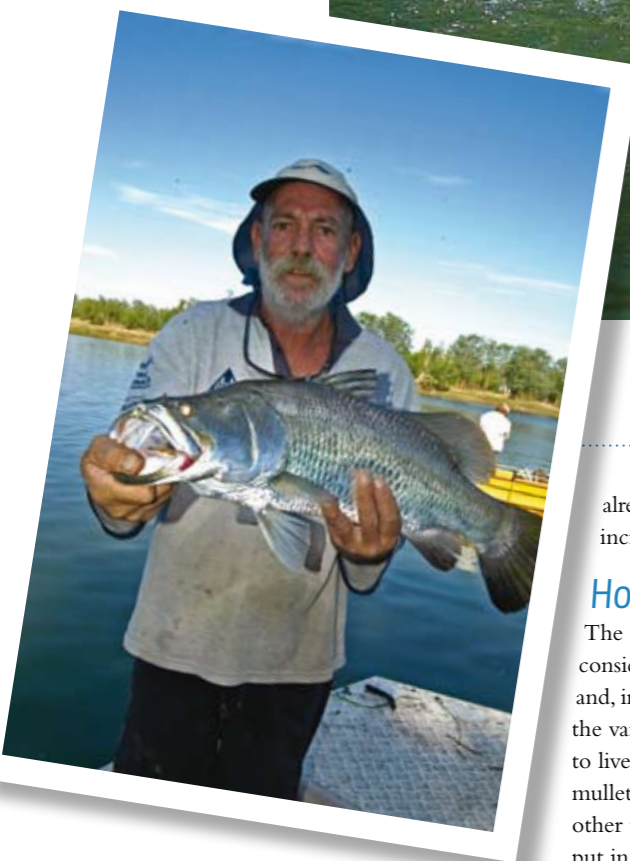
RIGHT: Areas like this in the Kimberley are ideal barra habitats and a fairly reasonable backdrop for your day's fishing to boot!

March. During the rest of the year, the older fish tend to prefer the salty waters in estuaries and the lower reaches of river systems. Young fish prefer brackish water and the upper reaches of rivers.

All barra begin their lives as males but most change into females at the age of 5 years old when they are around 60cm long. While a human might have some serious psychological issues with



ABOVE: The highlight of the barramundi battle is the explosive hookup leap
LEFT: The "Hairy Dog" with an average East Kimberley barra taken from his camp on the Ord River near Kununurra



already see signs of the population increasing significantly.

How to Catch Them

The methods of barra fishing vary considerably from person to person and, indeed, town to town because of the varied environment a barra is happy to live in. At times, only live baits like mullet or hardyheads will work but, at other times, they will snap up anything put in front of their nose.

When hooked, they perform spectacular, gill flaring leaps and run in powerful bursts to try and find the cover of a branch or log which is where you'll usually find them spending their days. When not hunting or moving with the incoming or outgoing tide, a barra will generally not move around much, preferring to conserve energy for lightning fast strikes on any unsuspecting prey. Much like Homer Simpson and donuts.

The size of the barramundi you will be targeting will be dependant almost entirely upon the time of year you are fishing and whether the water is tidal. At the tail end of the wet season, large

fish can be found in "billabongs" or large pools of mostly fresh water. These fish are usually very hungry and you'll see some great fishing action.

Also around this time (April to May) you will catch big fish in the rivers and estuaries all over the north of Australia. The runout tide is the ideal time to fish here around river mouths but, during other times of the tidal movement, you will find fish in deep holes around snags. Low tides will then produce the best action around these holes.

Although the end of the wet is probably the best time to target barra, the start of the season around October and November will usually has several weeks of excellent fishing as well. At this time, lures that work on the surface will produce results and fish are even caught crossing main highways and on land normally totally dry as barra attempt to move to a new system! Being born without indicators, this can cause traffic chaos. Basically, if there's water, they'll try to swim in it!

As the wet sets in, fish at dusk or at night with live baits to get the best results as lure fishing will now be hard

work. The fish aren't actively feeding as much and, while they'll take a lure, bait will be snapped up more keenly.

Dawn and dusk are the best times to fish and, after heavy rains, big fish will follow the bait flushed down to the mouth and be waiting there. Livies are ideal at this time. From upstream of the snag you wish to fish, drift a bait down with the current and hang on.

BELOW: Barramundi love snags and sometimes you just have to bring the lot in with you!

will also find that almost every river system in WA that holds barra requires you to target them in a different way. Basically, if you're travelling from Perth for the first time, forget everything you know about fishing and everything you think you know about barra.

Most systems you fish are going to be influenced by large tides and only a certain point of each tide is worth fishing. Large rivers from the Buccaneer Archipelago north of Derby through to Cape Londonderry in the far north are generally lined with mangroves and

now start to queue up at the mouths of the rivers and begin to think about wandering in with the incoming tide and the cleaner water.

Grab your esky and a mate and head off to a rock bar or likely snag. Some of these systems may still have barely enough water for the barra to even get across the bar but they can often be seen swimming in sideways to take advantage of prime hunting time and they all want to get to their favourite hunting snag first.

Why is this prime hunting time?



During winter in the south or the "dry" in the north, barramundi move further upstream. Once again, deep holes and areas with lots of cover and snags are the places to concentrate your efforts. You will find that most fish are in the limits of the tidal influence so don't be afraid to work well upstream

Time of year is important but you

rock bars. These are your barra hotspots and you have to imagine that barra are constantly moving in with the tide and then back out again with the flush.

Think of this scenario: You start thinking about fishing right at the bottom of the low. Now start to pack your esky, remembering that nothing moves quickly in the north. Barra will

Because at low tide the baitfish have nowhere to hide and the barra know this. As soon as the tide is too high, the mullet and other poor harassed baitfish can get into the mangrove roots and make life for the lazy barra too hard.

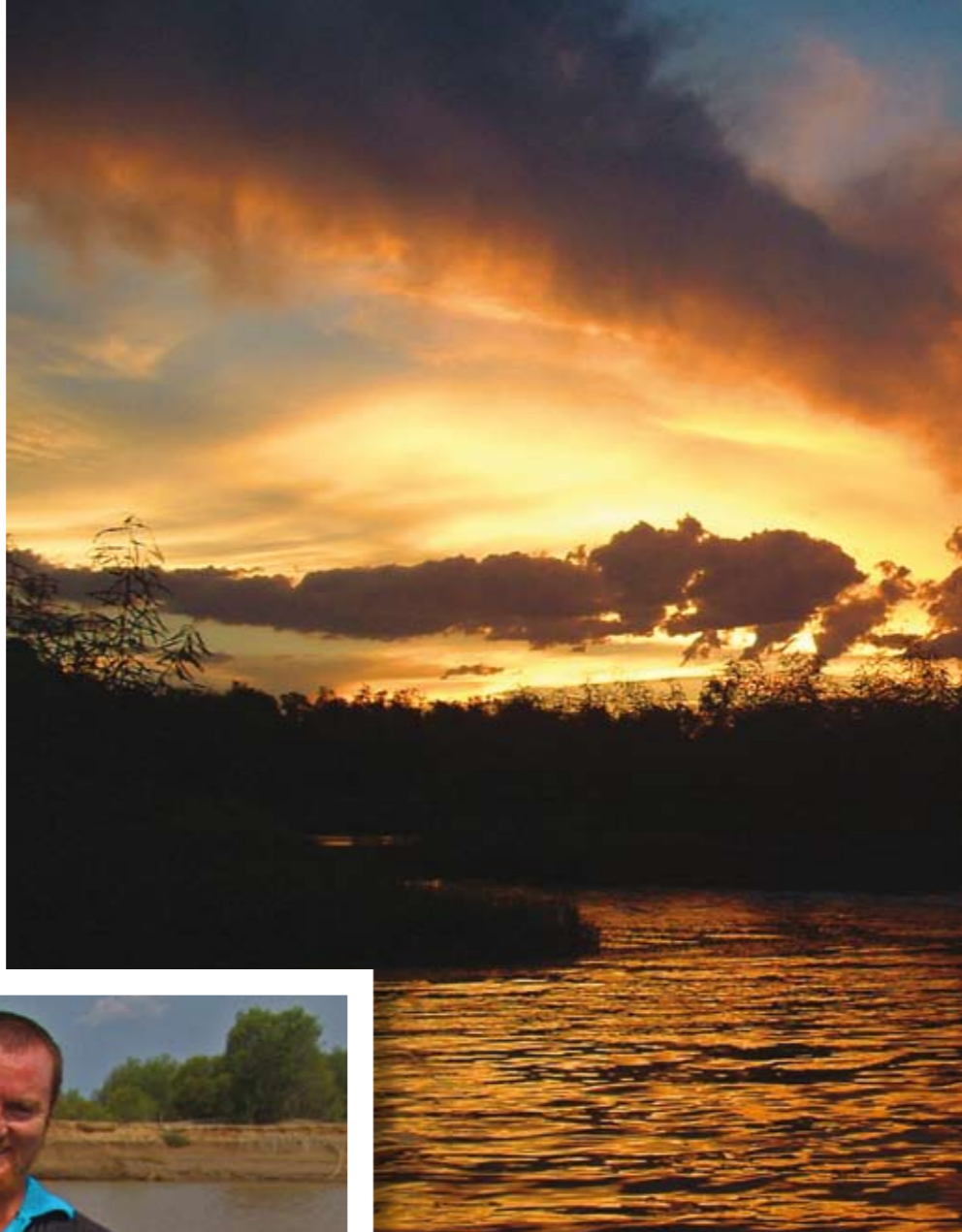
Also keep in mind that spots like eddies, rock bars, small curves in the river bank and such things are prime



barramundi habitats for the hunting fish. They really are lazy and any slack water is prime real estate for the moving fish to stop and use.

Having said that, a barra will move from spot to spot as the tide builds so you can have 30 casts into a spot for no result and then pull a fish with cast 31, 32 and 34. They literally do queue up behind each other for the prime ambush areas.

About halfway through the building tide, you can usually pretty much head



LEFT: The Fitzroy River in Derby is one of Australia's best barra waters but guides like Ben Palmer can turn a poor trip into a memorable one
 ABOVE: An East Kimberley sunset over the Ord but nighttime can bring its own brand of barra fishing excitement

back for home and wait for the next one but this isn't always the case.
 Derby has a crazy tide of well over 10 metres some days and the Fitzroy River moves huge volumes of water. The odd feature of this river (aside from the colour of the water always resembling Masters Choc) is the way the tide creeps out and then, right at the last minute, builds so quickly the banks disappear literally in the blink of an eye.
 Here you fish the runout and only with baits (it's too dirty for lures) and as soon as the tide starts to run in you high tail it before you get overtaken and turn into croc bait yourself. Bait fishing is all about patience because the barra pick up the bait and run with it, often removing the scales first before

attempting to swallow it. But if you wait too long they'll sew you up in a tangle of trees and other snags. It's all about feel and this is also why a guide is very handy, if just to offer some helpful fine tuning to your technique.

Kununurra is very different. The Ord is primarily a freshwater system at the source (Lake Argyle) and so clean, fresh water is constantly flowing towards the salty and very different mouth. Fishing here is best done with live baits in the pandanas trees, sunken logs, reeds and even runs resembling a New Zealand trout stream. Trying to extricate a 100cm barra through a series of logs is hard work even the for the best of anglers! Lures do work as well but most of the larger fish tend to be taken on baits.

Fishing for barra at the very top of WA around Wyndham is different again. Heading out into the amazingly complex systems around Caimbridge Gulf, you encounter creeks that fish best on the top of the high tides and you're fishing around submerged branches rather than rock bars. Working lures is the go and this brings us to the next topic of discussion, how to choose a lure and how to work it.

Barramundi Lures

It's true that almost anything will work some days and, on others, almost nothing will take their fancy. Mainly, you're looking for a minnow lure with a good deep dive on it and more wiggle than Ricky Martin. Yes, you can catch barra on soft plastics and many other

lures but packing for your first NW adventure can become a costly exercise if you buy everything that might work.

For simplicity, stay with minnow lures from 8cm to 13cm and you want a tight action, deep bib and a rattle inside. Barra certainly can hear the rattle and in dirty water it might be the only way they'll find your lure so this has to be an important consideration.

Halco do both the Scorpion and Tilsan Barra lures and these are hard to beat for action. Colours are going to work differently in different regions so check with your guide or the locals on this one. Generally, you can't go wrong with golds.

Reidy's Amberjack is another very good smaller pattern and they work well in the Ord which is full of clear, fresh water. Here, the famous Hairy Dog and his team plus a number of other excellent barra guides work snags and weed banks for huge barra with small lures almost exclusively over large ones.

Generally you would work the roots of submerged trees and barra almost always hang at the back end of the tree. Cast the lure past the snag and crank hard to get it down to a good depth and then work the lure really slowly past the snag. Fast winds are just no good for barra and several can be pulled off each snag at times using a slow chug.

Trolling is another popular method in the NT but not so popular in WA. To do well trolling you need a lure that will get down to where the timber is in any given system so a combination

of good sounder use and proper lure selection is important. Noise can also be important and it's more than a mere urban legend that crashing about in the snags with your boat or anchor can literally wake dozey barra up. It works! That said, however, if you're going to crash your tinnie into a snag make sure you're well insured and sober.

Using lures in the Caimbridge system near Wyndham, Looksea Tours has developed a method where you use a deep diving minnow much like you would a popper for GTs. Barra are very interested in surface activity and are also very greedy. Looksea's method involves casting the lure right into the heart of the snags that would easily grab your lure if you cranked it through like you normally would.

However, by twitching the rod tip, the lure (Tilsan Barra are great for this) dives and pops then floats back to the surface, literally right in the heart of the snag and without moving it forward. Just snap it up and down on the spot.

This is when the lure gets hit more often than not. Many people make the mistake with GTs and barra of not leaving enough of a pause to get the angry barra to hit the lure. Also, if they don't hit within 3 casts, generally here you would move on and keep covering ground.

It might sound confusing but that's the beauty of barra. You can't work them out no matter how hard you try and once you're hooked then you'll no doubt catch barra fever. Oh damn I used that pun again.

