

Backyard brawler



# Pink Snapper

*Pagrus auratus*

To most shore anglers in Perth, there are two fish prized above all others. One is the mulloway which can realistically be caught all year round. The other is the mighty pink snapper which are said to run for only 5-6 weeks each year in great numbers. This isn't strictly true and big fish are lurking around inshore waters any time from May to February so, based on this statement, you could say you're in with a chance of a pinkie nine months of the year. With the help of pinkie expert, Ryan Thipthorp, let's find out all about this fantastic and elusive fish.



LEFT: Steve Palumbo with a horse of a Cockburn Sound snapper taken only a few miles from shore



Tell that to anyone without a boat! From the shore, Perth based anglers need to wait for gales and storms which lure snapper into the groynes and marinas for an easy meal. Rather than wait for fishing reports which are often a few days too late, you can learn to read weather conditions and predict the snapper feeding times from shore.

With even a small boat, you can experience some amazing snapper action without hardly leaving the boat ramps in Cockburn Sound. The best snapper fishing isn't always miles offshore and learning how they move and react to weather in Cockburn Sound can make a huge difference to what you can do with your small or large boat.

## Scientific Information

One of the tragedies of the pink snapper, like the dhufish, is their extremely slow growth rate.

Unlike a dolphinfish or samsonfish which may grow 5kg each year or more, snapper are cursed with a body that takes time to become the magnificent 20 pound bump headed pinkies that are so highly prized.

All juvenile snapper develop into immature females during their second year. Over the next 1-2 years, about 50% of the immature females change

sex to males. By age 5, snapper are set as either males or females.

The growth rate is a paltry 30cm each 5 years and they'll peak at 15 years around the 80cm mark where the growth slows down. Fish in WA can live to 30 years and some New Zealand fish have been known to reach 60 years. Think about this carefully if you're fishing during the spawning period.

Spawning in Perth takes place during October to February over a number of weeks with a several batches of eggs produced by females which can



contain over one million individual eggs. It is believed that the bump on the male snapper's nose is used to induce spawning in a female, amongst other things. It certainly isn't for looks.

Spawning can extend for 3-5 months at times. The fish lay their eggs in sand in an ideal depth of 10m which makes Cockburn Sound a very good nursery. It is for this reason that it must be protected (are you listening politicians?!?). Fish in the northern areas of the state spawn during winter.

Fertilised eggs hatch after a few days and are carried by currents to their final nurseries which appear quite random and totally dependent upon currents for that year. This, obviously, has less of an effect for fish that spawn in shallow waters rather than deep at sea.

As a species, they are particularly widespread and are just as likely to be caught in 10m of water as along the

are a fascinating fish to study and the Shark Bay area alone has three different strains of the species which do not interbreed. Studies show that the fish living close to structures near shore tend to stay put while others in deeper waters tend to move vast distances.

Rather than being hunters, the pink snapper eats a variety of fish, molluscs and crustaceans and feeds opportunistically.

## How to Catch Them

### Perth Snapper

Snapper can almost always be found on offshore reefs all year round but close to June they congregate in larger numbers around the 5 Fathom Bank, along with samsonfish, and start to move into Cockburn Sound not long after.

Pinkies from 4-8kg are caught from shore quite regularly in Perth, especially over winter and North Mole is the ideal place to base yourself when the weather turns nasty. But why do snapper hang around the mole and why usually only when the seas are up?

The answer to the question, as with most fishy questions, is food. Snapper are quite the scavenger and for the most part are feeding on the bottom. They tend to hang

in deeper water past the 5 Fathom Bank but, when the NW winds pick up and the swell starts to crash into the mole, pinkies invade in big numbers.

What they're looking for is the poor unfortunates that get pounded by the swell and fall off the rocks. No, not drunken fishermen but crabs. Crabs are one of the snapper's favourite meals but, not having lungs and legs, they find it hard to climb up the rocks and grab the crustaceans with their hands. Not gonna happen.

So, when the winds whip up and the swell rises, the snapper all start moving towards places like North Mole and the ASI where they know crabs are going to be knocked off the rocks and into the water where they have no chance.

The best part is, catching these snapper isn't that hard. What makes a man sit in the rain, watching the rod tip for a telltale snapper nudge while trying to stop frostbite from rendering his fingers little more than useless stumps?

Ugly wife? Kids with ADD?



edge of the continental shelf. Most of the big fish in deeper waters will be reasonably old and they prefer a rubble type bottom but smaller, close to or just under legal sized fish, tend to hang around large lumps and wrecks in the deeper waters. Juveniles are also far more common in the Swan River than you'd think.

Related to the breams, pink snapper



*FAR LEFT: Tagging programs have taught us much already about the life and times of the pinkie  
LEFT: Deep water wrecks behind Rottnest Island are another place you'll find big schools of snapper*

*RIGHT: Big pink snapper needn't be a fish only for those with huge boats – just look how close to shore Ryan caught this beauty on a late summer afternoon*

*BELOW: Big pink snapper ... on fly ... in Perth ... at night? No problem says Ryan!*

Tupperware party at the house? Perhaps, but it's mostly a determination to catch the beautiful big snapper that winter storms bring with them. A lot of the hardcore boys are regulars and many use slide baiting but if you want to make it a bit more simple, a standard running sinker to a couple of snelled 5/0s is fine.

Bait wise, there are a lot of choices with fresh whiting a winner for some. Others like slimy mackerel and bait them up backwards with the head facing the last hook. Yellowtail and herring are also good and repel pickers but, whatever bait you use, only a small cast is required to get into the snapper zone. Just past the rocks to avoid the snags.

For the boaties, the best quality snapper fishing comes from Cockburn Sound. Pink snapper normally mass up on the fringing boundaries to Cockburn Sound waiting until the water temperature and conditions are suitable for movement and spawning.

Big storms can be a contributing factor to help these conditions come about. We don't want to get too technical with water temperatures but they are important and temperatures of around 17 to 18 degrees are more suitable for spawning.

The ground that pink snapper search for is basically somewhere that gives them protection from sharks and offers a healthy variety of food. Stomach contents show that they are an opportunistic feeder that not only feeds off the bottom, they also graze along reefs or coral and pick off any bit of tucker they can. Locations in Cockburn Sound can vary from the ever popular spots like the D9 barge, Sulphur Bay, coral lumps and Harding Rock right down to the secret spot that you may have.

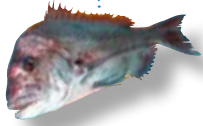
If you're keen to catch snapper you really need to concentrate on either fishing early morning first light or late afternoon sundown. Ryan Thiptorp dedicates much of his fishing time to snapper in the Sound and believes the light change is a trigger for the



fish to feed, which explains why these sessions are more productive. Try to be anchored approximately 1-2 hours prior to the sunrise or sunset. Avoid anchor chain noise as this can, and does, put the fish down.

Ryan also tries to incorporate a high tide as this brings in the more

favourable water conditions and usually produces more fish. Moon phases can also vary your catch rate, especially if you're fishing night time. The full moon at night can be very unproductive and if you want to fish at night, then fish the dark moon with a high tide. If you are fishing on a full moon in the afternoon



at sundown you may also experience an early shut down as the moon rises.

Surprisingly enough, wind direction and wind strength can also increase your chances. We have found that any sea breeze that blows at about 10 to 20 knots is more productive. Try to avoid really strong winds as this not only makes your fishing uncomfortable, the results aren't the best.

Discoloured water, due to the after effects of a storm, is something to keep in mind as this is not only brings in warmer sea water but there will be a quantity of food lying around the ocean floor that has been knocked off the reef and coral during the rough conditions. Snapper will be on the move after the storm, looking for an easy meal, and this is one of the best times to fish.

The pinkie will pick up the bait and run with it but don't give them line like east coast mags always recommend. WA snapper experts like Ryan now suggest it's best to have your drag preset to fighting strength and when the fish hits just let them hook themselves. This obviously means taking a solid rod holder with you that can take the strike without giving way and letting Mr Snapper drag your new Penn over to Cott Beach.

Further offshore, there is no doubt you can get into awesome pinkie fishing as well, but it can be a lot harder to locate schools of better sized fish. Charter boat skippers offer the following advice ...

Richard Thomas: "A light consistent berley trail for the snapper to follow is my favourite way of getting them excited in shallow water. I also feel the warmer months are better after the breeding period when shallow waters can produce good fishing."

Steve Thomas: "The full moon is bad for snapper in shallow water. They just don't seem to be interested. However, going out deeper, I notice very little difference between the moon phases."

Tony Sita: "Fresh bait! If you can't eat it then don't use it. Also, fight the fish carefully because if you lose one snapper the school will spook. Finding pinkies is easier than with dhufish – look for deep water ground with pinnacles. Our sounder shows them as green and red dots all balled together."

### Southern WA

Much of what we've talked about in terms of Perth snapper applies to southern WA but each area has its quirks, obviously.

Take Wilsons Inlet at Denmark. Regular spawning runs each year occur in this area for snapper up to 5kg. Catches are mostly by dinghy fishers with mulies and octopus baits. The fish do, however, seem to be affected by the water colour and content and the fish taste well below par. It is not uncommon to catch your bag limit within 30 minutes if you're over the right spot.

The Duke Of Orleans Bay, east of Esperance, is a noted pink snapper hotspot. Lumps in 20m of water out from the caravan park can produce the most awesome snapper fishing of all. This is the best spot we've found to target large fish on lures and you can find them 12 months of the year.

But snapper are also targeted and caught in Albany, Augusta, Dunsborough, Busselton, along

the shipping channel in Bunbury, Mandurah and just about anywhere else. Always check with the local tackle store for town specific advice.

### Northern WA

When talking of pink snapper, you must also talk of Shark Bay. The whole region is renowned for the sheer numbers of fish that were hammered to frighteningly low numbers in recent years.

A new marine park around Monkey Mia has seen the rejuvenation of pink snapper in the area. We've seen echo sounders fill with hundreds of fish in only 8m of water some 2nm from shore so it's a very positive sign.

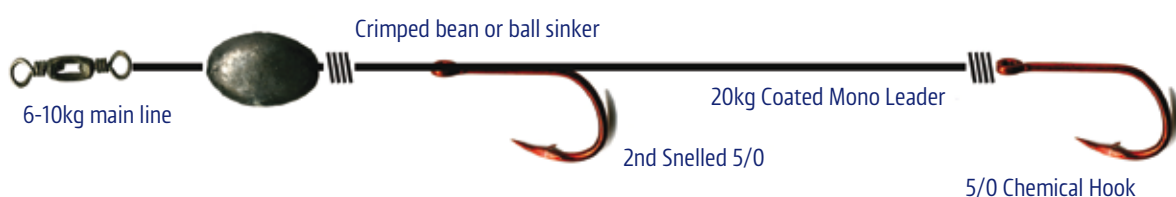
Heading out from Denham to the famous "Bent Pin" can still produce world class snapper fishing if you pick the right day and time and other reefs right throughout the Shark Bay area can literally be crawling with snapper. Specific fishing guidelines are in place throughout the area so check with Fisheries before you head out to make sure you comply.

Other areas of note include Carnarvon and the wonderful cliffs from Steep Point to Quobba where most shore based snapper catches are made.

Kalbarri will regularly produce snapper from the cliffs for those brave enough to chase them, while many good fish are taken not far offshore. Sizes, however, can be on the small side in most cases.

They truly are a superb fish and, like their cousin the bream, very hard to figure out and quirky almost to the point of frustration. But we keep going out time and time again to find them. Why? Well once you get hooked on snapper there's no turning back. Just ask Ryan!

Oops that's pun number 4.



**Cockburn Sound Snapper Rig**