



<b>PRESIDENT:</b>	HS Tham	<b>Emu Plains P/O</b>	Alan Izzard
<b>VICE PRESIDENT:</b>		<b>Lane Cove Environmental L/O:</b>	Matt McHugh
<b>PAST PRESIDENT</b>	Rico Van De Kerkhof	<b>Parramatta River Environmental P/O</b>	HS Tham
<b>TREASURER</b>	John Stokes	<b>Bents Basin P/O</b>	Rico Van De Kerkhof
<b>SECRETARY</b>	Milton Lazarus	<b>Bass Catch and Point Score Officer:</b>	Derek Sonter
<b>EDITOR</b>	Lyn Lazarus	<b>Raffles</b>	Nathan Horgan
<b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@Basssydney.com">info@Basssydney.com</a> <b>Battler Submissions:</b> <a href="mailto:lynlararus@optusnet.com.au">lynlararus@optusnet.com.au</a>			



## President's Message



Well and truly in our Bass season now. Its already noticeably a better season for quality bass. The La Nina conditions will see a good year for the Aussie Bass - more rains and wetter conditions will see good recruitment as well as easier migration for the fish. The downside of La Nina is that our opportunities to fish for our favourite Bronze Battler is a little reduced with more rain and storms. When we get a chance to fish for bass this year in "good conditions", we should make the most of it and enjoy the quality of fish this season.

This year, the Committee thought it might be a good idea to have a trip away in early December. It was going to be a cod trip on the Murrumbidgee in the ACT. It was meant to replace our Christmas Dinner, but it seems that nobody thinks it's a good idea to go away in early December. So - this means we will have our Xmas dinner on Tuesday, December 8th. We will have to organise something very soon and we will inform the club membership as to where, costs, etc by email soon.

It's been a pretty shitty year! I hope we all have a good holiday break and that 2021 is a better year than 2020!

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

### My Gorge-eous Bass Catch III

Over the years, I only get to fish the Nepean Gorge when I can get a berth on a boat. So, it's not the most well-known stretch for me but have had good memories of the Gorge. Greg Rouland and I have fished the Gorge twice for BassCatch, first time in Oct 2012 then again in Oct 2015. This year, I was fishing the Nepean Gorge for the Oct BassCatch again, this time on board Steve Peach's boat. We thought that there should be fish in that stretch with the good rains we've had. I was hoping to emulate the success that Greg and I had, especially in 2012 when we got a bunch of good fish.

This year, the Saturday of the BassCatch saw us heading up the Gorge not long after dawn. The conditions were cool, overcast with NE breeze. Barometer turned out to have slowly dropping all day. These conditions were not conducive to a "hot bite". However, we persisted and we ended up with a half-decent bag of 16 for me, largest 344mm; and 12 for Peachy, largest 305mm. A heck of a lot of casts were made that day!

My largest bass of the day came from a nothing cast, with a 16<sup>th</sup> ounce Zman chatterbait worked parallel with the outside edge of the weed banks. I was just working the little chatterbait slowly and as deep as I can make it go. As you can see, I was still dressed for cool temperatures!



Later in the arvo, we came across a scene of disaster. A boat was seen to be tipped over and mainly sunk with a pile of people offering help, etc. It turns out that the couple only bought the boat the day before!! It seemed to be a case of inexperience and lack of bungs!!

A boat buzzed off towards Penrith to get help for the people holding on to their boat. It eventually returned when a boat from the Emergency Services came up the Gorge to take the people back to the ramp at Penrith. I talked to them when we got back to the ramp at the end of the day. They didn't know how they were going to salvage their boat. It looks like an expensive exercise!!







Steve “matched the hatch” of predominantly green cicadas which has been sighted and reported on so far this season. Plenty of “green grocers” around this year. He eventually lost his only green cicada fly and he was getting noticeably fewer hits on a dark cicada fly.

Not as successful a Bass Catch up the Gorge as I’ve experienced before, but we were happy to score a few fish under cool conditions.

**HS Tham**

## **MANNING RIVER 2020**

Bass Sydney member Warren was keen to arrange a quick two-day trip to fish the Williams very early in November, but thwarted by weather, lack of accommodation at the Clarence Town pub and the Hunter Native Fish Bass Catch mid-November he decided to skip it and go a bit further north to fish the Manning at Wingham. Whilst I'd fished some of the upper section's with Alan years ago, I'd never fished the six kilometre reach from town upstream to Abbott Falls. Warren's local contact Dave was born in Wingham and fished the Manning all his life so we were fortunate enough to catch up with him at the boat ramp on the afternoon of our arrival. Nothing like a bit of local intel.

Even better he was keen to join us for an afternoon session once we'd got ourselves sorted and checked into our motel. Team Chalmers consisting of Warren, myself, Don and John Clark met David at the boat ramp. When I go away with these guys you never know what's likely to happen and there's sure to be a drama or challenge along the way, and so it was. We launched Warren's boat and tried to start his "as new" outboard, without luck. Don removed the spark plug and poured some fuel into the combustion chamber, replaced the plug and the motor would start but only run for a few seconds and cut out. After repeating this process three times it was decided to put the boat back on the trailer and leave it at the ramp. The motor hadn't been started since a service in July by a local Mercury dealer in Penrith, maybe all the vibrations on the trip up had something to do with it. So, the lost time exacerbated the timing of the tide and we were later than anticipated.



Warren's boat ended up parked at the motel for the duration of our stay. The boat is a 3.1 metre Stessco with a 6HP outboard which is probably ideal for use up to Abbott Falls. It's shallow draft, light weight and is easy to handle in shallow water.





Don's boat is a new design by Quintrex, they've taken the old Explorer, made it 100 deeper and wider to provide a safer fishing platform for those using it in Crocodile country, with enough room to comfortably fish three. Powered by a 25HP three-cylinder Mercury and it's capable of 100 kilometre daily river runs should you wish. As mentioned later the boat is inverted and loaded on the roof of the Landcruiser after the motor, seats and battery etc. are removed.



Luckily Warren was able to fish with David in his boat and I fished with Don & John. So off we went up to Abbott Falls. Four hundred metres up stream is a gravel bar which presents boaties with a challenge if the tide isn't in your favour, luckily the tide was still running in so we managed to get Don's Quintrex past the rocks and eventually arrived at the falls. I'm not sure why it called Abbott Falls as there's really no waterfall, just another rocky and gravel bar, but more exposed. David and Warren fished one side whilst Don, John & I fished the other. The water looked really good with great snags and shade,

everything a Bass fisho could ask for, but not a Bass was landed, not even a touch or a follow. Just one Flathead about 35cms.

Unfortunately, there was a southerly change heading our way and the barometer was dropping as we fished - sound familiar? It tumbled from 1025 to 1005 so that explained why the fish were shut down. Very disappointing after all the organization required to get there. After showers and a change, we walked to the Wingham Ex Serviceman's Club for drinks to sooth the frustration and dinner. Never mind we'll try again tomorrow. The Wingham Motel is just across the road from the local pub and a few more doors down the road to the Ex Serviceman's Club where we had dinner so it's a good place to have a base.

The plan was to call the Mercury dealer in Taree early the next day and see if we could drop the boat in to rectify the problem, but he was flat out and couldn't look at it for a few days. Plan B was, Warren & I would fish with Don and John stayed at home in Old Bar which is only 30 minutes east. John didn't mind as the fishing would probably be the same as the previous day.



Don decided as the Mercury dealer wasn't an option he'd remove and dismantle the carbie and luckily his Toyota tool kit had a suitable spanner and screwdriver etc. Strangely there was fuel in the float bowl which indicated the needle and float in the bowl were doing their thing, so Don removed the needle valve and blew out the carbie jet with compressed air. Handy to have a built-in compressor on the Landcruiser. After the carbie was reassembled and fitted the problem still existed so we continued with plan B and headed for the ramp.

This time the tide was running out which meant we had to get out and walk the boat over the shallow gravel bar before heading upstream. The previous day David showed us where to go to avoid the big rocks which sort of worked on the way up, but not so good on our return.

Once again, the river looked terrific and we fished every likely spot downstream, but only ended up with another small lizard. The return trip was a different story and we hit lots of rocks as the water was lower than during our trip up. Don's annual ritual is two or three -month winter trip to the Daly river fishing for Barra. The boat goes on the roof of his Landcruiser using an electric boat loader and he tows a dual axle off road caravan, quite an adventure, but during his last trip this winter he hit a submerged log then a few days later a rock which badly damaged the gearbox and propellor so this was just replaced. We had to drag the boat over the

gravel bar on our return and we seemed to hit endless rocks so unfortunately the propellor will need some panel beating and fettling when Don eventually gets home.





Don trying to find us a Bass or two

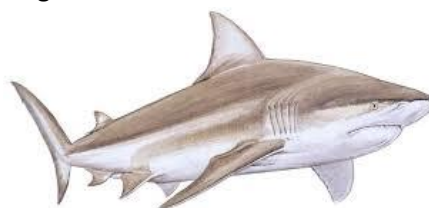


Warren looking very disappointed with the fishing

Two young guys fishing near us upstream mentioned they had seen some Bull sharks in the shallows when we chatted to them at the boat ramp so one never knows what's lurking when you are wading beside your boat.

After a schooner or two followed by dinner and a few bottles of wine at the pub we agreed that the location was a good choice, great accommodation and food so I think Warren is keen to return, not sure about Don. As mentioned, Warren's boat being smaller and lighter is probably more suited to this location so I'm sure we will return again in 2021.

Cheers Milton



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## 2020 October Bass Catch

By Matt McHugh

After a very strange year and a non-start for the February bass catch, it was nice to line up for the October instalment. Doug and I decided to reprise the 2019 October float from Devlin's Lane to North Richmond.

We met before dawn at Hanna park and left one car before arriving at Devlin's before first light. Before long we hit that eerie pre-dawn light and headed up stream over the first riffle. We started to get surface bites from small fish straight away and landed a 200 for the first fish of the day. Doug headed up towards Shaw's farm on the right-hand side and I stuck to the lower pool and the eastern bank with its timber structure.

I was using a soft shell cicada and on the second or third cast into a likely looking spot, hooked up and landed a very feisty 310. There was then a consistent surface bite of eight fish along the one section of bank, all tight into the timber. All healthy fish in a range of sizes all below 300.

As it got lighter, Doug met me after getting several up the main channel and we started to head back down past the lane parking lot. Exiting from the main Devlin's basin there were a few fish stacked up around the weed beds and I got my best fish of the day at 320 on a cicada in tight to the bank.

Downstream from Devlin's in the big pool, the weed that was there last year had virtually disappeared, and the fish that were stacked up on the western bank were absent or shut down. We then concentrated on the shaded eastern bank. The cicada stopped drawing hits, so I changed to a small chatterbait. I got a constant stream of fish, all tight into anything with a bit of fallen timber. Apart from a couple of 295s, the majority of fish were around 200.

We had lunch at Yarramundi and a leg stretch. By this time the wind had blown up from the north and the prospects of the paddle to North Richmond didn't look good. The fishing just below Yarramundi was really good though, with a few fish around the 300 mark along the eastern bank.

As predicted, the paddle was tough to North Richmond, we saw Damian fishing for carp and had a chat. We also saw Gary Blount, but didn't realise it was him. He caught a 400 in the stretch where we didn't even fish! Jeremy met us at the tidal limit and we fished when we could in the wind. I managed to catch another two small ones and took my total to 29 for the day.

Doug Jeremy and I had a drink together at the pub in Windsor and got Chinese takeaway on our way home. It was a great day, plenty of fish and great conditions for the first half. I'm very much looking forward to Bents Basin in the New Year.



*Some real ones!*



## **OLD FISHING BOOKS**

### **free to a good home**

Bass Sydney member Alan Fowkes has a number of old fishing books that some of you may be interested in acquiring.....

Here's the list – all '70's stuff unless otherwise noted so obviously very dated but some nostalgia value:

John Turnbull – The Sportfisherman's Bible

David Lockwood – The Atlas of Australian Fishing

Vic McCristal – Great Fishing with Lures

Dick Lewers – How to Build a Fishing Rod

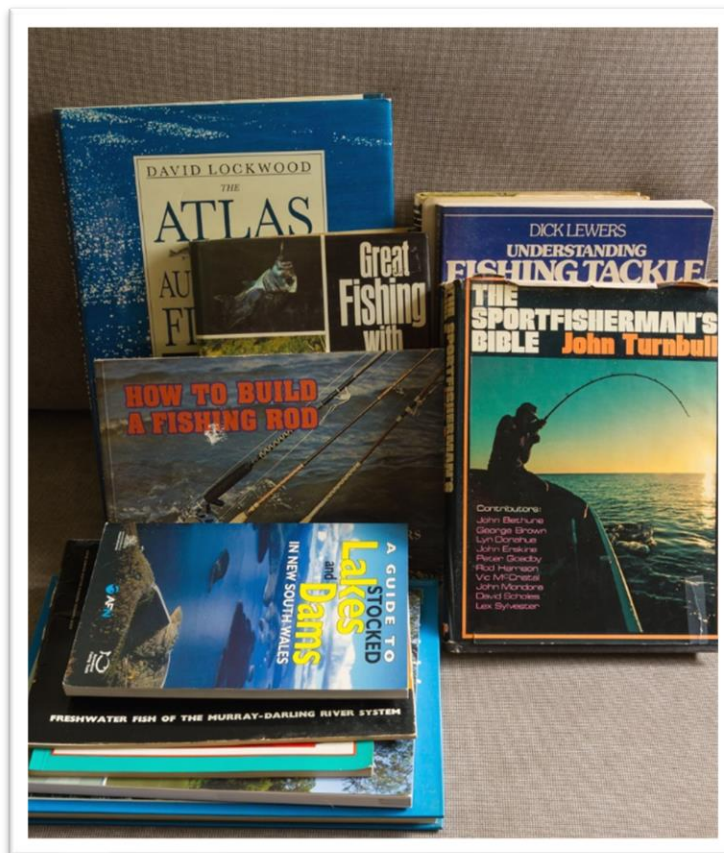
Dick Lewers – Understanding Fishing Tackle

Tiger Carnemolla – Estuary Fishing

John S. Lake – Freshwater Fish of the Murray-Darling Rive System

AFN – A Guide to Stocked Lakes and Dams (2005)

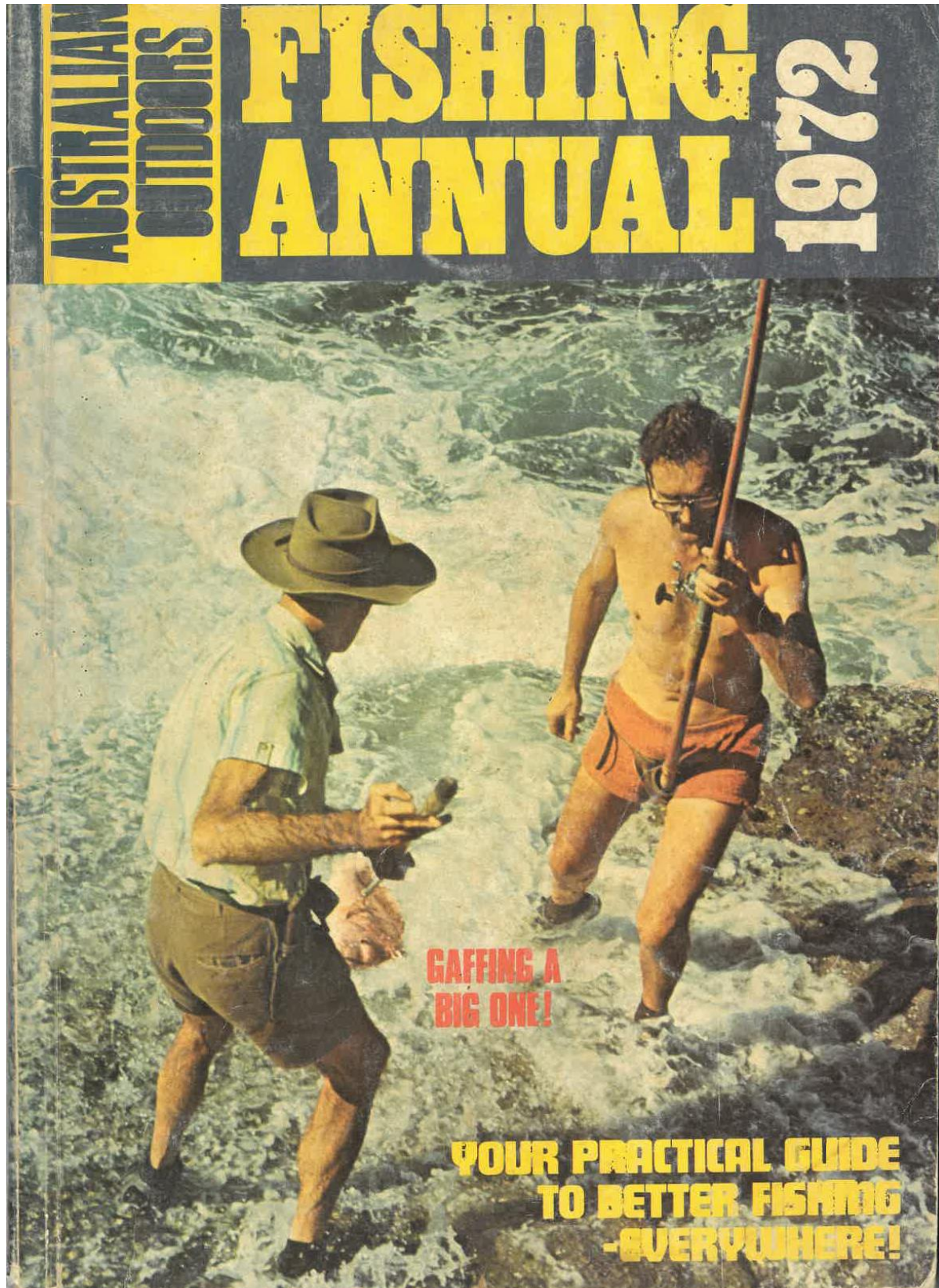
Mark Lintermans – Fishes of the Murray-Darling Basin (2007)



Should you be interested please email Alan on [alanfowkes@bigpond.com](mailto:alanfowkes@bigpond.com)

by Derek Sonter

Saving pocket money and lunch money for three weeks, Derek was about eight years of age when he purchased this fishing book. He has issues from 1973, 1974, 1975 1976, 1977 & 1978 but this one pictured is the only one that has an article about bass.







*Wide-eyed and alert after being fought up through a weed bed, this bass typifies the excitement offering to those anglers willing to push into rough country to go after them.*

# GAMEFISH OF THE EASTERN STREAMS

The bass of America are world famous as gamefish. American anglers here have told us that our Eastern Australian Bass is fully as good if not better, and we don't appreciate them as we should. What is it that hooks a bass fisherman? What is the bass' future in the rapidly changing environment of our eastern coastal strip? **BRYAN PRATT** surveys the current scene for us.

PERHAPS YOU CAN visualise the scene. It is a late summer afternoon, on a coastal river. The water is a mixture of brackish, salt and fresh, backed up by the tide which flows in from the Pacific Ocean. Long shadows form along one bank of the river as shafts of late sun come spearing through the eucalypts and settle gently on the surface of the quiet water.

Sitting motionless 30 feet out from the heavily wooded shoreline is an angler in a tiny boat. Small and low in the water they blend delicately with the surroundings. The angler has a small rod and reel, and has cast a lure some minutes before, right in against the branches of an old half-submerged tree. Now he sits and waits, watching the last of the ripples radiate out from the lure and disappear into the distance.

The yellow rubber lure sits quietly on the water, immobile, patient.

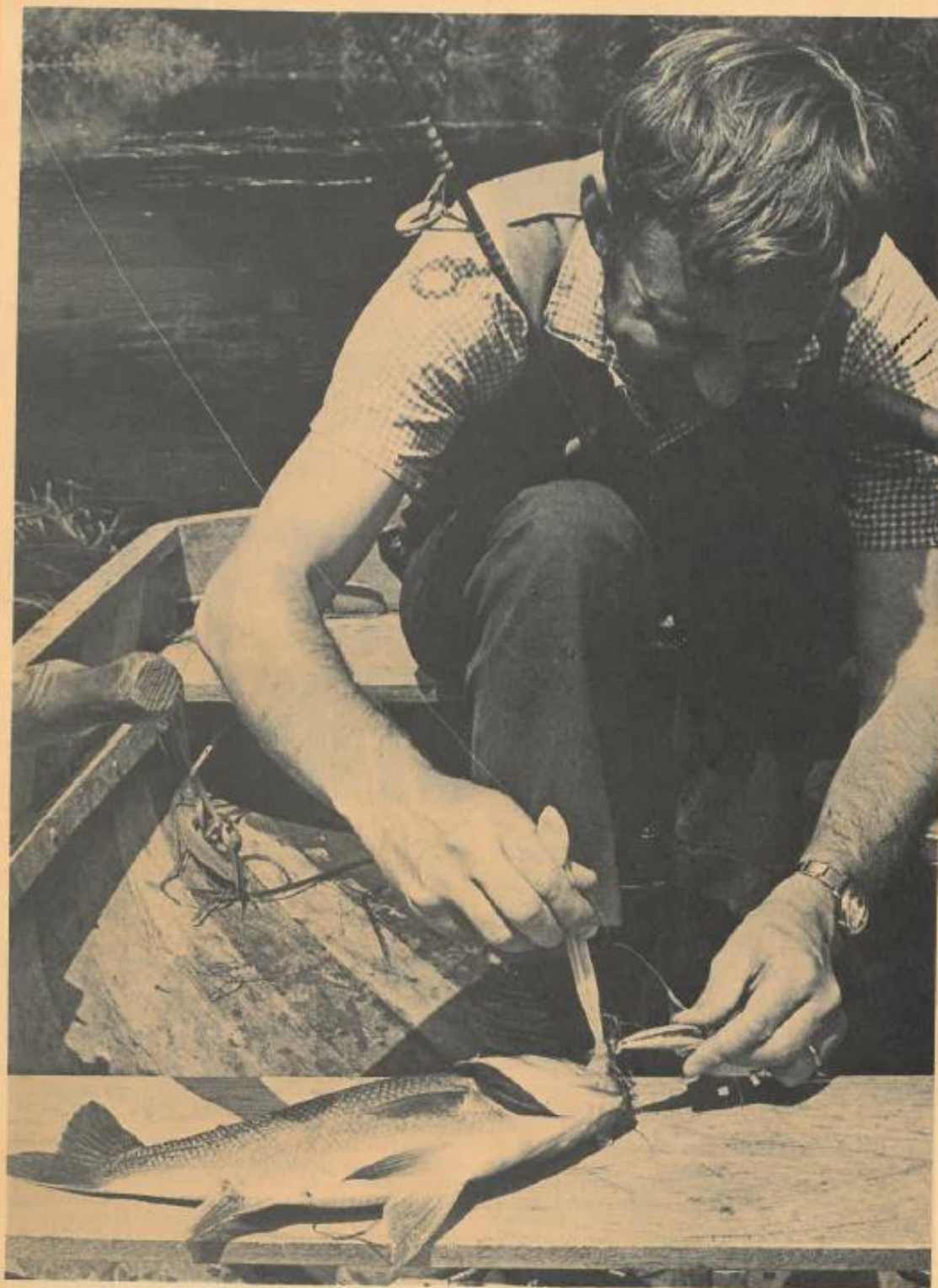
The man in the boat is finally satisfied that all the ripples have gone and the time is right. He lifts the rod, winding up the couple of inches of slack line, then gives the rod a flick, sending a belt of energy down the line and making the lure dive quickly beneath the surface. Instantly the water explodes. Spray flies in the air as a dark body crashes to the surface and down again, taking the lure with him.

The angler lifts the rod quickly, driving home the three sets of sharp hooks on the lure, then leans into the fight as the fish makes a run for it. The drag gives as the fish hurtles into the mass of tree branches, twisting, turning and rubbing across them as it burrows deeper and deeper.

The fish goes in one side of the dead tree and out the other, still tugging line from the spool. The angler knows what to do — he has been through all this many times before. He leans back on the rod as hard as he dares, listening, feeling and sensing the tension in his line, judging just when and how much to assist the slip clutch in letting the fish run, judging when to put a bit more pressure on to stop the fish going one way or another.

Soon the fish stops its wild head-shaking lunges and starts to come back, firstly under its own power than a little more reluctantly as the angler senses the weakening and begins to ease it back. It comes back into the tree branches and now the angler begins the delicate job of threading it back through the maze of





*Use a hook disgorger and take care with the multiple trebles used on most bass lures. Razor-sharp gill covers are one of the bass' defence weapons. They can slice fingers and hands with ease!*

*The Flopy. This French soft-bodied plug is acclaimed as the greatest bass lure ever, and has accounted for tens of thousands of fish in Australian streams. It is also beginning a new role in salt water.*



underwater girders.

He can't see most of these branches, of course, so it all has to be done by touch. He's had a lot of practice, though, and it's not long before the fish is out and on the same side of the tree as the angler and his boat. The fish spots the boat as it looms up close and makes a series of short, last-minute dashes to escape.

The angler is caught off guard momentarily and the rod buckles alarmingly with the weight of the fish on a now too-short line. The middle hooks and one of the two rear hooks on the lure tear free from the fish's mouth and now the catch is held only by one hook hanging in a whisper of flesh at the left side of the jaw.

Slowly and delicately the fish is played out and finally brought back to the side of the boat where it hangs, staring up at the angler with huge, broad dark eyes. Gently the fish is lifted into the boat; as it touches the floor of the boat it gives one wild kick and the angler whips his hand back quickly to avoid the flying hooks and spines and that razor-sharp gill cover.

The fish weighs in at a shimmering dark-scaled 3 lb 11 oz, and the angler sits back in his small boat with a broad grin on his face. He is well-satisfied.

The name of the game, if you haven't already guessed, is bass fishing. The locale is anywhere on the coast of NSW, southern Queensland or southern and eastern Victoria. The time is summer, and the sport is one of the most glamorous and exciting types of fishing available in Australia today. It stands head and shoulders above a lot of other fresh and saltwater fishing, and attracts more and more devoted adherents every year. A bass fisherman, once hooked, is hooked for life. The minute he catches that first bass he is done for. From that time on he is a new fisherman.

Mr Bass is in reality two separate but closely related fish. His scientific name is *Percalates*, and one species is the bass and another species is the estuary perch. Both of them are specifically Australian fish, with a most remarkable adaptation to the Australian coastal environment. They are similar in appearance, but estuary perch tend to be the deeper fish, that is, the distance between the dorsal fin and the belly is greater in the estuary perch than in the bass. In addition the estuary perch has more of a depression on its forehead than the bass. Then if you are really clever you might note that the bass has more gill rakers than the estuary perch.

We knew little of the life cycle of bass until a few short years ago, when the NSW Department of Fisheries took a more active interest in the fish. We now know that the male bass are small fish which

may not exceed 10 inches or so in length, and that those really big fat ones are the females. We know also what many anglers suspected for years and years — bass and estuary perch can live equally well in fresh or salt water. We know that many of them migrate to salt or brackish water each year, usually in winter, but whether it is for specialised feeding, for breeding, or for a combination of both, is not yet clear.

There are scattered bits of information about bass that I keep sifting in my mind, trying to anticipate where the fish will be at different times of the year and what their feeding patterns might be. These are a difficult fish to understand at times, and every little bit of information is added to the jigsaw puzzle.

Do all bass go down to salt or brackish water in winter for example? I think not. In one river in southern NSW I have caught an occasional bass in winter in fresh water, some considerable distance upstream from the tidal zone. These have always been small fish, so perhaps they were not sexually mature and did not wish or need to go downstream.

In the headwaters of the same river are a series of ponds, lagoons, backwaters or closed creeks in which live some absolutely giant bass. These are often cut off from the main river for several years at a time, yet they appear to be quite fit and healthy. Whether they are breeding in there I haven't been able to determine. There are many other examples of fish in these types of situations — the Bega swamps are in this category. If I remember rightly the last two or three Australian record bass were taken from areas like this.

Admittedly the bass are difficult to take on lures in winter in fresh water, particularly in southern NSW. I understand the situation is a little more flexible north of Sydney. For example, we rarely see good bass activity on the south coast before Christmas. The real fishing gets under way around January and reaches a peak in late February and March. We can still catch them in April and May but then they disappear very suddenly, and most of us give it away in those areas.

We see a few starting again in November and a few more in December but January is really the starting point. On the north coast of NSW I have seen excellent bass activity well before Christmas. I have caught them in the Nepean even in September and October. A lot of this seems to depend on where you fish. If it is assumed that most of the bass and estuary perch move into the salt water in winter, and move back up later on, then the early season fish should be found in the salt and brackish water.

From all the bits of odd information we have this seems to be true. At Bega, I have been told about a chap named Thompson who could regularly take bass





from behind a certain rock in salt water in winter. He would row over, hook a live prawn through the tail, then flick it out on a handline. Wham! A bass would latch on to the prawn and he would haul it in.

In other southern NSW rivers I have kept in touch with a number of professional fishermen who net the estuaries. They assure me that they pick up a lot of bass in winter in nets designed to catch bream, flathead and niggers. In the mouth of one small creek one night they lifted out 23 beautiful big bass up to about 4½ lb — mighty fish indeed. But when spring and early summer roll around the bass catches drop away and from then on they rarely see one. Occasionally they pick up a stray estuary perch, but no bass.

Normally it is assumed that the bass and perch move down the river in which they live, to the salt water section of that river, and feed there. This may not be so, and fish may go out to sea and may even come back up a different river. Last winter we took a couple of fish out of a small inlet on the south coast. It is entirely salt water with no fresh water river coming in, just a small amount of local surface drainage. Both of the fish were estuary perch, about 2 lb, and if ever they had been in a fresh water river then they would have had to swim out to sea to get around to this estuary.

We opened the fish and washed out their stomach contents — small mullet to about 3 inches in length, several small fish which looked like mud gudgeons of some sort, a heap of small shrimps or prawns, and half a dozen small flounder about two inches long. Certainly a varied diet and indication of bottom feeding for at least part of the time.

The interesting thing, though, is that if we fish all of these areas with standard bass lures we do not catch fish. Is it that the fish aren't interested in lures? It seems odd when they are feeding on fish, as many of the lures are "fish-like" in color and design. Perhaps we need something radically new in lures.

It is possible to catch fish on lures further up salt water rivers in early summer. On the north coast of NSW I understand this is not overly difficult, and that some good specimens are taken from logs and rock corners on standard lures. On the south coast, though, this has been very difficult. I have thrashed many miles of these salt water sections, with negligible results, yet I know the fish are there. Maybe it's me and the technique, but I have a sneaking suspicion there is a vital link here which we do not yet understand.

The real stuff of bass fishing is in the tangled, log-strewn, overgrown weedy stretches high up in the fresh water. Here the bass can eat their heads off all day every day, chomping away at shrimps, spiders, mice, grasshoppers, cicadas, butterflies, moths, beetles, grubs, worms and just about anything else that falls into the stream.

Here the fish are ever alert for food objects falling on to the water surface, and lure fishing can be exceptionally good. I have had bass on many hundreds of occasions smash into a lure a fraction of a second after it hits the water. For years we wondered if in fact they really saw the lure coming and were on the way up to meet it when they hit. Some of them actually seemed to get head and shoulders out of the water and take the lure before it hit the water. We were never dead sure about it, though, because it always happened so fast.

Finally, though, I saw it happen last weekend, as clear as crystal. I was trying out a new Rebel

*2½ lb bass and the baitcaster which caught him. Single-handed rods with baitcaster or spinning reels have become standard equipment on our inland waters. Picture by John Turnbull.*

Quarterback lure — a tiny lure with a delicious action. It was a vivid fluorescent red and I cast it well out to the base of an overhanging tree, aiming for the point where the branches touch the water.

When the lure still had about 8 inches to go before it touched the water a bass shot up out of the water in a hefty splashing arc, grabbed the lure and fell back into the water about 18 inches from where it came out. This is the first time I have ever been absolutely certain that they can jump right out and intercept that descending lure. It backs up again what we all know about bass — they have incredibly good eyesight and make good use of it.

The bass have an assured future in this country if we take reasonable care of them. The things in their favor at present are that they inhabit a fairly big geographic range in eastern Australia, and that they inhabit some of the wildest country imaginable within this range. In all probability they are in every creek, river and estuary running in from the coast between the Glenelg River in western Victoria to about Tin Can Bay in southern Queensland.

They love the tick-ridden, leech-filled swamps, backwaters and overgrown rivers and creeks where they get reasonable protection from the poachers, morons with set lines, spears, traps, nets and the dynamiters. Having won a strong place in the hearts of thinking sportfishermen in this country they can be assured of support for protection whenever they appear to need it.

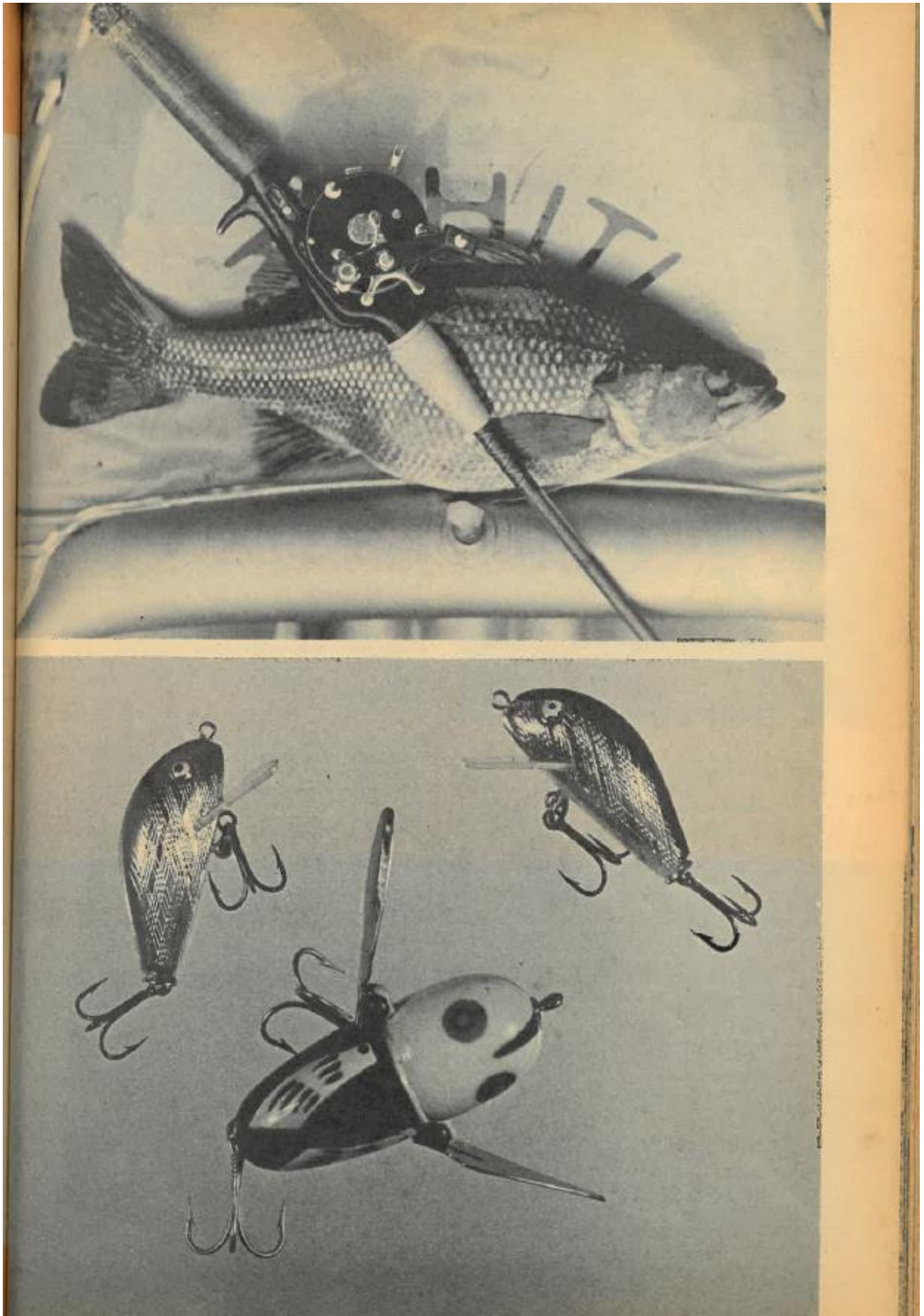
The things which could kill out or seriously reduce our bass populations are easy enough to understand. Parts of the Nepean, Georges, Cook, Parramatta and Hunter Rivers are all good precedents. Industrial pollution will kill directly or indirectly by reducing essential food items. Indiscriminate bank clearing and "opening up" of streams is likely to reduce protective bank cover and reduce the supply of food insects. De-snagging of rivers for "flood control", so avidly practised in Victoria, reduces points of shelter for fish and reduces food supplies. These opening up procedures also make the streams too accessible and the fish population could decline then from simple overfishing.

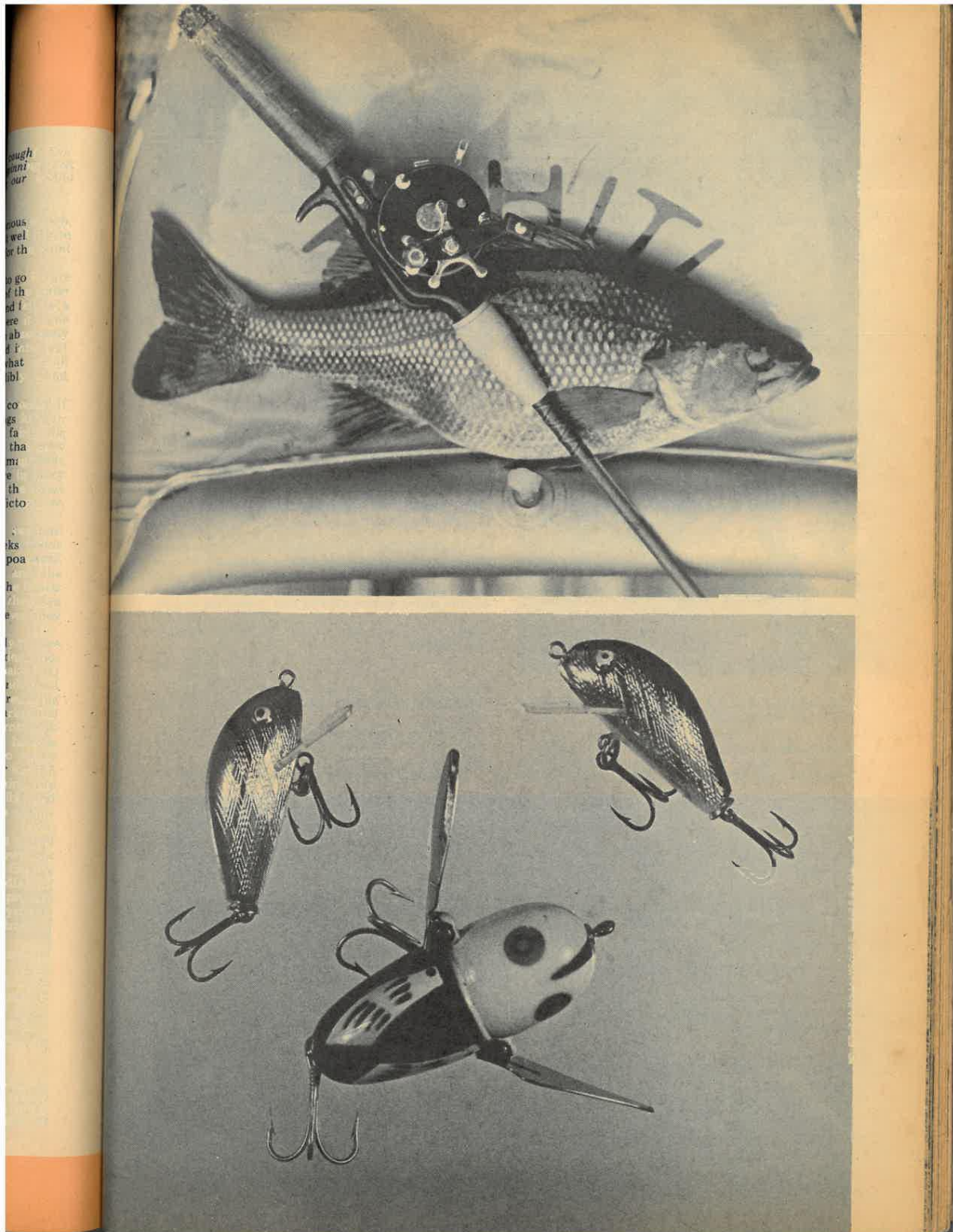
We are not yet sure of the effects of dams placed across bass rivers. Does this interfere with movement up and down rivers sufficiently to affect feeding patterns? Does it prevent some or all breeding of completely landlocked fish? Does it prevent cross-breeding of fish from different river systems, with a subsequent loss of hybrid vigor in trapped fish?

Only time and careful thought by both anglers and biologists will give us usable answers to these questions. The one thing we are sure about right now is that bass are a magnificent sportfish, completely Australian, and a facet of our sportfishing scene which must be preserved or conserved in such a manner that it can be enjoyed by future generations of Australian fishermen. \*

*Two bass lures winning wide acceptance today in Australia, both from America. Two Rebel Quarterbacks, small shallow running lures, and the arm-waving Crazy Crawler, a flopping surface lure for evening fishing.*









## **SHOALHAVEN WEEKEND**

**By Jason**

Dates were set for late November for our trip to the Shoalhaven. After initially discussing other options including the Clyde, we opted for the familiar setting of Grady's Riverside Retreat as above all, it has fished relatively consistently on previous trips and it offers variety of options for both boaters and 'yakkers within a reasonable distance of camp. Late November is getting toward the busy end of the year and as expected, the dates clashed for many and only a few of us could make it.

Rico, Tham and I all arrived late on the Fri to a full campground. There was even another fishing club with 31 in attendance for an annual getaway. When seeing this, fishing expectations dipped a little with the certainty of a busy river and of course the usual squadrons of jet skis and wake boats. The plan was for Rico to fish 2 sessions in my boat on Saturday while Tham met Damo for a 'yak session or 2, and then switch with Tham fishing from my boat Sunday.

We woke early on the Sat morning to the peace of a quiet campground as everyone else was still asleep. Pleasingly, we were the first boat to launch at just before 6am. The river was calm and with decent tannin-stained flow and the cicadas screaming early, the conditions just felt good. Rico was rigged and ready with a Chasebaits Cicada while I needed to tie on a new leader and choose my lure. I commented to Rico that I reckon he could have 3 in the boat before I put my first cast in. I motored slowly to the bank directly opposite the ramp where there was plenty of casuarinas overhanging the bank and some root balls and undercuts likely exposed from the flood in February. Rico's first cast was a good one and the initial pause before beginning the retrieve was met with the aggressive bloop of a small Bass. That one missed the hooks, but they found the mark on a repeat cast back in to the same patch. The first Bass was a small low 200s model but very welcome given it was the second cast of the trip. Rico landed his second before I was ready but he couldn't quite get the third as predicted. I had tied on a small Maria pencil as it's a lure that is very easy to skip-cast back into the shadows and this too got immediate attention. The action was consistent and by 8am we had 17 each but none over 300mm.



By this time a few other boats had joined us on the river and we were forced to make a move downstream to ensure that we weren't casting at "second hand" water while the bite was still on. At our next section Rico decided to stick with the cicada as it was still receiving frequent attention while I switched tactics in attempt to find a few EPs as Rico and I had caught several in this location last year. I tied on a small blade as part of this section bottoms out at 14m. Rico continued to tally Bass, but the EPs were either not holding here or not interested. He managed the two-best Bass of the morning at 330 and 315 fork in quick succession which did tempt me to move back to a surface lure, but I persisted with the blade. Soon after I did however manage an Eel-tailed catfish on the blade from 9m of water which was certainly not expected and a welcome surprise.



From here we moved further downstream and tried Calymea creek and a few other banks but the tide was close to bottoming out which meant the creek was really shallow and the edges and undercuts were exposed – not to mention the wake boats and their bank destroying wash was making it difficult to stand, let alone catch fish! On the way back upstream, we encountered a sizeable red-bellied black snake swimming across the middle of the river where it was about 300m wide. A quick warning to a few swimmers on the nearby bank was certainly appreciated. We called it a day around noon with the tally for session 1 at 46 Bass, 1 Bream and the Eel-tailed catfish. Rico did well with nearly all of his 27 Bass taking the cicada. Nearly all of my 19 were taken on the Maria 55mm pencil.

After a cool drink from the esky and a refreshing afternoon nap, we woke to a howling south east wind. With the plan for the arvo to drive to Nowra and fish the mid reaches in search of EPs and possibly more Bass, we delayed leaving as the river is much wider and far more exposed down there.

We finally launched at 5pm when the wind had abated enough to consider it comfortable. It still made life difficult in trying to position the boat and get accurate casts in, but we persisted. The EPs could not be tempted, and in hindsight, given the amount of fresh inflow I suspect they were likely holding further downstream. We did encounter some odd behaviour by a mob of Bass on a likely looking section of rocky bank though. We worked this section with sugapens and imitation sugapens as a last-ditch effort before calling it an afternoon. Rico's lure was hit in a messy strike that didn't sound quite right and soon after mine copped the same. The same fish hit my lure 4 times but was knocking it clear of the water, presumably with its tail. After repeated strikes on both lures over several casts, it became obvious that they were not actually trying to take the lure, but appeared to be trying to chase it and knock it away. Needless to say, we didn't hook one, but were at least encouraged that we had found some activity.



We came to another small creek entrance which neither of us had fished and right against a small rocky point with the flow pushing onto it, Rico's lure was smashed in a big surface hit. Unfortunately, the hooks pulled after a few seconds. It looked to be a good fish too. After that we decided to push into the creek in attempt to salvage the session in the dying light. We quickly caught a small Bass each within the first 50m of the creek, however despite deep undercuts, dark shadows and some spectacular overhanging sandstone formations, we could not muster another strike. This was certainly water that must explored at a later date though! As we turned to exit the creek a bit bemused that we hadn't done better, we spotted a platypus casually cruising the bank before it disappeared into an undercut and up behind a root ball. Always great to see a platypus in the wild! We finished the session with 1 Bass each, but it had still been a great day.

The tough arvo session left Tham and I in two minds about where to fish in the morning. Over a couple of beers, we discussed whether we should we break camp and take our chances downstream again so as to make heading home easier, or fish the upper tidal reaches near Grady's again after it had been fished by numerous boats the day before? In the end it was the almost fishless arvo session that convinced us to chase the early Bass bite upstream again. We launched early and this day were the second boat on the river. The first boat had worked the productive stretch just below the ramp so we gave it a brief shot before moving downstream a little to work some different banks. We managed a few fish before I missed a good surface hit from what appeared to be a better fish on the Maria pencil that had been productive the day before. The old switch bait worked a treat here, as after two more casts into the same spot with the maria, Tham fired in a jig spin and connected after a crunching strike. After a brief tussle in the current Tham lifted in a nice 320 fork fish for a quick photo before release.





Just down from here I spotted an ideal looking section on the opposite bank. The rocky bank cut in sharply after a longer straight section. There were several large casuarinas and water gums overhanging providing plenty of shade, and a beautiful back eddy had formed in the outgoing tide. First cast in with the maria was met with an aggressive strike from a small fish. This was the first of 9 we landed from the small 30m pocket which was great fun. We pushed a little further downstream after that to the deeper the section where Rico had got the best fish the day before and I lucked the catfish. After noticing a Bass like take on the surface nearby, I pinged the maria in and after a few slight twitches left it for a long pause. As soon as I moved it to start the retrieve it was boofed in the take of a better fish. It went deep straight away and was coaxed away from the nearest fallen tree for a comfortable net shot. At 360 fork it was not a huge bass but a beautiful healthy specimen. We tallied a few more fish from this stretch including one that vomited two very sizeable caterpillars when I went to remove the lure. By this point the wake boats and jet skis were getting the better of us so we decided to call it a day. It was another great morning with 36 Bass to 360 fork – 24 for me and 12 for Tham.







A cold beer was enjoyed in the midday heat while breaking camp before we left to head home. Final tally for the boat for 3 sessions was 84 Bass, 1 Bream and 1 Eel-tailed catfish.

Tham caught a few beautiful fish on his day 1 yak trip with Damo including a 400-fork Bass from Bomaderry creek, but I'll leave the details to him. Rico also managed a few more Bass, a few Flathead and a nice bream while fishing from his yak in the creeks around Nowra on the Sunday morning. A thoroughly enjoyable few days!

Cheers, Jason.



## **BASS SYDNEY'S RUSSELL STREET REGEN PROJECT- The First Ten Years, (almost!)**

**By Alan Fowkes October 2020**

Vision and persistence. That's what's required to succeed in the regeneration of a highly degraded area and that's what Bass Sydney has demonstrated for close to 10 years at our Russell Street site in Emu Plains, NSW.

But perhaps a little history is in order to explain why a fish conservation club is so active in bush regeneration.

Bass Sydney was formed almost 40 years ago with the aim of conserving native fish in the Sydney basin. As the club name implies we had a specific focus on the area's most important freshwater sport fish – the Australian Bass.

At that time, the Australian Bass was suffering badly. As a species that needs to migrate from fresh to brackish water and back again in order to complete its lifecycle, the numerous weirs on all our Sydney rivers were a serious threat to recruitment. Poor water quality due to poor management of sewage, siltation due to land clearing, industrial and agricultural pollution, all saw many fish carrying skin lesions and suffering ill health. Indiscriminate fishing of spawning aggregations was also a problem.

Thankfully, by the late 1990's many of these problems had been addressed. The majority of weirs carried appropriate native fish ladders, Sydney's sewerage plants had all been upgraded and the introduction of size and bag limits had largely addressed the over-fishing problem.

Bass Sydney had been involved in many of these wins including in the construction and maintenance of fishways and in providing NSW Fisheries with the data needed to implement appropriate fishing controls.

And so we turned to the next most obvious contributor to river health and that is the quality of the riparian vegetation. This critical corridor of vegetation contributes to water quality by controlling erosion and filtering runoff. It impacts water temperature through shading and kick starts the food chain through the provision of habitat. For a fish like the Australian Bass those food chain benefits can be via healthier instream biota or via insects falling directly from bankside vegetation.

We built our skills steadily. First volunteering with Greening Australia (GA) at planting days on the banks of south Creek and then with NPWS conducting primary weeding on the Grose and Nepean Rivers (we volunteer with NPWS to this day, most recently at Bents Basin).

By the end of the "noughties" we were keen to get involved more deeply and thoughts turned to establishing a long term project on "our own site".

In early 2011 our Environmental Projects Officer, Alan Izzard, identified the site at Russell and entered into negotiations with Penrith City Council (PCC) seeking permission to work it. Given that we were proposing to run our own project rather than simply volunteer on existing programs, we had to give PCC confidence that we had the skills and integrity to do the job and to stay the course.

At this point, our relationships with GA and NPWS helped to prove our credibility. It was also fortunate that by this time a couple of Bass Sydney members, myself included, were working in the bush regeneration industry. This allowed us to present PCC with a written plan for the scope of works and to guarantee appropriate supervision of our members on site.



Having established our bona fides and jumped a few administrative hurdles (like confirming that our club had appropriate insurances) we were granted approval by PCC in May, 2011.

So, the good news was that we had our site. The bad news was that it was a mess!

This was a highly degraded area. A complete history is unclear but it is likely that some of the roads through the site were built to support gravel extraction for the construction of Warragamba Dam. Certainly, large concrete blocks with anchor points are present on site that are reputed to have been part of the flying fox structure carrying gravel from the river to the dam.

Perhaps it's a legacy of this work that left a stretch of the high bank above the access track completely devoid of native vegetation and with some obvious alterations to contours and hydrology.

What's also fairly clear is that agricultural activity on the floodplain above this high bank led to clearing of that area and the invasion of our site by pasture weeds, fruit trees and other usual suspects like Lantana and Privet. What we were left with on this high bank was a blanket of Privet and other woody weeds now swamped with Balloon Vine and Madeira Vine.

Below the road, on the slope to the river bank itself, a canopy of mature River Oaks (*Casuarina cunninghamiana*) was in place but choked with Balloon Vine. This had shaded out the understorey and was threatening the health of the host trees.

Further upstream on the site was a wall of Lantana reaching high into the Cassies. We had our work cut out.

The decision was made to tackle the site in sections. We would skirt the weedy vines on the lower bank to provide some urgent relief for our existing canopy trees and then focus our efforts on the high bank where our results would be most visible to the local community. The upstream section of Lantana would have to wait.

The skirting was achieved over the first few months providing highly visible improvements. Where the view from the access road had once been a sea of Balloon Vine, the dying vines gradually revealed a much more pleasant view to the river.

Primary weeding on the high bank continued for 12 months. First skirting the vines and then removing what must have been thousands of privet revealed underneath. Every attending Bass Sydney member became very adept at "cut and paint". Very little in the way of native vegetation was revealed here and it became obvious that planting would be necessary.

Our initial 2012 plantings were of appropriate canopy species (Eucalypts and Angophora from the River Flat Eucalypt Forest community) mixed with Acacias. The latter were included for their fast growth, pioneering capability and nitrogen fixing benefits.

Plantings have continued in most years since, gradually filling out the structure to include smaller shrubs, grasses and ground layer plants. Even native vines. Natural recruitment from planted specimens is now occurring which contributes further to vegetation density and the ability to resist weed invasion.

We've also had success with natural regeneration. Even in our most degraded areas native grasses like *Microlaena Stipoides* (Weeping Meadow Grass) and *Oplismenus aemulus* (Basket Grass) along with other groundcovers like *Commelina cyanea* (Scurvy Weed) have made a return.

But beneath that upstream wall of Lantana was perhaps our greatest regeneration surprise. Struggling under the weight of this wall were some mature *Hibiscus heterophyllus* (Native Rosella) and *Trema aspera* (Native Peach), amongst other species. Relieved of their burden the Hibiscus in particular have expanded and provide a wonderful flowering display in late spring to early summer.

In this slightly less degraded part of the site the existence and regeneration of a wide variety of natives has been heartening. Sandpaper Figs, Coachwood, White Cedar, Frangipani and Cheese Trees. *Lomandra*, *Plectranthus*, *Viola* and *Rubus*. The list goes on. A great reward for our effort and a great platform to move forward with.

We have had a lot of help along the way. For the first six months of our project PCC loaned us tools and provided herbicide. During that time Al Izzard worked hard to access two small grants - Caring for Country (Federal) and Fish Habitat Action (NSW) Grants – totalling about \$12,000.

These provided seed funds, allowing us to buy tools and chemicals, and a lockable trailer to hold them all. The balance of these funds were later applied to the purchase of plants and a little contractor assistance.

Through our relationships with GA we also benefitted from the “Windsor to Weir” project being granted some contractor sessions in 2013. These were very useful in opening up new sections via high volume spraying techniques.

Later, PCC nominated our site for receipt of 300 plants accessed via Local Land Services and more recently we’ve had plants provided by Conservation Volunteers Australia.

But all this support would have amounted to nothing without the persistence of Bass Sydney’s regen group. As any regenerator knows, a long term commitment to secondary weeding is the most critical part of any project such as this.

We’ve now been on site for more than 9 years and the changes have been startling. Whilst a first time visitor might tune in to weeds that still exist, regulars can appreciate what a horrible mess this site was and how much progress has been made.

You know you’re making a difference when local residents regularly stop by to thank you for your efforts and our greatest reward has been to have a few of them join us in our endeavours. Two of the local ladies are now among our most consistent workers.

In 2020, our plantings on the high bank are now approaching the density of the weeds they replaced. Small birds, our canaries in the coal mine, live very comfortably in this area – wrens, thornbills, finches – whilst Brown Quail persist in the complex ground layer.

The trees saved from suffocation are also home to prolific birdlife. Some nest in hollows or on high branches. Others, like the Brown Gerygone I noticed last week, tend nests that hang from the lower branches.

Of course, our site does not exist in isolation from all the degraded areas around us. Nor have we yet exhausted the seed bank from years of weed inundation, or completely met the challenge of those particularly persistent weeds that reshoot from tubers.

If we stop work today then our site will suffer and that brings with it a conundrum. Not just the usual difficulty of maintaining an enthusiastic group of volunteers beyond the 10 year mark but also the matter of money.



At this point our trailer is in need of repair and our tool supply has suffered from losses as well as normal wear and tear. Our chemical supply is low and our grant funds have long since been exhausted.

There seems to be a problem with available grant funding. Every new program that comes along seems to require that the project is new. No value is placed on the maintenance of gains that have already been achieved – despite this being so needed and so hard to achieve.

We've been lucky this year. We've been thrown a lifeline. PCC have committed additional funds to their bush care program and, as of July 2020, we've been provided with a council coordinator who supplies council tools each month as well as chemicals when required.

Admittedly, this means the site is no longer quite "ours" but this is the only way we can continue and we're grateful for the support.

Hopefully, funding bodies will, in the future, see the value in maintenance work and make grant funds available to avoid other groups failing.

Bass Sydney is proud of what we've achieved at Russell Street. We had a vision to apply and expand our skill set to restore a significant piece of riparian vegetation. We aimed to realise this through regeneration where possible and to create planted zones that were structurally complete where necessary. We aimed to restore ecosystem function and benefit our favourite native fish.

We think we've gone a long way towards achieving our aims and we continue to plough on towards that 10 year mark.



*High Bank - Day 1*





*High Bank - Early Planting*



*High Bank - 2020*





We hope that this Christmas  
will be for you all,  
a cheerful ending to a difficult year  
and a great beginning to a  
Happy New Year

Lyn and Milton  
editors

