

Secrets of the wily black



bream



By Trevor Gill

Wily is the word. It springs easily from the lips of bream anglers who have studied the idiosyncrasies of one of Australia's most popular and cunning fish.

Black or southern bream are found along various parts of the coastline from Victoria, around Tasmania and through to southern Western Australia. They are fish of estuaries and rivers and can withstand a wide range of salinities.

Bream rarely move away from their inshore or estuarine environment. They are bottom dwellers and tend to inhabit areas where rocky seabeds, snags or structures, such as jetties,



bridges and marinas, provide cover from predators.

They are slow growing and long lived, reaching a maximum size of 60 centimetres and weighing up to 4 kg.

Now, turn the page for action tips!

Beauty of bream

is they'll take baits, lures or flies



The Onkaparinga River and estuary is an ideal place to go bream fishing.

Mark Lewis of Glenelg loudly sings the praises of bream as a sports fish.

"They are great fun to catch and accessible for most people because they can be caught just as well from shore as they can from a boat," Mark said.

"We are lucky to have places like the Onkaparinga River, Patawalonga and Port River so close to Adelaide because they are natural habitats for bream providing safe, all weather fishing experiences."

There is a closed season for bream in the Onkaparinga River upstream of the main South Road bridge between 1 September and 30 November. In all South Australian waters, the minimum size limit for bream is 28 cm with a bag limit of 10 per person or 30 per boat.

The beauty of bream is that they will take lures, baits or flies. But they are very cautious fish and are easily "spooked."

They love underwater structures and snags, which offer protection from other big fish and a ready-made food supply.

At night or on overcast days, bream will also move around on sandy or muddy flats to satisfy their hunger for a wide range of plants and animals, including bivalve molluscs, worms, prawns and crabs. A receding tide can often reveal small craters or hollows in the flats where a bream has been digging for food.

Behind the big lips of a bream is a full armoury of teeth with which they seize prey. With their impressive molars, bream can also grind and crush hard food items such as shellfish and crabs. It is wise not to put your finger into the mouth of a live bream.

While bream can be caught all year round, Mark believes his greatest successes have come in winter through to late spring when



flooding creeks push tannin stained water into rivers like the Onkaparinga and Patawalonga.

"When a river looks like dark tea, it is a good time to fish because bream will tend to be less cautious about taking lures and flies and will move around without so much fear of predators," he said.

"It is advisable to have some tidal movement or flow in the water and this stimulates the fish to come out of their hiding places in search of food. Early mornings and late afternoons are usually the best times to fish. But in dark water with low visibility bream will often feed throughout the day.

"Because they are timid, it is advisable to keep very quiet when fishing for bream, use the least weight, lightest line and freshest bait.

"If you are bait fishing, try to find out from local fishers or tackle shop owners the natural food source for bream in a particular area. Usually, the advice will be to go for tube worms, shrimps, prawns or small rock crabs. However, large fish will also take cubes of pilchard meat.

"Live shrimp caught on location are also good bait. However, you need to be aware of the rules that apply to the use of shrimp traps

"The natural prey of bream, including shellfish, populate underwater structures such as marinas and bridge pylons and, in most cases, long casts will not be necessary.

"A long "whippy" rod with a light casting reel, 2 or 3 kg line, and split shot or small running sinker about 30 cm above the hook will carry your bait to most of the cruising places for bream. Long shanked hooks size 8 to 12 are ideal for bream fishing using worm as bait. Suicide pattern hooks are better suited to shrimp, prawns and fish strips.

"For lure fishing, a light graphite rod around 1.8 metres matched to a small threadline reel is usually better suited to throwing and retrieving lures. This style of rod used with Fireline or any equivalent low stretch line will result in greater feel when retrieving a lure.

"It is also a good idea to work some burley into the water using chopped up pilchards or chicken pellets soaked in fish oil. If a bream does not strike within 20 minutes, move to another place.

"When a bream does strike, it will run with the bait. Many fishers will say you don't need to tend your rod as the fish will catch itself. But I think it's best to fish more actively and enjoy the contest.

"Rods left unattended with a lightly set drag will catch fish, but this technique usually results in deeply hooked fish which stand little chance of survival if you are planning to release them.

"Given the number of undersized fish that are usually encountered when you are bream fishing, this is not the preferred technique in terms of sustaining our fish stocks."

Mark's passion is lure fishing for bream from his kayak. These small, light and cheap paddle power craft are ideal spinning platforms for bream fishing and they can be launched just about anywhere.

On the water, kayaks are very stealthy and manoeverable. A carefully wielded paddle makes little noise, which is important when chasing bream. They also allow access to areas not reachable by any means other than by boat. But then the stealth aspect is lost.

Mark maintains a very impressive tackle box of about 30 diving lures, predominantly in the 38mm to 40mm size range, along with a range of soft plastics resembling natural prey.



On the water, kayaks are stealthy and manoeverable, which is important when chasing bream.

"Usually the smaller the lure, the greater chance of strikes and catching fish," he said.

The colourful lures may look irresistible to bream, but Mark is quick to point out this is not a case of "feeding strawberries to pigs."

"Bream can be very moody," he said. "Some days they will be aggressive to a lure, and on other days show no interest at all. Their habits can also vary from one place to another.

Usually bright pink and green fluoro patterns are the most successful in dark water.

"I am convinced that in most cases bream will have a good look at a lure before deciding whether or not to attack. Again, visibility, tidal movement and time of day all play an important role."

Mark experiments with his lures, changing colours and diving depths until he finds the one that attracts a bream.

His rod is mounted within easy reach on the bow of his kayak and angles 90 degrees from the craft. With his rod and lure set up, Mark slowly paddles along a shoreline or in circles around structures such as the bridge pylons in the Patawalonga.

"Usually, I'll be working the lure a metre or more below the surface and along the face of the pylon," he said. "You can vary the amount of line you feed out to influence the trolling depth.

"When they strike the lure, bream can be quite ferocious and it is great sport fishing."

Casting a lure from the shore is also a fun way to fish for bream. Slowly reel in your line and occasionally stop winding to allow the minnow lure to appear as if it has momentarily stopped swimming. Often this is when the bream will strike.

"Sometimes a bream will follow a rising lure right to the surface and then decide to bite, particularly in the early mornings and from dusk onwards - periods of low light."

Fly fishing for bream is a relatively new trend, but one that is sure to grow and spread.

"Flies offers a new dimension and challenge to the stealth involved in bream fishing," Mark said. "They are generally smaller than lures and allow for a much more subtle presentation."

"In the right conditions, you can use very light tackle and have a lot of fun. If you are fly fishing from a kayak, you don't even need to paddle.

"If you are using flies, slowly creep up on likely bream hideouts over weed beds, under wharves, bridges and jetties or around mangrove roots. Often, you will see bream swimming around and it's just a matter of landing the fly temptingly close to the fish.

"As with lures, it is worth experimenting with different flies until you attract the interest of the fish."

Mark is one of the growing band of recreational fishers who enjoy catch and release angling.

Barbless hooks are advisable as it significantly reduces stress on the fish. Another benefit of barbless hooks is that they are more easily removed from snags, clothing and - by way of accident - various parts of the human anatomy.

To release bream in the best condition, you must minimise the loss of the natural slime that protects their bodies. This means wet hands and minimum handling to get the fish back into the water in the quickest possible time.

If you are fishing for keepers, remember the size, bag and boat limits and kill the fish instantly. An advisable method is to place a sharp, pointed knife into the fish just behind the eye and cut down through the backbone.

Place your bream in an ice slurry to maintain the flesh in the best possible condition. To

make the slurry, just add some sea or estuarine water to some crushed ice making a relatively thick mixture. Adding salty water to ice actually takes the temperature to below normal freezing point.

To fillet a bream, lay it down and cut from behind the pectoral fin to the backbone. Then turn the knife and run it flat along the backbone towards the tail of the fish.

You will need to carefully slice out the rib bones sacrificing the minimum amount of flesh.

The fillet can also be skinned. Simply lift the flesh off the skin at the tail end. Grip the skin and slide the knife along to separate the flesh. This may require a few test runs, but it is easier than it sounds and you will finish up with beautiful skinless fillets.



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Complex sex lives of bream



Bream can be caught just as well from shore as they can from a boat.

In South Australia, bream spawn from November to January.

Female black bream release between 300,000 and 3 million eggs during the spawning season.

The eggs are relatively small in size and are pelagic, meaning they are found near the surface. The eggs hatch about two days after fertilisation.

Bream reach sexual maturity between two and three years of age by which time they are about 23 centimetres in length, well below the legal size limit.

The sex lives of bream can be quite complicated. They can - and do - change sex, which is quite common in the world of fish.

In most situations, bream populations are made up around even numbers of males and females. However, in stressful situations like droughts, closed estuaries or overfishing, more of the smaller fish tend to be females.

Many of these females will change sex to become males if they survive beyond a certain size or age.

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