

BIG SUNDAY

METRE PLUS MURRAY COD CAN TAKE SOME CATCHING, BUT THEY CAN ALSO TURN UP WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT THEM, AS MARC AINSWORTH DISCOVERED AT LAKE EILDON.

Photographs: Ben Scullin & Marc Ainsworth

I was keen to visit Lake Eildon for a crack at some golden perch, but had struggled to find a companion for the trip. Over the years, several friends have endured tough weekends at Eildon chasing goldens. Long hours, hot days and few fish have broken many of them. My dad Murray and pals Ross and Tony have all paid their dues, largely unrewarded. Yet others, including Scott Gray, have enjoyed terrific fishing and loved every minute. But they were all busy, overseas or reluctant, so my list of 'usual suspects' was exhausted.

"Hey Ben, keen for an Eildon weekend by any chance?" I emailed, hopeful. Two hours later Ben replied and my search for company was over. We'd drive up Friday night and fish the weekend, over-nighting at a friend's place in Alexandra that would avoid the complications of camping out. Ben Scullin is an old mate and we'd not fished together for many years. But he had done some hard yards at Eildon chasing goldens with me before, so was up for the challenge.

SATURDAY

We cast lipless crankbaits, hardbodies and spinnerbaits relentlessly along rocky shores and to timber and by lunchtime had not

raised a single scale, bar a few carp that entertained us during lunch in the shade. No yella follows and no taps.

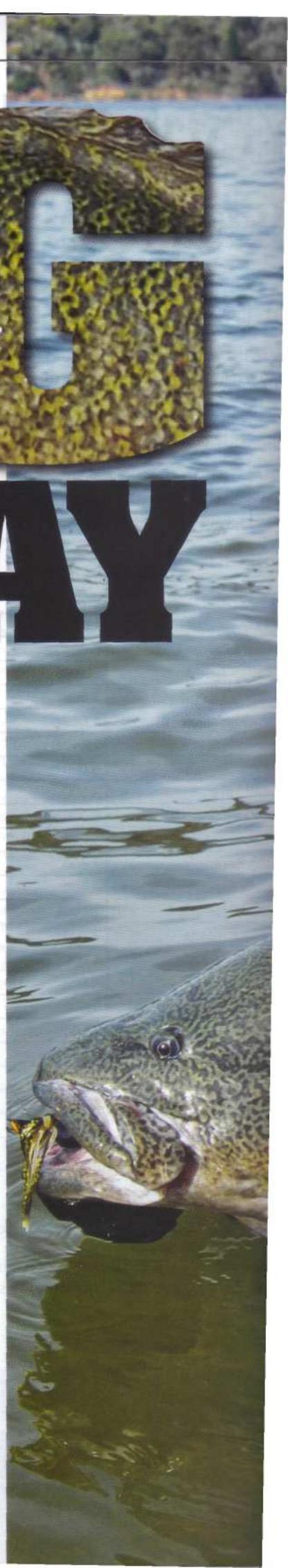
"Here we go again," I thought, feeling guilty I'd got Ben into this situation once more.

"I think we're doing everything right Ben, but these buggers just aren't on the chew," I said, hoping something would change soon.

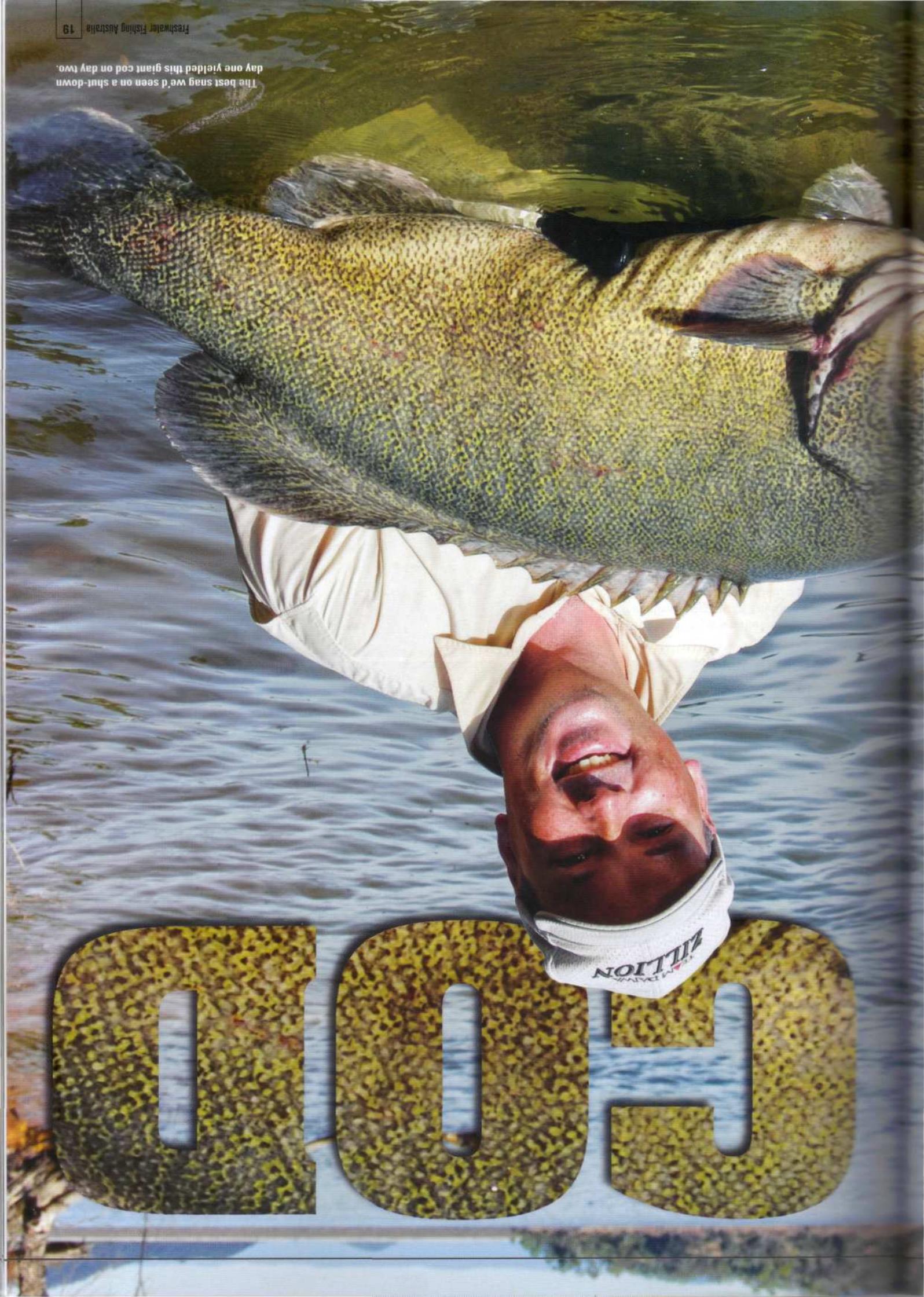
But nothing did. Ben got a couple of 'maybe' taps on a Bassman spinnerbait mid-afternoon, and the 'golden hour' just before dark failed to deliver too. We returned to Alexandra and devoured our pizza on the couch, exhausted and happy to distract ourselves from the day's failings with a SBS drama ironically called 'Hunted'. Oh dear!

SUNDAY

Thirteen hours of casting for no fish didn't have us jumping out of bed at 5 am. I wasn't sure we'd actually make it back to the lake at all. However we got up, packed our things and drove up to Fraser National Park for another go. I'd made tentative plans to meet up with Andy McCarthy, who'd I'd rung the day before in desperation for local knowledge and the latest tips. He'd landed a thumping 15 lb golden the week prior so his advice was highly valued.



The best snag we'd seen on a shut-down day one yielded this giant cod on day two.





Casting rocky banks is a good strategy, but look for submerged timber to clinch the deal.



"Andy will be down the lake so let's some miles under our belt early," I said.

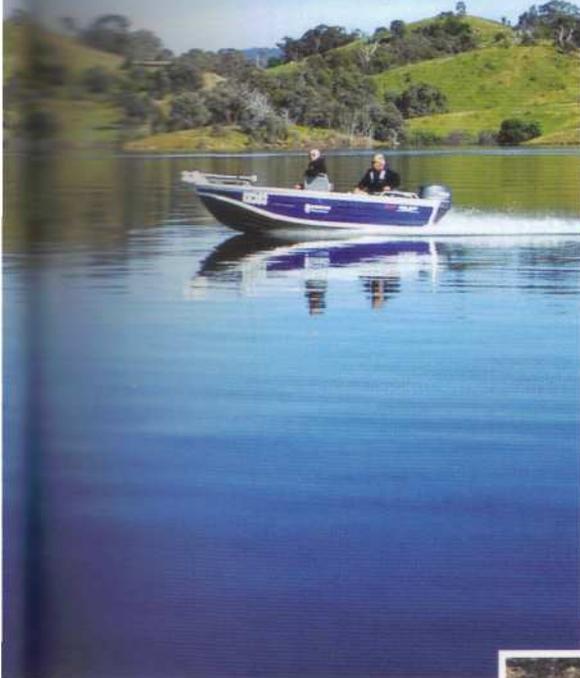
"And there were some nice snags out there too," replied Ben.

Fifteen minutes later we pulled up to a bay, cut the four-stroke and lowered Minn Kota. "I'm going to fish light today. I'll try a 12 lb leader," said Ben as he sat down on the back of the boat and snipped off the 10 lb mono. Ben's a keen tournament breeder and angler for whom fishing light is the norm. "Righto Ben, but there's some big fish out there," I said sarcastically with a smile at the same time reflecting on yesterday's top water fishing – 12 lb or 6 lb – it wouldn't matter if the fish weren't biting.

I put my second cast into the shade where we'd seen two gigantic logs the day before. Crunch! A solid strike from a golden fish. At first I thought it was another golden like Andy's several days earlier when it bulldozed line from my baitcase. I realised this was something more substantial – much more.

Ben confessed later to quietly sliding a spool of 12 lb leader back into my tackle box before reaching for the Boga grips. We saw a glimpse of a big cod and calmly used a net electric to push into deep water, away from standing trees and submerged shrubs. It was big enough a gigantic Murray cod was brought ashore and in the safe hands of Ben, who'd slipped on a pair of Saltiga jiggling gloves. The fish just weren't going to cut it. We measured the cod at 103 cm and marvelled at its bulk. A few quick photos in the water and the fish was released. Talk about a Sunday success.

Covering water to find the best habitat is something I'm doing much more of Lake Eildon.



Ben's first cast at a prime snag yielded this 60cm cod within half a crank of the handle.

LESSONS

That encounter is symptomatic of fishing: heart-break, misery and mystery one day, ecstatic celebration the next. The weekend overall highlighted a few things when it comes to natives, especially at Lake Eildon.

DIFFERENT DAY

Andy later confirmed that the bum had fallen out of the barometer Saturday afternoon. Regardless, I wonder if Ben and I should have been more courageous in calling it quits earlier on Saturday when it was clear the goldens weren't biting. Should we have regrouped back at Alexandra in the comfort of a cool house, rested up and returned Sunday, still buoyed with enthusiasm and confidence? Maybe. A different day might bring different things.

But we'd driven two hours to get there and knew there'd be tough hours in between fish. That goes without saying. What if Andy had rung later that night and told us the goldens had gone berserk at dusk and we'd missed some memorable action? Eildon goldens do that. I've seen it for myself and several mates often talk about it. I'd have been uncomfortable on the couch wondering 'what if' and dreading such a call. Alas, hindsight is a wonderful thing and on this occasion, declaring defeat would have saved us a few hours of extra frustration and kept those bicep batteries a little more charged for day two.

But what sticks with me most is how,



from one day to the next, native fish action can be so varied. We'd fished that big snag the day before and fished it well, covering it with hardbodies, spinnerbaits and lipless offerings; for nothing. Yet, on the second cast of the very next day, wham, a giant cod. Go figure. I guess that's what some people call 'bite-time'.

HABITAT

Later that Sunday morning, after celebrating with a cuppa and a few boasting phone calls, Ben lost a good fish that we didn't see. It took a small, single-bladed Bassman from amongst some complex timber, ripping a few metres of line off his baitcaster as it dashed for cover. Yellowbelly or cod, we'll never know.

Ben and I started targeting quality snags rather than blindly creeping along endless rocky banks. We replaced the notion of 'stumbling' onto submerged timber with a game plan to proactively search for prime snags and fish them exclusively, and hard. No longer were we going to fish a 200 m

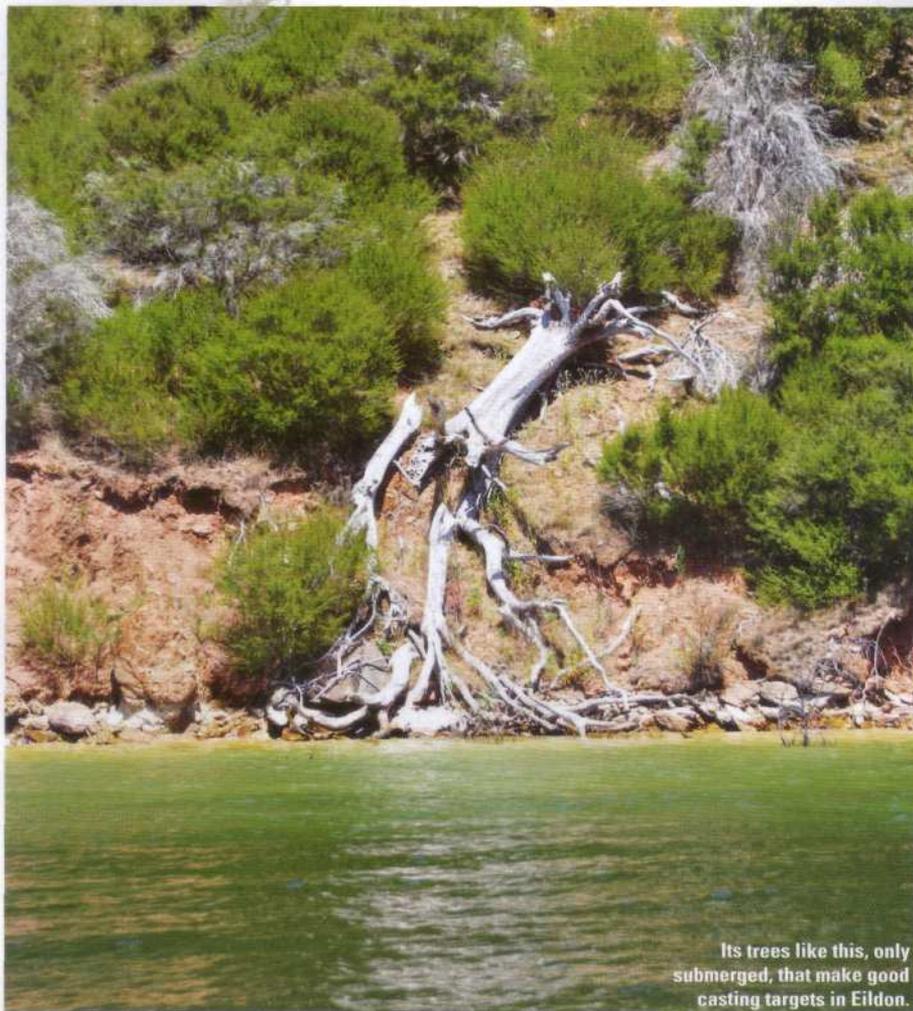
FACT BOX

MILLION MURRAY COD

Fisheries Victoria is using recreational fishing licence fees to stock one million extra Murray cod fingerlings into Lake Eildon over three years. These are in addition to the 50,000 cod fingerlings the lake receives annually. This is the most aggressive stocking of Murray cod anywhere in Australia. The third instalment of these million cod was stocked last summer (2012/13).

When these million cod reach size, as a substantial 'pulse' I suspect, the fishery at Eildon should take a giant leap forward. Imagine coming to Lake Eildon for cod opening weekend instead of driving all the way to the Murray River or Lake Mulwala.

Best of all, the high water levels since 2010 and the flooded vegetation have provided immense food and shelter for juvenile fish, so cod fingerling survival should be better than average. We'll know a lot more when fisheries scientists investigate Eildon cod and determine the contribution stocking has made to the overall cod population.



Its trees like this, only submerged, that make good casting targets in Eildon.

stretch of bank in search of yellas. Instead, two or three snags along it. That's all.

Soon enough the new strategy delivered and Ben hooked up in between the branches of a fallen tree. It was a good first cast right into the 'slot' and upon engaging the reel a 60 cm cod engulfed the lure and took off. There was something to this targeted habitat strategy. At least that day there was.

COMBINATION

It was only on the drive home that Ben and I got talking and realised that the 13 hour 'super-tough' Saturday was a vital contributor to our success on the Sunday. Had we not found that submerged timber snag on Saturday, we would not have returned to it on the Sunday morning.

And so there was actually a dual-strategy at play. Regardless of fishing action, creeping along the banks was essential to finding good submerged snags. Sure, root balls and other give-away signals indicated the location of submerged logs along the bank, but that big cod had come off a massive log that was 10 ft under. Nothing of that snag was visible from above the water. No tell-tale curling root... zero.

Furthermore, at 8.30 am on the Sunday morning, that snag was in heavy shade. I couldn't actually see it when I made the big cod cast. I had some idea of its whereabouts having referenced it against bankside landmarks the day before, but it was still somewhat a 'prospecting' cast that I happened to get right.



Success at dusk. Snags found throughout the day's casting can be revisited as the sun goes down.

Alas, some of the best snags in Eildon need to be discovered during high sun when they're illuminated and clearly visible. That may not be the best time to catch fish from them, but it's certainly the best time to find them.

CIRCUIT WORK

Ben suggested I mark the location of better looking snags on my GPS. It would then be possible at low light to race around the lake and fish the very best of the timber. I liked the idea, but realised that in a lake like Eildon, water levels vary and a month between trips could see a snag that was perfect, be left high and dry on the bank if the lake dropped by 10 per cent. That's not a reason to ignore the GPS idea, just a reality check on its application.

It got me wondering if a newer model Humminbird might have a function whereby I could save a suite of marks from a trip at 90 per cent lake capacity, and then create another new suite at 70 per cent the next trip. That way, I wouldn't be wasting my time looking for snags that were no longer in the water.

Regardless, I'm pretty good at remembering spots. On one section of the Murray River, I've got a circuit of 50 spots that we target in a day, all of which I have a good knowledge of. Yep, we travel some serious miles to fish spots that meet our criteria.

Funnily enough though, when I think about it, those 50 spots don't deliver all the time. That's why there's 50 of them. And occasionally, I cast at something new that ticks all the boxes and voila – a fish. That might have been a spot I'd ignored for years, but this time round, it delivered. Whether its flow rates, river level or barometer, something changes and the snag delivers. Kind of like the big cod snag really on day two.

NEXT TIME

While the trip overall was a tough one and we'd only found 'following' goldens on Sunday that weren't really switched on, we had landed a terrific cod. Amongst many lessons are a few I won't forget soon.

Firstly, persistence is fine, but knowing when to stop fishing is part of the skill set. Secondly, native fish love timber. Find it at Eildon and you'll hugely improve your chances of success. Thirdly, a tough day can be followed by a terrific one. A lot can change in one night. And lastly, trust that you know what good habitat looks like and return to it again and again. If it looks fishy, it probably is. You've just got to be there at the right time and with capable anglers. Speaking of which, Dad, Ross, Tony and Scott have all rung, enquiring about when the next Eildon trip is on. Funny how one good fish can inspire your mates!

AUTHOR BIO

Marc Ainsworth lives in Bacchus Marsh with his girlfriend Susanna and dog, Fergus. He works with Fisheries Victoria as a communication advisor and previously managed their stocking program. He's also been the editor of *Victoria Fishing Monthly* magazine. Marc loves casting for freshwater natives and most forms of trout fishing.