

MARY RIVER

Bass Mission

AS IS OFTEN THE CASE WHEN TRAVELLING ANGLERS HIT THE WATER, THE WEATHER WREAKS HAVOC ON PLANS.

CHRIS SCURFIELD DISCOVERED THAT THE FRASER COAST'S MARY RIVER PROVIDES A SPECIAL PLAYGROUND WHEN THE WEATHER GODS RULE OUT PLAN A.

PHOTOS BY JON JONES, AIDAN ROBERTSON & SCOTT MITCHELL

A recent trip to the Fraser Coast with good mates Jon Jones and Sarkis Cigercioglu was hampered by adverse weather conditions; unable to hit the ocean waters we began searching for a Plan 'B'. This involved calling mate and local Hervey Bay young-gun Aidan Robertson; a quick chat was all it took to make a plan to harass the local bass population while we waited for the weather to die down.

Aidan's one of those lucky kids that has parents who are just as passionate about fishing as he is. In the last four years the family has become kayak fishing fanatics and choose to spend most weekends exploring the local freshwater systems. While a vast amount of rivers and creeks flow past their doorstep, one system keeps them coming back time and time again; the Mary River.

Mary River holds plenty of chunky specimens. This bass couldn't resist a well presented spinnerbait retrieved slowly through the strikezone.

MARY RIVER

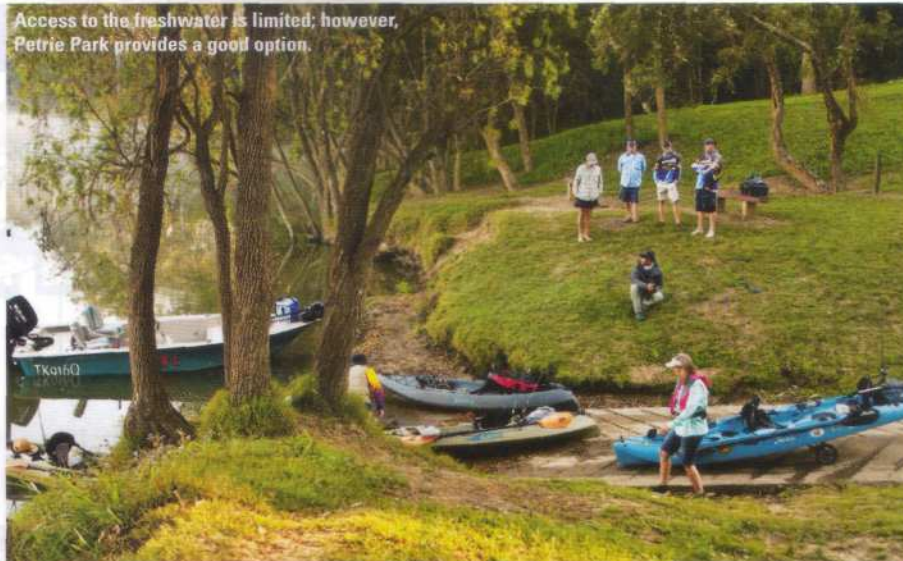
The Mary River is one of those places that hold a special feel to it and it's evident as soon as you see it. Flowing over 300 km from its headwaters, it empties into the Sandy Straits west of Fraser Island. It is the only large river in SE Queensland without a major mainstream dam. This means that other than the Maryborough Weir separating the fresh and the salt, it remains uninterrupted for the most part. The system is home to a number of endangered species and unique species; one of which is the Queensland lungfish, a native only to the Mary and Burnett rivers. The endemic Mary River cod, one of Australia's largest freshwater fish fosters a passionate following among many local anglers. Keep in mind though that they're a no-take species and should be returned un-harmed to the water as quickly as possible. The odd golden perch, tarpon and sooty grunter are diluted by the very healthy local bass population and it was these fish that I most wanted to tangle with.

YAKKING THE MARY

Long distance paddling can be a daunting prospect for some kayak anglers. The beauty of this location is you can start fishing 100 m from the boat ramp: and that's exactly what Aidan did! He peppered the first visible snag using a small 'walk the dog' action surface lure and local knowledge paid dividends as a couple casts later, slurp, splash, and the tiny walker was gone and the battle was on. What happened next had me speechless, I watched as Aidan was literally towed back into the snag by his adversary. With some fancy rod and paddle work he managed to keep the fish's head up and soon after netted a healthy looking bass in the high 30 cm range. My look of astonishment must have been all too obvious as Aidan was quick to explain that being 'towed' by fish was the norm for yak fishing and one of the major appeals for him.

I was left shaking my head in astonishment as we paddle on towards the next fishy looking snag. Leap frogging each other down river from snag to snag became an idyllic way to fish the river and it became quiet obvious I was in good hands. Early in the piece Aidan handed me his favourite bass lure for the area: a small-sized dark

Access to the freshwater is limited; however, Petrie Park provides a good option.



purple spinnerbait with a soft plastic grub on the hook. With confidence I began to probe every fishy looking nook and cranny of the bank. Not long after it all came together, I was slowly rolling the spinnerbait away from a likely looking snag pile along an undercut bank. I felt a small tap before everything came to an abrupt halt. This is when the fun really began; I am used to going hard from the hook-up so as to pull fish away from structure but in this instance my yak got pulled into the snag pile at a rate of knots. I am sure my audience shared a chuckle or two! Somehow I managed to get the head of the fish coming towards me and soon after was able to guide the fish into Aidan's landing net. The fish was no monster and measured in at around 35 cm but the capture is one that will live long in the memory bank.

YAK TACTICS

Just like any waterway, there are certain places on the Mary that provide improved results. During this trip in the kayaks there were a few main areas where we focussed our efforts:

Bank Side Vegetation

The typical 'amazon' looking banks with plenty of low hanging overgrowth and lots of shadows yield plenty of fish, but I was

Bass are powerful enough to drag you around on your kayak. Some rod and paddle work will be needed to land these pocket rockets.



FACT BOX

ACCESS

Access is limited if you want to hit the freshwater reaches of the Mary River: Petrie Park near Tiaro is the only designated public access point Aidan knows of along the entire freshwater section. The park is located about two kilometres north-west from the town and thankfully it doesn't disappoint. There's ample parking for vehicles and trailers and even a concrete ramp – a rarity on inland waterways. It also makes a fantastic place to take the whole family for the day. It boasts picnic tables, toilets and shallow banks that are perfect for swimming. The moment you put a boat or kayak into the water you will notice how fishy this stretch of river looks, and there are kilometres of quality water both up and down stream. Keen explorers shouldn't be discouraged by the limited notable access as I'm sure there is a few other options off the beaten trail. Carrying out some research and politely approaching a few landowners may well provide further access options.

FACT BOX

MARY RIVER CHUNKS

The day provided plenty of excitement with some big fish hooked and many lost. Fishing tight to structure ensures that the bigger locals stand a good chance of getting home before you are able to gain an upper-hand. The crew suffered some monumental dustings at the hands of fish we can only guess about regards size and species. The beauty of fishing the Mary River is that you don't quite know what you're going to come up against. One spot may house a resident bass, the next a powerful sooty and the next a Mary River cod that makes a game out of owning tackle.

A highlight for me came late in the piece when a solid bite turned into something that felt a lot bigger. A large bass materialised from the murky waters, suddenly coming to life making several powerful lunges for the bottom; loading my little flick stick down to the butt. I had been so casual about this hook up the boys barely even noticed I was on before I made the call for 'assistance?'. Once it was finally safe and secure in Aidan's landing net he looked at and goes 'Wow! That's a BIG Bass'. After putting it on the lie detector I let out a shout of joy as I had just cracked the magical 50 cm mark. After a few photos it was sent off to sulk in the depths and ponder on its recent encounter.

surprised to see just how little vegetation they would sit under at times. In particular we noticed a lot of bottlebrush shrub and even the spindly and smaller clumps usually had a bass or two sitting close by. If you can find one of these beside a fallen tree or deep undercut bank it is almost a guaranteed hook-up. Aidan describes the behaviour of local fish whereby they can be found favouring specific structure on any given day. It pays to start the day by fanning casts across available bankside structure so as to find some type of holding pattern for resident fish. Casts should, wherever possible, be tight against structure or cast to a position so that the retrieve pulls lures directly past likely fish-holding areas.

Logjams

The Mary features plenty of logjams to peg a lure at. The size of the logjam dictates how long you should ideally spend casting a lure in a particular spot. A popular local strategy includes working the front and edges of the jam with long forward casts as the area is approached. As you get closer, casts should be used to probe deeper into the snag. Bass are known to strike out of sheer aggression even when they aren't in a feeding mood so persistent casting can pay dividends. As the rear of the snag is approached it is worth firing one or two more casts up each side of the structure or towards the bank before moving on. In some cases this will mean putting 10 to 15 casts into the one jam.

Deeper Water

A number of deep holes can be found along the river and big schools of bass will hold in these at times during their annual migration after the winter's spawn. Casting or trolling lures through these holes can account for big numbers of fish but also requires the aid of a sounder to be successful. Jigging lures such as blades can account for good numbers of fish when they are schooled in these locations.

LURE CHOICE

A variety of lures and retrieves will provide success when fishing the Mary River. I urge visiting anglers to use lures and retrieves they are confident with. There is something about the purpose and accuracy with which

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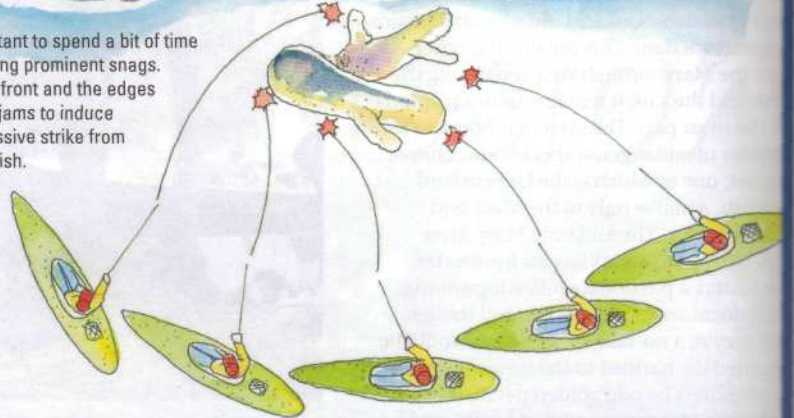
BASS TACKLE

I've found most small threadline or baitcast reels (depending on your preference) loaded with 6 to 14 lb braid will work fine. Match this to a suitable graphite rod around 1.8 m with a soft tip for finessing small lures and you've got the perfect bass outfit. I usually tie about 1.5 m of 8 to 14 lb fluorocarbon leader to my braid.

Poppers, fizzers, walkers, frogs and other top water lures all have their place in the tackle box. While the strikes are awesome to watch at times the hook up rate can be atrocious and some days they just won't rise. For more consistent results you can't go past a small hardbody in the 40 to 70 mm range. The ability to 'twitch' it in the one spot, keeping it in the fish's face long periods can sometimes be a bass's undoing. A couple of other reliable options are soft plastics and spinnerbaits which can work especially well once the sun is high in the sky and the bass are sitting deeper.

TECH TIP WORKING A SNAG

It's important to spend a bit of time prospecting prominent snags. Work the front and the edges of the logjams to induce an aggressive strike from resident fish.

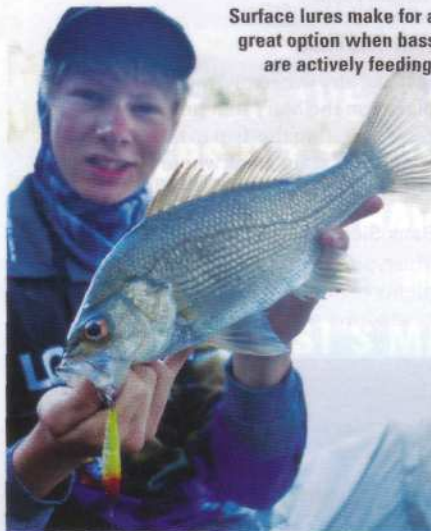


TECH TIP WORKING A BANK

It pays to fan casts around bank side vegetation, regardless of how little cover it provides fish. Cast tight to structure and retrieve past likely looking areas.



Surface lures make for a great option when bass are actively feeding.



tight in the snags were the most versatile and consistent producers throughout the day.

- Spinnerbaits and chatterbaits worked well when hopped and slow rolled in the deeper water once the sun got up. They also accounted for the larger fish of the trip.

CLOSING

While bass fishing isn't the first thing that comes to mind when us southerners plan a trip to Hervey Bay it is a great contingency when weather prohibits a day on the salt. I'm not sure if it was the great fishing or just having a great day on the water amongst friends but it was certainly a memorable one. It's also given me a few new tricks to try back home in NSW on my local bass waters. In just one day Jon, Sarkis and I all realised how special the Mary River is and we're already planning our next trip back.

AUTHOR BIO

Chris Scurfield is a 26 year old based in Sydney, NSW, a cabinet maker by trade and avid fisherman at every chance.

Fishing has always been in his family and something Chris has loved since growing up in northern California, USA. During Chris' time as a freelance writer he has developed close relationships with both MAKO eyewear and Rapala lures.

anglers fish their confidence techniques that seems to breed consistent results. In saying this, there were few things I noticed that worked particularly well:

- 'Walk the dog' retrieve surface stickbaits worked well in the morning with a slow to medium paced retrieve mixed in with quick pauses. This approach is popular with locals until approximately 8 or 9 am.
- Small diving hardbody lures 'twitched'