

# Shallow Water Success!

By Cameron Cronin

*Arriving at a favourite weed flat in my local system, I scanned the surrounding area, my stomach tingling with anticipation of the day to come. The surface of the water resembled a mirror, glistening with the first rays of morning sun and broken only by the swirling water left by the wake of my small two person kayak. As I prepared to begin my first drift the silence was broken as a vast flock of cockatoos flew overhead, their shrill calls resonating through the crisp morning air.*

After a quick rummage through my box of topwater lures, I selected a slender, 70mm stick bait and launched it into the distance, carefully tracking its path. As the lure touched down, about thirty metres from the kayak, I engaged the reel and began a fast and steady retrieve, sending the lure skittering side to side across the surface. I was only ten metres into the retrieve when I received the first bone jarring strike of the day. A pack of large sand whiting rose from the seafloor, their golden backs arching out of the water as they pushed and shoved each other out of the way in attempt to disable my rapidly zig zagging lure. Finally one broke free from the pack and in a surprisingly large spray of water, managed to find the point on one of my size 12 chemically sharpened trebles. After a spirited fight and plenty of line burning runs, I slipped the net under a beautifully conditioned 44cm sand whiting. This was the first fish of what was to be a great surface session!

To some, all of this may sound like something only experienced in some remote coastal estuary in the middle of nowhere. However, the fact of the matter

is that awesome shallow water lure fishing options abound right up and down the coast, even in some of the most heavily fished waterways in Australia. In the past year and a half I have been using a variety of both pedal and paddle kayaks to access some shallow water action that I could have never hoped to experience while fishing land based or from a boat. Because these waters are usually well under 1.5 metres deep, they are often unattractive to people fishing from larger craft, meaning they get fished much less than other areas. Essentially, this translates into red hot

more expensive craft simply drive straight past! So, how do you do it? While fishing from my kayak I have singled out a few different lure choices that will cover just about every shallow water scenario you will ever come across; be it oyster racks, creeks, mangrove forests or flats. Let's have a look at each of these choices in more detail.

### Surface lures

Undoubtedly the most exciting way to fish, surface lures allow you to cover shallow ground quickly and effectively, drawing aggressive strikes from feeding fish. As surface lures float, they are virtually snagless, meaning you can cast around weed flats, mangrove roots and heavy timber snags, with minimal empty spaces in your tackle box at the end of the day.

Surface lures come in a range of styles and sizes, including (but not limited to) stick baits, poppers, wake baits (ultra shallow diving hard body lures) and various floating soft plastics. I recently found myself turning to surface lures while paddling a kayak through some ultra shallow mangrove forests at high tide. The water was so shallow that our plastics quickly became snagged on the mangrove roots, oysters and fallen logs that littered the ground. A quick switch to a floating surface lure was made, which marked the start of a red hot session in which our small 5cm stick bait drew aggressive hits from bream, whiting and even flathead, almost every cast. The best part was that because we were fishing in a kayak, we could access

accessing fish that were feeding much more aggressively than those on the outer fringes that were exposed to boat traffic and other disturbances.

In most NSW estuaries a surface lure will be predominately used to target bream and whiting, although other species such as trevally, flathead, bass, estuary perch, pelagics and even blackfish will sometimes get in on the act. I like to fish my surface lures in two ways, while using the wind to drift my kayak through the target zone and using it to assist with making extra long casts. The first technique involves casting out and moving the lure forward a few metres at a time, (note that if you are using a popper or a surface walker/stick bait, you will also need to twitch the rod tip while moving the lure) before pausing and allowing it to settle for a few seconds before repeating the forward movement. Bream are a sucker for this retrieve and once you master it there will be no end to the amount of fish you will land.

The second technique is very similar, but instead of stopping the lure after a few metres you continue the retrieve, winding in at a steady pace while twitching the rod tip to impart action on the lure. I use this retrieve almost specifically for whiting, but when the bream are fired up they will smash a lure retrieved in this manner. However, as deadly and effective as surface lures are, they target a smaller range of species and cannot be used as effectively in the colder months or when the fish are shutdown. This is when a switch to another presentation must be made.

### Soft plastics

Perhaps the most widely used lure in Australia, soft plastic lures are an extremely versatile fishing tool that can be used to fish a large percentage of our shallow water scenarios. In my experience softies come into their own when fished across shallow sand flats and around weed edges, but are also equally productive around oyster racks and snags. Some varieties, such as those from the ZMan and Ecogear stables, can be fished so lightly that they float on the surface, making them a handy lure to have around when the potential for lure loss is high and you need a cheap and effective surface lure.

Usually though, as many of you will know, plastics are weighted with a jighead that allows the lure to sink through the



water column, drawing strikes as the lure drops or after the angler imparts an action with the rod. In a kayak I regularly enjoy fishing for flathead and bream with soft plastic lures, using the wind to drift me along open, shallow flats from 50-150cm deep, fanning out casts in all directions as I drift. Sometimes, especially when the wind reaches in excess of 20 km/h, it can be beneficial to employ a small drift chute, as kayaks are blown around much more quickly and easily than other craft. This will give you more time to fish the target area, and can turn what once would have been a day of fighting the wind into a hot bite.

Another technique for fishing plastics is targeting drop-offs and weed edges by either anchoring and working the area over for ten minutes, or drifting if the conditions permit. When targeting open flats it can pay to look for small drop offs, changes in depth and weed or rock patches. These are the best places to cast your plastic, keeping in mind that because flats

are relatively featureless, any area that is slightly deeper or offering cover will often hold fish. When I pack my plastics for shallow water fishing I usually take a small box of 2-4 inch plastics and a selection of jigheads weighted from 1/40 to 1/60z, in a variety of different hook sizes. This will allow me to target any species I am

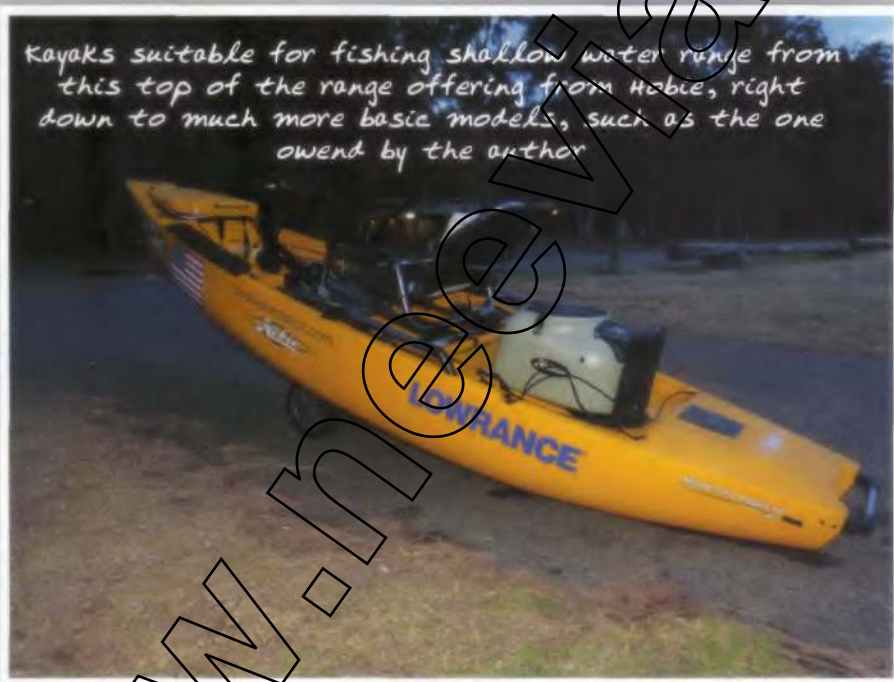
likely to encounter, with bream, whiting, blackfish and flounder favouring the smaller lures, while flathead, trevally, and the odd stray pelagic will chase down and eat larger presentations.

To get the most out of your plastics, fish them with as little weight as possible, as the slow sink rate will give fish more time to see and eat your lure. This is even more important while fishing for spooky and shy species such as bream, around snag piles and crystal clear flats, as the presentation will seem much more natural. Although plastics are probably the most versatile lure available and still catch a truckload of fish, they still do have a few downsides. One downside is that you can quickly go through a pack when you encounter small 'pickers' such as leatherjacket, tailor, small bream, toadfish and yellowtail. I have managed to overcome this recently however by using the ZMan range of plastics, which are so tough the only time I ever lose one is to a snag or a bite off. If you are going through a lot of plastics in your area, I would suggest you give them a go as they really do work and can save you a lot of money.



*One box of your favourite lures is all that is needed for a shallow water session*

*Kayaks suitable for fishing shallow water range from this top of the range offering from Hobie, right down to much more basic models, such as the one owned by the author*



*Sand flats with patchy weed offer some red hot surface luring options*

## Diving Hard Bodies

The final category of lures I use when fishing the shallows, is diving hard bodies or 'crankbaits' (cranks). Diving hard bodies have an aggressive side-to-side wiggle and body roll, often incorporating internal ball bearings that generate additional sound and vibration. Because hard bodies are so loud and noisy, they can be used to target fish when nothing else will work, as fish will often just hit them out of pure aggression with no intention of actually eating them!

Just recently I was drifting a shallow sand flat for flatties, fishing a plastic, without a single hit in over an hour. I then changed, opting to tie on a small, 1m crank. In around fifteen minutes I managed to land four flathead and a bream, proving to me the crankbait's ability to turn on shutdown fish.

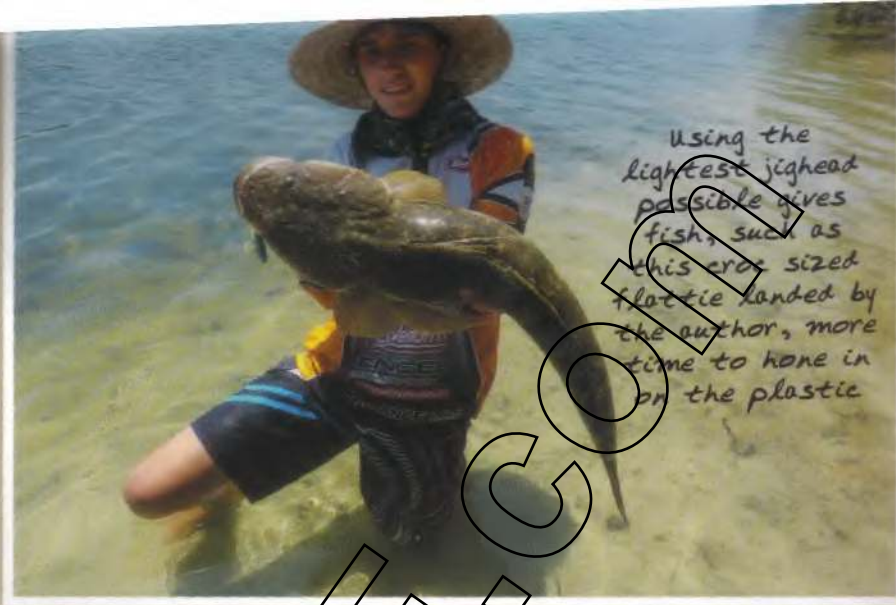
Commonly armed with two sets of trebles, diving hard bodies provide a high strike-to-hook up ratio, although in turn are prone to snagging up. This is why I use them mainly on open sand flats, although crankbaits are also hard to beat if you are game enough to fish them around rock piles and fallen trees and can be a great producer of bream when worked over the top of weed beds.

There are a variety of ways to retrieve a crankbait, though I believe that by far the most productive technique is the 'slow roll'. This 'slow roll' simply involves pointing the rod at the water and winding as slowly as possible. In shallow water, the crankbait will bump the bottom occasionally if the correct lure depth is selected stirring up sand that serves as an attractor for predatory fish. Anything that will eat a soft plastic will also fall for a crankbait on a regular basis.

Crankbaits come in many different colours, sizes and depths, although the

ones we are interested in for fishing the shallows dive to a maximum of 2m and are generally coloured in natural and clear greens, browns, blacks and orange. They are also usually a maximum of 60mm long. An interesting feature of crankbaits is that they can also be trolled, allowing anglers to cover large areas of water. This is particularly effective while fishing out of a kayak, as the stealth factor of a yak will spook fewer fish, resulting in more hook-ups. Trolling can be a real wildcard, with plenty of fish not usually encountered in the shallows ending up on the end of your line.

This summer break we were trolling down one of the edges of a shallow creek in a small coastal lagoon, when my friend's crankbait was slammed by what I initially called for a big flathead. I think it is fair to say I was more than a bit surprised when a 70cm jewie surfaced! Trolling is also very handy if you want to locate a patch of fish and then switch to another presentation, such as a soft plastic. This is what we did on this occasion, with another smaller jewfish gracing the net after just a few casts of the plastic.



Using the lightest jighead possible gives fish, such as this crabs sized flatie landed by the author, more time to hone in on the plastic

## Shallow Water Gear

While fishing in shallow water, you often have the luxury of being able to use the lightest of gear with little chance of losing fish. When I fish open water in my kayak I usually run two combos; one being a 2000 size spin reel loaded with 3lb braid and a 4-6lb leader, matched with a short 1-2kg rod. I use this combination primarily for bream and whiting, although that doesn't stop other much larger fish from getting in on the act. This always makes for tense moments on the ultra light gear! The other combo usually consists of another 2000 size reel, this time loaded with 3-6lb braid and attached to a 2-4kg rod. I use this combo mostly for flathead, but it also comes in handy while fishing around heavy structure such as oyster covered rocks and snag piles. With this kind of gear I use a leader from 6-8lb while fishing for bream and anything from 12-16lb while fishing for flathead, to prevent bite offs.

Last of all... remember to experiment! The lures mentioned above aren't the only ones that work, with small blades like TT Ghostblades, Ecogear VX series and Daiwa Gekkabijin Vib coming into their own while slow rolled across shallow ground for whiting and bream. Small, sinking stick baits also work a treat when pitched into the gaps in the weed beds.

Ever since I started kayak fishing the shallows, I have unlocked a completely new chapter in my fishing. So, now you know how to do it, it's your turn, but don't say I didn't warn you... shallow water yak fishing is extremely addictive! Once you taste success for the first time, you may suddenly find yourself not wanting to fish anywhere else!

Trolling a small diving lure for flathead can dish up its fair share of surprises. In this case, it was a 70cm jewie!

