



Emma Cartwright tight to a real horse. Is there a more magical moment in barra fishing than that frozen instant when a metre-plus salty gets airborne for the first time?

kg specimen pulled from tidal waters on El Questro Station, in the north eastern Kimberley. The barra was hooked from the muddy bank—it fell for a live popeye mullet fished on the front edge of an incoming tide—so I was pretty proud of that fish. But I had to admit it was a midget compared to some of those my mates had scored. In their books, I was still a virgin where it really mattered: the metre-plus club.

A big part of the problem is my pathological distaste for trolling. My attention span when trollin' for barra runs to about four-and-a-half minutes. After that, I start fiddling and fussing and fidgeting, or simply wishing I was somewhere (anywhere) else. I don't like trolling and I'm no good at it—end of story. So, there was very little chance I'd catch my first metre-plus fish that way and I certainly didn't want to.

Bait seemed like my next best bet and, unlike some barra snobs, I have no problem at all with using the real McCoy to sucker these great fish. In fact, I quite enjoy bait fishing for barra—especially casting live and dead baits close to cover and tweaking them like lures.

It almost worked for me at Macca's Camp on the lower Ord last year when I hooked a fish very close to the metre mark and wrestled it clear of all sorts of evil country, only to have it chafe through a 30 kg leader right beside the boat... Not happy, Jan!

To rub salt in the wound, Bushy cracked his own PB on that same Ord River trip with a fat, deep-shouldered beauty of 105 cm, making life even lonelier for me in the sub-metre kiddies' wading pool.

I figured my other potential salvation from going metre-less to the big weigh-in upstairs would be the number of fantastic stocked impoundment barra fisheries now coming on line in Queensland. These promised massive fish and very good opportunities for casting lures, if I could just get there at exactly the right time and crack it. The trouble is, the 'right time' seemed to represent an incredibly narrow window on most of these barra dams. From what I'd heard, it had to be a Wednesday night in a month with an 'r' in it, two days before the full moon with the barometer over 1010 and the wind from the nor' nor' west at less than 15 knots, or I'd be wasting my time. Something like that, anyway. Then there was the small matter of all these places being about three days' drive from my homebase. Life certainly wasn't meant to be easy.

Fate stepped in when Emma Cartwright of Anglers' Choice Fishing Safaris contacted me early this year and explained that she and her partner—gun Darwin guide, Mick Mannix—would love to have me as their guest for a few days of run-off fishing in early March, as they'd heard I *still* hadn't caught a metre barra. (It seems not being in the metre-plus club is a bit like having a social disease... *Everyone* knows!)

I jumped at the chance, despite reservations about heading north so early in a year when the Big Wet was finally living up to its name, but I also explained to Emma that I didn't have especially high expectations. Metre barra were a myth in my world, like unicorns. She just laughed and said, 'Mick will get you one'. I liked her style, so I went.

AT THE JUNCTION

The big river junction Mick selected for our first casting session certainly looked the goods and when we approached close enough to see clearer, tea-coloured water pouring out of one arm to join the milk coffee of the other along a swirling break-line, I couldn't help smiling. I may not feel anywhere near as comfortable deciphering tidal barra water as I do reading bream snags, but I know enough to understand the importance of defined colour changes. They spell 'mundi fish with a capital 'B'!

On board were Mick, the irrepressibly optimistic Emma, her friend Sally Neagle and old No-Metre Starling. I didn't doubt that *someone* aboard might hook a big fish at a tasty spot like this one, I just didn't expect the lucky angler to be me.

We anchored up and began peppering the junction and especially the colour change with a range of lures. Or rather, the girls opted for the big, olive-backed Bombers Mick instructed them to tie on (and which have been so good to him in recent seasons) while I stubbornly stuck to my own lure collection, choosing a mid-depth Blue Fox Barra Magnum in gold.

I guess I'd made two dozen casts up towards the apex of the river fork when it happened. I was jerking and twitching the minnow back in plain sight along the tea coloured side of the break-line when a bloody great silver beast just seemed to materialise all over it, suck the lure in, shake its head, spit the lure out again and de-materialise.

For a few seconds I couldn't speak. My