

mouth hung open and I shook my head, I was trying to make the image compute.

"That was it," I finally blurted. "Well over a metre. Monster. Ate it and spat it out. Gone!"

"That's alright," Mick laughed. "There'll be others. Or that one might come back. Just keep casting you lure."

I did as I was told. We all did, but nothing happened for a good 25 minutes, until Sal suddenly gasped in alarm from the stern of the boat, where she'd been patiently probing the colour change as it snaked out into open water.

"Oh my gawd!" she exclaimed. We all spun around and were mesmerised by the bulk of the scaly, silver brute that was silently shadowing her lure right up to the boat's transom, its mean, glowing eyes locked on her wobbling Bomber with malicious intent.

I'd just tied on a new lure—a chunky Rapala Super Shad Rap plug that had made Mick raise one eyebrow in a mix of puzzlement and disapproval when I'd pulled it from the tackle box a few minutes earlier. Reflexively, I lobbed this unorthodox, perch-patterned offering right beside the finning barra as it slowly began to sink away from Sally's dangling minnow, its red eyes finally uncrossing. I



Sally Neagle's first metre-plus barra really wanted that big olive Bomber! Check the leader damage, too. Deep hook-ups often result in badly worn leaders—something to bear in mind when using soft plastics or flies, which tend to be inhaled.

miss. The fish thrashed heavily in the mesh and we were all cheering loudly enough to spook birds out of the trees.

What a gorgeous, gorgeous fish! Although barely 110 cm in length (did I really say 'barely'?), it was deep and thick like an impoundment barra and weighed over 42 pounds in the net, giving a true weight of around 40 pounds (18 kg). To say I was stoked would be a gross understatement. I'd waited 22 years for that moment and as we snapped a few quick photos, swum the big girl and turned her free, I wore a grin like a split pumpkin.

In light of my euphoria, Sally even managed to be reasonably magnanimous about the heinous act of piracy I'd just committed in stealing *her* fish from right under *her* rod tip. Sal's bottom lip only protruded the slightest bit as she shook my hand and pretty soon she was able to talk to me again without cursing. What a sport! I'd have sulked for a week.

IT JUST GETS BETTER

That spectacular curtain raiser proved to be little more than a sample of what was to follow over the next two days. Set-up as we were aboard a small mothership anchored in the mouth of the Mary River, we were in prime position for

"IT WAS A BRUISING, KNOCK-DOWN, DRAG-OUT ENCOUNTER MOSTLY CONDUCTED ON A RIDICULOUSLY SHORT LENGTH OF TIGHT BRAID..."

pulled the rod tip hard to make the big balsa plug stagger erratically down through the water and the barra almost casually swung its head to the side, flared its gills and sucked the lure in, producing a deep 'boof' that we not only heard, but felt through the soles of our bare feet.

For a nanosecond, the tableau remained frozen as if painted on canvas: four stunned people standing in a boat under a wide Top End sky, looking down at a massive chrome fish with a colourful lump of painted timber jammed awkwardly in the corner of its bucket mouth. Then I stabbed the rod up sharply and the still-life exploded into shattered action fragments.

We each shouted in a mix of fear, awe and excitement as the barrel-chested barra beast blasted off from a standing start and became completely airborne above the starboard corner of the transom. For just a twinkling, there seemed to be a real chance it would crash down into the boat at Sally's feet rather than back into the water,

but instead it arched back and smacked onto the river's surface rather than plate alloy.

I was almost literally dragged the full length of the six metre vessel and around the motor as the fish went ballistic, line spurting in bursts from a tight-set drag, rod lunging down at the heaving, boiling water.

At one point, the big barra peeled away out into the open with the current and sprinted, tearing line freely, but almost immediately it doubled back and powered for the gnarly stand of trees at the apex of the junction. Water swirled amongst the trunks themselves as I applied a double thumb-lock and backed away, expecting hooks and rings to open like paper clips. They didn't.

It was a bruising, knock-down, drag-out encounter mostly conducted on a ridiculously short length of tight braid and, almost before I could believe it, Mick was going for one of his trademark fast-but-deadly net scoops. He didn't

a pre-dawn getaway to a sneaky little creek down the coast that Mick was eager to revisit—especially after listening to the war stories of fellow guide, Braydon Menzies.

The tides were right, the timing perfect and for one of the very few times in my long fishing career, no-one said "Mate, you shoulda been here yesterday". We were there today and today was the right day. To be precise, the last hour of the morning run-up tide and the first hour of the run-out were the prime time. Bingo... Game on.

The creek was really little more than a big drain pouring out of the scraggly coastal forest and the swamps behind it. At dead low tide that afternoon, it would become a shallow gutter snaking across a hundred metres of sticky, black mud to the tepid sea. But an hour before the peak of a seven metre high, the forest itself was flooded with a swirling mix of dirty water in several shades of brown, all shuddering nervously with sudden, violent death as blue