



swirl just two trees back into the forest. I pointed the rod straight at the commotion, locked both thumbs and pulled even harder. A small sappling keeled over and broke and with a rushing woosh, the barra was back on our side of the trees, half aerialising in a slow, tired jump.

I don't know who was more surprised: me, Mick or the fish! It hardly resisted as Mick scooped it into the net, one flank rubbed and lightly scratched by the broken branches.

That barra was an immaculate, chrome-bright salty that measured 118 cm and weighed just over 17 kg. The Barra Magnum lure in its jaw was scoured and the exposed hook points were grotesquely distorted but, remarkably, it had hung in there. What impressed me most, however, was the line and when an item of tackle performs *that* well, I think it deserves a blatant plug (while also stressing that I am in no way financially or professionally associated with its makers or importers). For the record, it was 15 kg Fins PRT Braid and, in my book, it performed way above and beyond the call of duty. I'd cut down a small forest with it while connected to a rampaging metre-plus barramundi, yet it was unmarked enough to have simply fired off another cast without re-tying a single knot. I don't know what they put in that stuff, but trust me, it's tough!

## SAL JOINS THE CLUB

After catching two amazing metre-plus barra in two consecutive days I was pretty blissed out and actually found time to put the rod down and chase a few hook-up and jump photos as that amazing little session hit its straps. Emma and Mick both caught and released metre-plus barra in the next 30 minutes and, as the bite finally slowed, Sally's persistence paid off in spades when a 108 cm model completely inhaled her big Bomber and did its best to stitch her line through the jungle.

**Starlo's 118 cm fish found the trees big time and wreaked some major hook damage before it could be extracted, but the Barra Magnum minnow hung in there.**

Sal followed Mick's energetic directions and enthusiastic gesturing to the letter, using a mix of rod angles, thumb locks and sheer feminine determination to virtually will that fish back out of the sticks. It was a case of mind over barra and a memorable display of white-knuckled fishing to watch down the barrel of a camera lens. I think I was almost as happy as Sally when the net finally went under that fish, not least because we could now put my poaching job of the previous day in the past!

In the run-off, big tides mean big fish, but also narrow windows of opportunity. It's life in the fast lane and peak bites can last an hour or less. Well before midday, our barra fishing was effectively over for the day. (Unless I wanted to swallow my pride and go do the 't-word' thing... No thanks! Me-no-troll.) Not that it mattered. Four metre-plus barra, a couple of smaller specimens, a few jump offs and a salmon or two ain't a bad morning's work in my book! Lunch, a snooze aboard the air-conditioned mothership and a late afternoon session on a jewie reef offshore sounded like the perfect wind-down to this satisfied angler.

## FINISH WITH A 50

Emma and Sally had to leave that evening to head back into town and I offered Mick the chance of us joining them. I knew he had almost back-to-back charters for the next six weeks and figured he'd jump at an unexpected day off.

"Y'know," I explained, "we've done the job here. I've cracked the metre thing, got some great pic's and it's all in the can. I don't care if you want to pull the pin early and we all head back to town. I'm *really* happy!"

## STARLO'S BIG BARRA GEAR

Serious barra demand serious gear, especially when tackled at close quarters while casting in tight, snag-studded country. I recommend the following set-up:

- A sturdy, mid-sized baitcaster reel with a smooth drag system.
- A 1.8 to 2 m baitcaster rod capable of casting lures up to 30 or 40 g in weight.
- High quality braided GSP main line with a rated strength between 12 and 20 kg.
- Tough nylon or fluorocarbon leaders, 1.5 to 2 m long, with a strength of 25 to 30 kg.
- Floating/diving minnows and plugs in the 120 to 180 mm size range.
- Extra strength (4X to 6X) replacement trebles and split rings.
- Large (80 to 150 mm) soft plastics matched to jig heads built on strong hooks.

Mick's brow wrinkled in consternation. "But the tides are great in the morning!" he pleaded. "And I just know there's a 50 out there with your name on it."

"Okay, okay!" I laughed. "I'm happy to stay. No sweat. Just thought you might enjoy a break, that's all."

We stayed. Mick is as keen as any angler I've ever met and completely lacking in that jaded, seen-it-all-before, I'm-just-doing-my-job feel you sometimes get from guides who've been in the business too long. Almost a decade into his career, Mick seems to greet each new day, new client and new fish like it's his first. That enthusiasm is both contagious and invigorating.

The bite had definitely slowed on that last morning—or perhaps the window had just closed a bit tighter. But it wasn't shut yet. Half an hour before the top of the tide, the gutter erupted in a salvo of watery detonations and Braydon's crew scored several whoppers as well as losing a couple more. Things were quieter in our boat.

With just the two of us on board, I insisted that Mick fish. He looked uncomfortable about doing it, preferring to leave the best shots to me, but in the end he concurred. "Only if you give me one of those Squidgy rubber things to use, though," he grudgingly conceded. I laughed and handed him one; a No. 7 Squidgy Fish tail on a big Resin Head.

I love my soft plastics—especially the Squidgies that Bushy and I have designed—but I must admit to a loss of confidence in them amongst all that filthy, brown, fast-flowing water. I'd jumped two sub-metre fish off on Squidgies the first day, but hadn't tied one on