

# The Nambucca River



**E**stuary fishing on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales may not produce the adrenalin rush of the 'barra and 'jack waters in the far north, but it does have a heck of a lot going for it.

Crystal clear waters languishing in the shadow of the Great Dividing Range offer not only excellent fishing options for all bread 'n' butter species, but also an aquatic playground for the whole family.

One such place is

## Story & Pics by Mike O'Neil

Nambucca Heads, conveniently located just a few minutes off the Pacific Highway, about half way between Brisbane and Sydney.

It's a picture perfect destination with the Nambucca River picking its crooked path from the foothills of the New England Plateau, through hinterland farms down to floodplains, forming a large coastal estuary at the sea's edge.

Fed by a relatively

small catchment of some 1330 square kilometres, it has two main tributaries – Warrell Creek, which drains swamp land to the south east of the catchment, merging with the main river a few hundred metres up from the mouth at Nambucca Heads; and Taylors Arm Creek, which funnels water from the south-western area of the catchment.

This creek also has a number of small feeder

channels, the largest of which are Bakers and Thumb creeks.

Other tributaries of the Nambucca River are Missabotti Buckrabendinni and South Creeks (these enter the system directly above Macksville, about 18 kilometres from the mouth) while the largest of the downstream tributaries, Newee Creek, merges with the main system about one kilometre downstream of Macksville.

Despite the small catchment, there's plenty

“ . . . Research shows that the Nambucca River has changed significantly since European settlement. The mouth and main channel have been altered by the construction of a breakwall along the northern riverbank. Sedimentation, which has been attributed to floodplain and riverbank erosion as well as littoral drift of sand, has been trapped at the breakwall and channelled into the river.

“Areas above the tidal reach have not escaped unscathed. The river bed and course has been dramatically altered in some areas causing extensive erosion of the banks resulting in widening and shallowing of the river.

“There's always much talk about who or what is to blame for the processes accelerating erosion in our coastal rivers, but it is hard to argue against the destruction caused by clearing of river flats and much of the area's riparian vegetation; and desnagging the river bed. It's these actions which lead to gravel and sediment being eroded from our river systems during floods and dumped downstream, clogging our estuaries . . . ”





**Above:** Looking out over the Nambucca River and south to Scotts Head – it's easy to see why this area produces such good flathead and whiting fishing. **Right:** The rock wall at the southern end of Nambucca Island Golf Club – a favourite spot for luderick. **Below:** Author's son Daniel fishing at the back of a sand bar inside the mouth of the Nambucca River.

of water to work. The main arm stretches west about 76 km, with the tidal influence pushing upstream around 28 km.

However, the upper reaches are shallow with many sand and gravel bars just waiting for the unwary boater.

The western sector of the catchment is flanked by the rugged eastern edge of the New England Plateau while the eastern sector is characterised by isolated steeper ridges intruding into floodplains and adjacent undulating land.

This diverse environment augers well for downstream fishing, producing a healthy food supply and plenty of relatively inaccessible habitat.

As well as offering good fishing for estuary species such as whiting, bream, flathead and luderick, the Nambucca estuary also has a few surprises – hairtail have turned up from time-to-time in the lower reaches of the river. When about, they inhabit a seven-metre "pot hole" just off the point of the Nambucca Island Golf club rock wall.



On more than a few occasions I have sent down a live bait to do battle with some of the big critters lurking at the bottom of that hole . . . and come off second best.

And although Nambucca is considered to be outside the southern extreme of the mangrove jack habitat, some are taken around the rock walls and from the deeper, upriver holes during the hotter months of December, January and February.

Locals are fairly tight-lipped when it comes to pinpointing specific locations but if you stick to deep-running lures along the steep banks above Macksville railway bridge and concentrate on the undercuts up towards the Midco meatworks factory, you're in with a show.

Sandflats and spits are a feature of the Nambucca estuary system and are prolific bait-gathering grounds. There's plentiful nippers, soldier crabs and squirt worms to be found, and on the beaches, pipis and sea worms are available for those who make the effort.

If you want to get amongst the big stuff, live bait can be jigged around the rock walls and upriver road and railway bridges.

I must confess bait fishing is not really my bag – I much prefer the more active pastime of tossing lures or flies around the Nambucca oyster leases and sandflats, chasing bream, flathead, and the occasional jack.

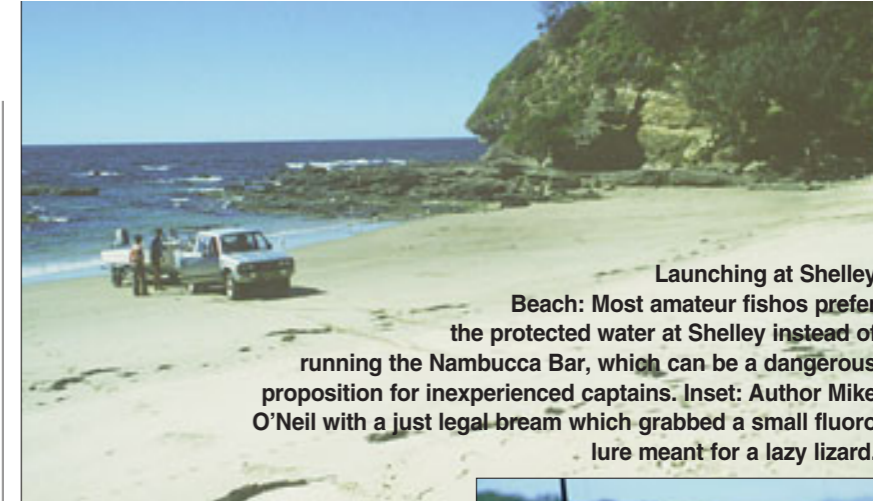
Upstream, in the brackish reaches and above, Australian bass complete the lure-fishing equation.

There are few experiences better than a slow drift across a sandflat, sight fishing for basking flathead. Or being anchored off oyster racks at dusk and fly casting a 'Thong Thing' (a surface fly made from old thong pieces) into big bream territory.

The swirl from aggressive oyster busters as they race each other to smack an imitation rates high on the 'moments-to-remember' scale.

And while the Nambucca area is ideally suited to small to medium boat tactics, land-based fishos are well catered for too. There are multiple-choice fishing spots easily accessible in the family chariot. These include small rocky outcrops, beaches and the river rock walls and banks.

Wellington Rock at the mouth of the Nambucca is a popular spot. It produces tailer, drummer, jewfish and



**Launching at Shelley Beach:** Most amateur fishos prefer the protected water at Shelley instead of running the Nambucca Bar, which can be a dangerous proposition for inexperienced captains. **Inset:** Author Mike O'Neil with a just legal bream which grabbed a small fluoro lure meant for a lazy lizard.

bream and also a few reds after a big blow. The rock is a good spot in a nor'easter with the wind coming from behind.

And then there is the Vee Wall where visitors are encouraged to leave their mark in what has become a giant outdoor gallery for graffiti artists.

**Background Notes:** Construction on the first stages of the breakwall began way back in 1895, when coastal steamers plied the Nambucca River upstream as far as Macksville. And an attempt was made to build a wooden wall on the southern entrance which ended with a gale and floods around 1907.

It wasn't until the 1930s that work resumed on the breakwall project when construction of the huge concrete blocks to buttress the eastern end of the wall was incorporated into a relief program for the unemployed.

Now, the area is a perfect spot to wile away a few hours chasing the resident species. It's a popular spot with luderick buffs during winter months.

For 'outsiders' there is a smorgasbord of options with good reefs close in shore. Target species are snapper, pearl perch, black cod, teraglin, kingfish, spanish mackerel, snook, samson and morwong.

The Nambucca River bar, although used by professional fishers, is usually bypassed by most locals, including Nambucca Offshore Fishing Club members. They prefer to launch off Shelley Beach, just a headland north of the river mouth.

Shelley is a protected launching site with good facilities including toilets and cleaning tables.

River launching sites are at Nambucca Heads RSL carpark; the Island Golf Club; Pelican Park caravan park; Wellington Drive (2); and



Macksville (north and south of the bridge).

For the safety of deep sea anglers, emergency radio channels VHF Channel 16 and 27.88 MHz are monitored. Trial Bay Coastal Patrol can be contacted by phone on (02) 6566 5240.

Skippers are encouraged to log on and off with the coastal patrol through channel 27.91 MHz, which also broadcasts periodic weather reports.

There are nine licensed professional fishers operating in the Nambucca River. However, according to the local Fisheries officer, only two of these are involved in regular netting operations. The remaining seven are mainly concerned with traps and crabbing.

With the Nambucca River at my front door, and Warrell Creek my backyard, there's no need to travel far to get a feed of fish. But when I feel like rippling some new water, there are numerous great locations on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, and all within a few hours drive of Nambucca Heads.

**F&B**