

First Impressions of Awoonga

BIG BARRA, BEAUTIFUL PLACE

The author with his personal best barra. 1.08m. Estimated weight 50lb. She was fat!



Hey - we've all heard about it. Awoonga Dam is fast achieving 'legendary' status as the home of some of the biggest barra anyone has EVER seen. Fortunately, they're no good for eating - but a huge thrill to catch - and release. Aaron Concorde takes us with him as he tracks Mr Big . . .

Over the last decade, there have been a number of impoundments in Queensland that have received a heck of a lot of press regarding the impressive sized barramundi that live in them.

The growth rates alone have been astonishing in places such as Tinaroo, Peter Faust, Callide, Monduran and Awoonga.

Coupled with the heavy cover these fish like to inhabit, it has led to some champagne sportsfishing. So, of course, I have naturally followed the fisheries progression, hoping to one day have a serious go at it.

Awoonga Dam is one of the most southern dams stocked with a large concentration of barramundi in it.

My first recollection of hearing about the barramundi that had been stocked in Lake Awoonga goes back to the Brisbane Boat Show, Y-2000.

I ran into one of the people from the Gladstone Water Board, who told me about the vast number of fingerlings they had introduced and the sizes the barra were already attaining. There were 10 kg fish back then!

The barra were putting on 3-4 kg a year on the bountiful bait supply.

As the last 6 years have flown by, I had suffered the phone calls and pictures of mates who had sampled the lake's enormous fish and each season, the fish have been larger and more numerous.

I just had to go!

Well, this season nearly went by again, for one reason or another and again, I was eating humble pie regularly.

Friends such as Geoff Seeto, Shane Gator, Emanuel Eliadis, John Kieboom, Leeann Payne and Warren Steptoe were all getting their personal best barramundi. A fish of 110cm was relatively common, which dropped my jaw.

The top three being Shane's 120cm barra and Leeann's going 123cm and Warren's going 125cm. At that length, they weighed more than a cement bag. These are huge fish.

Warren estimated his big girl at 70 old fashioned pounds.

I struggled to deal with it, I can tell you.

It seemed the lake was just absolutely on fire, with large numbers of outlandish sized barra being common. The lake had hit its prime well and truly.

After a half dozen aborted attempts, I finally got my act together to get up there and sample the fishery.

Tony Shao, from JML Trading came to the rescue. As the sole importer of EcoGear and Yamatoyo lines, he had a bunch of prototype lures he wanted to swim in the lake. That's the best excuse I had heard for a fishing trip in ages!

Tony had fished the dam before, so along with the best technical info from all my other mates who had fished the dam over the previous months, it seemed a probability that we would do well.

What an understatement!

About Awoonga.

Lake Awoonga is 30 odd kilometres inland from Gladstone, in Queensland. It's a good 6-½ hours drive north of Brisbane.

I wouldn't call the Bruce Highway our best road, though it and the 8km access road you take to the dam from the Bruce Highway is all sealed bitumen, so 2 wheel drive vehicles are not a problem.



Look at how the eyes are glowing on this 1.04m specimen!

The dam is on the Boyne River and utilises its catchments.

Overall capacity is nearly 800,000 mega litres.

There are 2 arms branching off the basin, those being Riverston Creek north west of the launch ramps and Iveragh Creek to the southeast.

Directly across from the ramp and a good 10km run puts you into the

Boyne River proper which lies in an almost north-south direction.

Back at the entrance to the Boyne is Futter Creek, which first runs N-NW then does a left hand turn SW. All in all, a fair bit of ground to cover.

Users of the dam have a full length, 2-lane concrete boat ramp on the basin's NE shore. As of March 2006, when the dam was at roughly 50% capacity, it was a good 80 or so metres to reverse down the lanes to the water and she's on a fair incline!

There is a reasonable amount of car parking up the hill from the ramp on the left hand side, with more atop a crest, which also serves as a reasonable lookout over part of the basin looking up towards the Boyne Arm. If there are white caps (*yes! white caps!*) you know not to bother launching your 10-foot roof topper tinny. It's like being out on Moreton, Hervey or Port Phillip Bay in 20-25kn of southeaster. Short and nasty.

Where To Stay.

There is a caravan park near the dam called Lake Awoonga Caravan Park (07 4978 0155) where cabins, tent sites and caravans are available, though book early to reserve any room at all. Around popular times of the year, it can be booked out well in advance, so be warned. Just don't rock up there and expect an automatic roof over your head or a campsite to pitch a tent.

There are also houseboat hire operators as well, the two I know of being Cousins Houseboat Hire (07 4978 1211) or Lake Awoonga Houseboats (07 4973 8087). These too are popular, with fishing clubs and groups of anglers hiring the houseboats to use as a mobile base. Yep, mothershiping on a dam.

We chose to stay in a cabin at Benaraby, right on the Bruce Highway on the Boyne River. As it were, the caravan park at the dam was chocker's, so we had little choice other than to commute to Gladstone or Benaraby and back. Willowgrove on the River at Benaraby is a nice spot in its own right. We had a great stay and will be back this October all things going well.

Whether you stay at either Benaraby or the Lake, the main reassurance is that it is safe for families. There are no Box Jellyfish, Crocodiles, Sharks, and Stone Fish in the lake. No sand flies and the mozzies were negligible when we were there. Activities abound for