

Let's Hear It For The FLATHEAD!

There wouldn't be an Aussie fisho who hasn't snared a decent 'lizard' at some stage or another in his or her fishing career . . . but as Geoff Carey explains, there is a lot more to these animals than we think, and a sound knowledge of their habitat and hunting characteristics can dramatically improve your catches of this delicious table fish.

If you're wading the sand or the seagrass beds of our estuarine tidal flats, they may be right next to you without you knowing; the only thing that may give them away is a brief flick of the dark eyes, but you have to be quick to see it.

If you walk the sand flats at low tide, you may see their trademark imprint left on the previous flood tide, but they have slipped away with the receding tide. They are so good at feeding, that the only thing live prey usually see of this hungry predator is the inside of their mouth once they have been swallowed.

For these guys, stealth and subterfuge is their currency, and they are very, very good at it. But our relationship with these creatures is cemented by the fact that they are a prolific angling species, their propensity to engulf almost anything that smells tasty or moves means that they fall for all sorts of baits and lures, small and big, live or dead.

They are a true entry level fish, but are also specialist targeted by both lure and bait fishermen who agree that this fish, sometimes described as 'weird looking' or 'ugly', is an extremely attractive proposition!

So with anglers around the country readying themselves for a run of big breeding fish, it's time we had an in depth look at this terrific animal.

Dissecting Flathead

The Name . . .

Fish known as 'flathead' in Australia are members of the family Platycephalidae, and most of these are from the genus *Platycephalus* which is

literally translated from the Greek *Platy* = flat, and *cephalus* = head, hence the name flathead, which is a good descriptor of the genus and family. Using one of the most common flathead species on the east coast, the dusky flathead, as an example, the scientific name *Platycephalus fuscus* means flat head, (*fuscus*-Latin) dark



with Dr Geoff Carey

coloured. So a flat-headed dark-coloured fish.

The family of fish that flathead belong to, the Platycephalidae, are found throughout the Indo West Pacific region (around 60 species), with 13 species found in Australian waters, with the genus covering most Australian estuarine (and sometimes oceanic) waters. Because there are so many Australian species, this article will be a bit of an overview of the

genus as a whole, with some information on particular species. Some of the more popular flathead species (species names and common names listed) and the Australian regions in which they are found are *Platycephalus* (*P.*):

P. fuscus – dusky flathead – east coast – QLD, NSW, VIC

P. indicus – bar tailed flathead – northern Australia - QLD, NT, WA

P. arenarius – (northern) sand flathead – QLD, WA, (northern) NSW (reportedly)

P. bassensis – sand flathead – southern Australia – NSW, VIC, TAS, SA, WA (reportedly)

P. speculator – yank or toothy flathead – southern Australia – VIC, TAS, SA, WA

Flathead can be found from low salinity reaches of rivers and creeks to the open ocean, in depths of just a few centimetres to areas approaching the Continental Shelf. However, this article will concentrate on those species commonly encountered by anglers, which tend to be relatively shallow water estuarine dwellers.

External Features

As already touched upon, the common name of this group of fish tells us a lot about their external anatomy.

Flathead are dorso-ventrally flattened (dorsal = back or upper, ventral = abdominal or lower), and as this body plan would suggest, spend the majority of their time lying on the bottom. Their tail tapers from the broad neck to the tail fin, which is laterally flattened,

Geoff Carey in his favourite laboratory - out on the Gold Coast's flattie rich Broadwater, late in the day. He keeps insisting he's just doing his job, but we're not really convinced!

