



Having been away from barramundi too long, **Peter Morse** tries a remedy.

Recently, when asked to list my six favourite fish species, it took a while to narrow a short list down to even twice that number. There are so many variables and so many possible candidates: bonefish, permit, tarpon (the big ones), goldies, rainbows, saratoga, ‘the Spanish’... There’s the environment: flats, bluewater, estuaries, the big bays or mountain streams? What about the type of fishing—sight casting, deep dredging? Tricky fish or straight-out thugs? No matter which way I looked at it, the species alone would not be enough to ultimately settle the list; it had to be a blend of place and fish, of difficulty and fight, of character and charisma. With considerable angst I started deleting and narrowing the field to half a dozen, all the time feeling like I’d betrayed some old favourites, even disrespected them.

With six remaining it was time to put them in order and it really came down to emotions, to that feeling you get in your gut when you fish for certain species—but also how it feels when you’re *not* fishing for them. Which one do you miss the most and which scenario? On a bonefish flat I find myself trembling with excitement almost the entire time; confronted by permit it’s a hair-tearing exercise. Visions of schools of giant tarpon heading across a Florida Keys flat still haunt my dreams, while memories of days in the company of friends and great anglers on the big rainbow rivers of New Zealand’s South Island gleam like diamonds.

But as I considered all this, I kept swinging back to just one species—barramundi. When all the dust and debris of my experiences had been sifted through, these were my number one fish. Then I realised how much I’d missed fishing for them, and how little barra fishing I’d done recently—especially for the salties, and especially in those wild, fecund, and smelly places called mangrove systems. Something needed to be done.

### First Skirmish

Descending into Maningrida over northern Arnhem Land takes you across a landscape of wild contrasts—the barren stone country of the ridges, pockets of rainforest, burned scrub, verdant floodplains speckled with the black dots of buffalo and big rivers cutting through shimmering dry plains. The dark green ribbon of mangroves etched a frame for the milk-tea colours of the rivers, ranging from coastal creeks to the huge serpentine Liverpool system.

Within minutes of landing at Maningrida and amidst a jumble of rod tubes, bags, boats, trucks, introductions, and handshakes, I found myself on a boat with guide Rob Robinson. We headed north out of the mile-wide mouth of the Liverpool River to the aptly named Skirmish Point. Here we were confronted by a sea stained dark with baitfish schools. The slashes, splashes, sips, and swirls of predatory



species broke the surface and diving birds wheeled overhead.

“The tides aren’t quite right for barra fishing today,” said Rob, “It’ll get better as the week goes on and the tides begin to neap, then we’ll get cleaner water”. In the meantime, a big school of goldies mixed with other trevally species and queenfish sipped minute baits and kept us entertained. A monster cobia appeared behind the boat amongst the curious goldies, but a small Clouser on an 8 weight was no option for a fish like this, and the Skirmish Point waters were dense with reef. The rushed departure and preparation had left me under-prepared—I’d normally have three rods rigged and ready to go, not one.

### Camp

The Arnhemland Barramundi and Nature Lodge is perched on an escarpment overlooking the floodplain of the Thompson River, which in turn flows into the Liverpool. It’s dry, stony country on the

escarpment and during November when I visited, very hot. The camp has a main mess area with views over the floodplain from a large deck arranged with tables, chairs, and a well-stocked bar. There are very comfortable safari tents of various sizes scattered through the bush surrounding the mess area and along the rim of the escarpment. This was to be home for the coming week.

The camp is also home away from home to Alex Julius—and his business. Alex is one of the major figures in Australian sport fishing and we go back many years. My efforts to convert him to flyfishing have met with moderate success and he’s keen to promote the flyfishing potential of the region. Roger Sinclair, one of the Territory’s finest flyfishers, works for Alex. Between us we’d worked out a set of tides for this visit. “You want the neap tides up here,” said Roger, “Smaller flows give you cleaner water. We always look for the cleaner green water and then the structure that’ll hold fish”.





## Backcountry Billabongs

Rob and I were off the water early following that first session near Skirmish Point. We swung past camp to collect some lunch and a smaller boat, then we headed into the wilds of Arnhem Land to fish some billabongs an hour and a half inland. These were at the head of the Liverpool system, at the end of a track that wound tightly through the trees. Rob explained that he'd been in there a couple of weeks earlier and had fished off the bank for dozens of barra, but there had been good storms since he was last there and the water level had risen considerably. A narrow channel about a metre deep connected two water holes and the clear drag track of a crocodile was etched into the sandy bottom. The water was dark and deep with a tumble of snags along both shores and a lily pad bed at the shallower far end. From there it opened right up into what looked like a rice paddy.

We headed straight for the best looking snag and my first cast with a Gusto was wolfed down by a small barra. It's always easy to get excited about a first cast fish and to think 'here we go, this is going to be great!!' But so often it also means no more fish.

We flogged that billabong from one end to the other, on the top and down deep, with a huge range of flies and retrieves. In my enthusiasm to understand what was going on I even went for a swim in it (accidentally of course). I doubt there was a piece of water that didn't see our flies. We had flashes from barras and one good hook-up from what was probably a saratoga but that was it. Perhaps with the first of the rain the barra had vacated the waterhole and headed downstream to the upper Liverpool, only a few kilometres away. Or perhaps they were up on the flooded grassy plain.



Later in the week I visited another waterhole, this time with Roger Sinclair. This was a really beautiful waterhole with all those ingredients that make these one of my favourite places to fish. It was thickly lined with pandanus and big old melaleucas grew in many places along the banks. These were in full blossom and shrill with bird life. The vicinity of the melaleucas was naturally where the snags were, and where we found the barra. Often in billabongs the barra are near the weedbeds but this waterhole was too deep for lilies and water weeds to proliferate.

We saw a few very small saratoga and we had to work hard for the barra we caught, but so much of the pleasure of this fishing is in the tight casting. Accuracy is essential as the fish lie very close to cover. I was using one of the powerful Sage bass rods, a 7'11" beauty designed exactly for fishing like this: casting big flies with a premium

on accuracy and with a requirement for some 'trick' casts.

Sometimes trick casts can bring you undone however. I'd pulled a nice barra from the front of a snag, but I could see there was still plenty of cover at the back, behind a vertical log that stood a metre or so out of the water. A curve cast flipped the fly around the back of the log, it sank and a short, sharp strip later, a barra ate the fly. But it only had to come towards me to win the contest, which was exactly what happened—proving it's possible to be too tricky for your own good!

This billabong was much larger than the one I'd fished earlier and was at the head of the Blythe River, but within reach of a trickle of tidal slurry flowing in on the high tide. The stained water from the incoming tide had flowed through pig-infested swamps to reach the billabong, creating a distinct colour change in the deep green water. This proved to be another spot where (predictably) the barra lurked.

Overall, the billabongs provided a great diversion from the tidal rivers, especially when conditions on those rivers weren't quite right.





### Smaller Tidal Systems

The Liverpool River system remained seriously discoloured so we decided to fish some smaller tidal systems along the coast east and west of the Liverpool mouth. A group of lure fishing guests were doing it tough by lodge standards—'only' 40 to 50 barra per day per boat of three. They were travelling a long way each day to the Blythe River. Later in the week as the tides slowed further and the water cleared, they fished the Goomadeer River and on the lodge's big whiteboard, daily catches up in the hundreds began to be recorded. Most flyfishers here rate lure to fly captures at 10-1, so by that ratio, my days of half to a dozen fish were looking pretty good.

The smaller coastal creeks are primarily sandy systems, with a shallow bar and extensive sand flats in the mouth area. Because we had a midday high tide it was a matter of getting in on the incoming tide in the morning for a few hours, then timing our departure so we weren't trapped in the creek. Ironically, Rob told me the best tide for these systems was a big midday low, so you deliberately spent the day trapped up the creek. On these days the creeks would become a series of holes where of course all the fish were corralled— predators and bait. "That's when the locals fish these creeks", he told me, apparently with spears at close quarters.

Naval Landing was a small but impressive piece of water which at high tide doesn't materialise until you're right on it. 'This is fly water', I thought as Rob swung the boat through a series of very tight and seemingly random turns on the way in past the mouth. His eyes moved constantly back and forth from the GPS to the sounder and then to the creek mouth. Flocks of terns rose off the sandbars and a big old turtle took a deep breath and dived. "I had to check the channel on the way in so we don't get stuck in here for the day," explained Rob, "That would mean not getting out until 8 o'clock tonight". Good, I had no desire to be the main dish at a sand fly smorgasbord.



### Saltwater Barra Country

At any rate, this was what I'd come here for, saltwater barra country. Just the smell of the mangroves was enough to trigger memories of old line burns.

Barra are the master of the ambush. Chasing food is not for them, they like those slow corners, places where food accumulates, where eddies form and the baitfish are forced to linger as they follow the tidal flow. Add a bit of cover to an eddy and you have a prime lie. On different tides the fish behave differently and on this day they weren't in Rob's favoured locations, but we found them anyway.

I insisted Rob fish with a lure for two reasons. Most of the time a lure is a much more effective barra-catching tool than a fly, so there's no quicker way to discover if there are fish present in a location than to drag a lure through. The second reason is to wake the barra up. Creating a ruckus in the snag gets these not-too-smart fish thinking they might be missing out on something. The lure worked as snags were rattled and fish were roused. Rob hooked an 85 cm fish and later hooked a monster of a thing we didn't see. We were still speculating on its identity days later. "Possibly a very big barra." was Rob's understated conclusion. It headed for midstream initially and was circling back towards cover when the hooks pulled.

In this water, effective weed guards on flies are absolutely critical. The quantity of unseen twigs and branches will see unprotected hooks snagging constantly. There are many times when you simply must sink the fly into cover and work it through a range of depths. Clousers are certainly effective a good deal of the time,

especially when the cover is sporadic, but there's still that hesitation to sink them deep or to cast them well back into cover. If you really want to get to where the fish are, you must put up with tying on weed guards and fishing with them. The perception that weed guards cause you to miss fish is a false one. Most strikes when using a weed guard are strikes you simply wouldn't obtain if you were fishing without one, because you wouldn't be fishing far enough into the cover in the first place. The simple weed guard pictured hereabouts is very effective and I believe causes few fish to be missed.

Naval Landing was good to us. We left the fish biting in a draining gutter, and with the tide falling fast, we just made it out through the maze-like channel at the mouth.

## Flats

What a difference the few hours inside the creek had made to the seascape out the front. The extent of the sand flats was finally revealed—WOW! Although a falling tide is not a good time to be fishing and exploring flats in an area where the tidal range is measured in several metres, I just had to spend some time there.

The flats were firm white sand. A bar well offshore and several hundred metres long blocked the waves, creating a lagoon situation on the inside. This lagoon was cut with channels and bait skittered all over it. Sharks were tearing into the mullet schools that seemed loath to leave the shallows. I wasn't stupid enough to wade the deeper areas where I couldn't see the bottom. In this remote country the potential mix of stingrays, box jellyfish, stonefish and crocodiles makes wading extremely hazardous. With the prevailing wind on my left shoulder and at my back, the sandbar provided ample safe shallows within a comfortable flick, while long casts could reach the channels. Although I caught only queenfish as they ambushed bait falling off with the tide, this was one of the more exciting flats I've seen around the country. Some day I'll be back on a rising tide ...

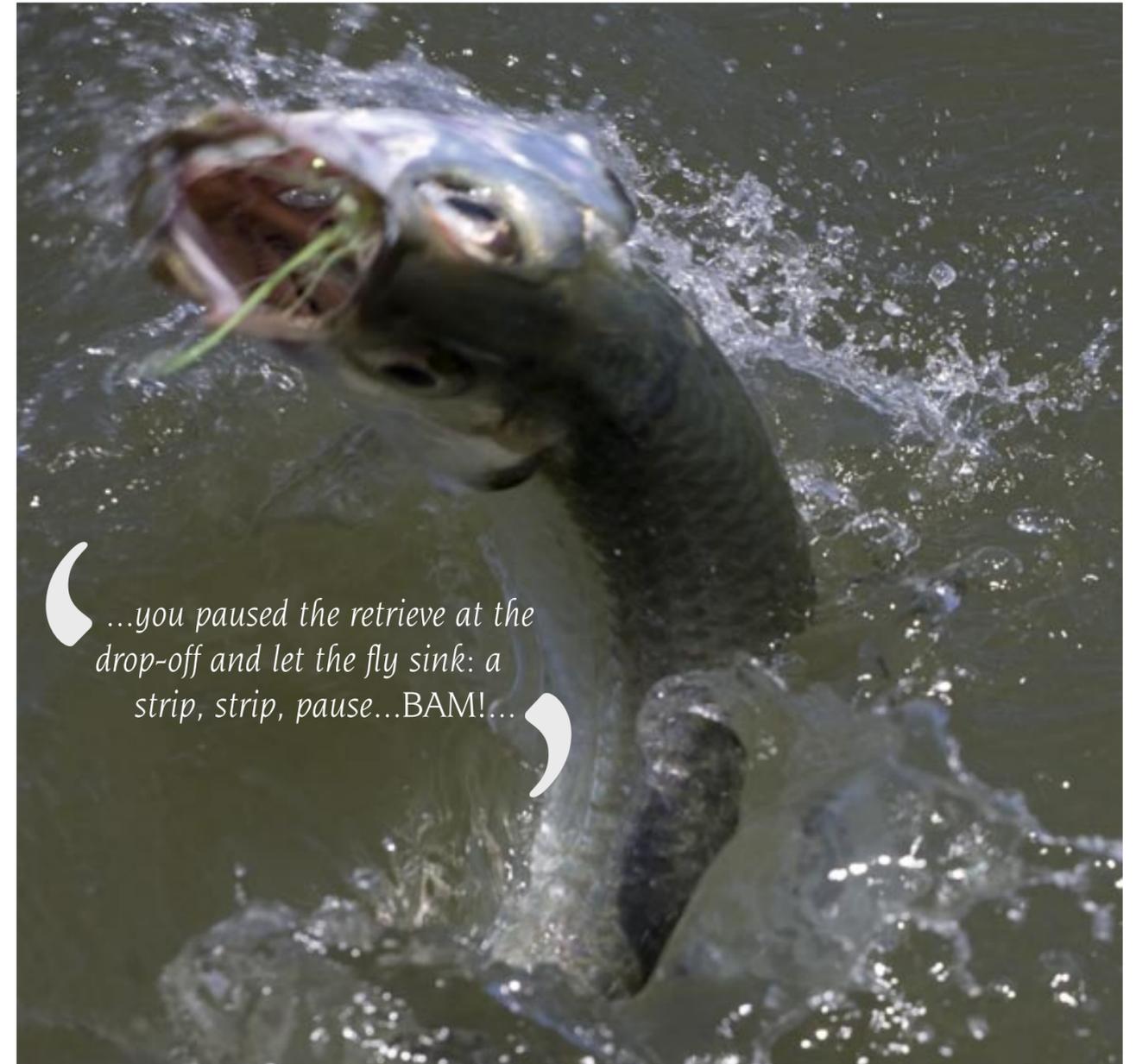
## Last Days

The Blythe River was a big disappointment on this trip. I'd looked forward to fishing the famous rock bar but I visited the river after the lure guys had flogged it for several hundred barra over the preceding days. The Blythe's a big river with many known hotspots and I managed to scratch up a few fish, however on the whole it wasn't up to expectations.

On my last morning Roger took me to another small creek system west of the Liverpool. The tides were on the full neap now and the water had cleaned up considerably. This system in Rolling Bay had borne the full brunt of Cyclone Monica two years earlier and the mangroves were stripped bare and dead. It was a bizarre landscape to fish in, but it certainly hadn't affected the barra. While they weren't large, they were willing and there were plenty of them. In the mouth area on an incoming tide the barra were stacked up along a snag-packed shoreline, and really concentrated in a few areas. Casting had to be spot on. Roger would point out where the drop-off was in relation to a particular the snag. If you put your fly right in amongst the snag the hit usually came immediately. If you didn't, you paused the retrieve at the drop-off and let the fly sink: a strip, strip, pause...BAM!

Like most trips to a place such as this, it was over too soon. We motored back to the airstrip at Maningrida over a glassed-out sea, tracing a coastline that would never have seen the footprint of a flyfisher. The neap tide water was very clean, birds worked all the points, baitfish showered and the ever-present queenfish hammered into them.

Most flyfishers I know yearn to leave the confines of a boat to walk the shore and the flats, and the prospect of exploring these waters in the future is exciting. But I was here for barra this time. I wanted to cast flies for these great fish and re-acquaint myself with them, to see if the number one ranking I'd held in my mind hadn't just been nostalgia. And it wasn't. I couldn't get enough of them.



*...you paused the retrieve at the drop-off and let the fly sink: a strip, strip, pause...BAM!...*

### FACT FILE LODGE DETAILS

Arnhemland Barramundi and Nature Lodge is a part of Hotspot Travel. You fly there from Darwin with Air North, which provides daily services to Arnhem Land with a fleet of medium-sized planes.

Manager Dave Thompson has spent most of his life in Australia's remoter regions and runs a great camp in what must be challenging circumstances. For its remoteness the lodge is incredibly comfortable. The safari-style tents have their own bathrooms and toilets and range from deluxe to shared rooms for four. But the main focus is the central mess area where the kitchen, dining room, and well-stocked bar are perched on the escarpment overlooking the Liverpool River floodplains and the Thomson River system. From the balcony early in the morning we watched buffalo travel through the scrub and across the plains to their chosen waterholes, and observed vast flocks of corellas rising from the trees.

Speaking of which, the lodge is a favoured location for bird watchers during the depths of the northern winter. To the excitement of the 'twitchers', large flocks of Gouldian finches have been discovered in the region.

The guides working out of the lodge are an exceptional crew. Although their knowledge of flyfishing is a little restricted, their knowledge of the area is exceptional. This country is very hard on boats and vehicles so it's a relief to know that the lodge employs a full-time mechanic.

Rob told me the offshore fishing in the cooler months when the barra are quieter is sensational. We visited reefs and pinnacles where in winter the big mackerel were thick but these waters were quiet at the time we visited.

Best months are June for the bluewater; and April, May, June, then October and November for the barra. The lodge will be running a flyfishing week for up to 12 anglers.

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**FACT FILE****ROD SET-UPS FOR SALTWATER BARRA**

My set-up for this kind of fishing is not complex but having three rods ready to go is part of it: one with a full intermediate line, another with a clear intermediate tip, and the last with a fast sinking line—usually a fast sink tip. If I had only one outfit it would be the full intermediate; only two and the second outfit would depend on the size of river I was fishing and the tidal flow at the time. On smaller, slower rivers with clean water the clear tip would be on my second rod, while on a big river with much stronger flow and deeper water, the fast sinking line would be essential.

On each of these rods I'd have a different fly, probably starting with a Gusto on the intermediate, a Clouser on the clear tip and either a Fat Boy, Pink Thing or Black 'n Barred on the sinker.

So, typically my three rods look like this:

**INTERMEDIATE LINE**

Usually on a 9 weight rod and always a Rio Saltwater Intermediate. The leader is 1 metre of 50 lb butt section looped to 1 metre of Rio 10 kg hard mono, with a triple turn Surgeons Knot to a 45 lb shock tippet about 50 cm long. The starting fly is probably a Gusto.

**CLEAR TIP LINE**

Usually on an 8 weight rod with Rio's Saltwater Clear Tip line. The leader is 1 metre of 45 lb butt section looped to 1.2 metres of Rio 10 kg hard mono, with a lighter 40 lb shock tippet around 50 cm long. This rig is used in cleaner, shallower water with less flow where the fish are usually a little spookier.

**FAST SINKING LINE**

Usually on a 10 weight rod, and recently I've used Rio's Custom-cut T14. This is an integrated shooting head system that has a 35 foot section of T14 at the front, designed to be trimmed back to balance the rod you use it on. I cut the tip back to 28 feet which suits the 10 weight. It sinks like a stone and is not recommended for slow-moving shallow water—it gets down to 2–3 metres very quickly. Because it's so important to stay in contact with your fly, keep the leader on this rod short—loop the class tippet of 10 kg Rio straight to a loop on the front of the fly line and then add the shock tippet. I'm usually anticipating catching larger fish on this gear so I use a 60 lb shock tippet.

**FACT FILE****FLY GEAR TO BRING**

I would take 8, 9 and 10 weight rods for most of the time but a 7 and an 11 are also going to see action when the bluewater and the beaches are fishing well. Carrying a full range of line densities is a good idea but a full intermediate is your most important line.

**FLIES**

- Clousers in various colours, weights and sizes.
- Fat Boys, dark colours and natural colours, some weighted and some floating.
- Pink Things
- Black 'n Barreds.
- Gustos in a wide range of colours and sizes.

**TIPPET**

10 kg tippet material, and some 20, 22, and 24 kg shock tippet material.

Peter Morse is hosting the Inaugural Arnhemland Fly Fishing Week at the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge on 10–17 December this year.

Fly fishing will be two to a boat guided for barra, estuary species and bluewater species, as well as sight casting off white, sandy beaches, and along the banks of secluded tropical billabongs for barra and saratoga.

There are limited spaces available.

# AD

*A noted flyfishing journalist, photographer, author and presenter, Peter Morse is also a FFF certified casting instructor and a member of Team Sage.*

Alex Julius Ad