

urban antics

by John Hunter

A fish tale

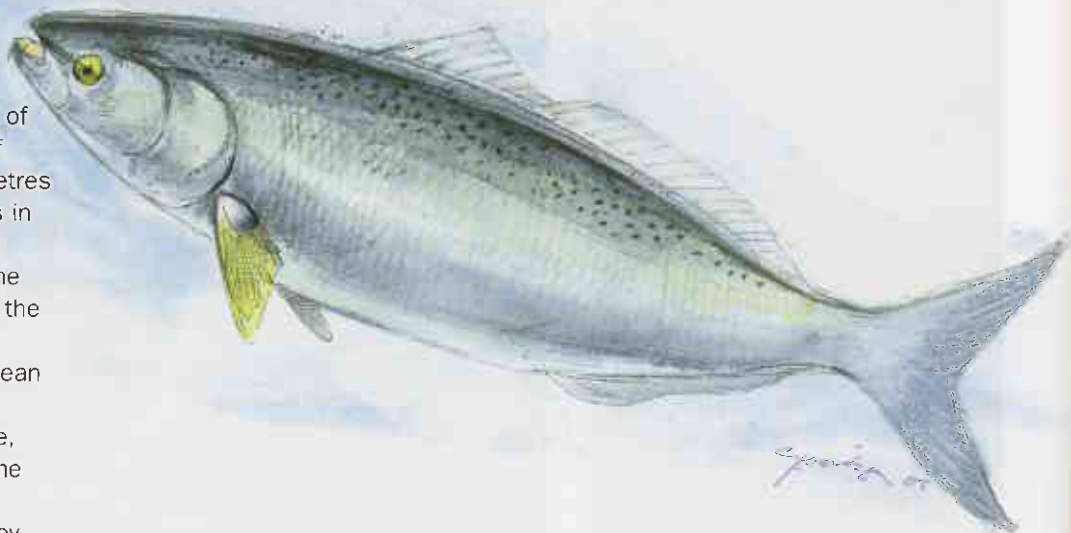
How lucky are we? Most of us in the western suburbs of Perth live within a few kilometres of some of the best beaches in the world. Here, unlike the eastern coast of Australia, the early morning sun rises over the land to create windows of wonder in upright walls of ocean waves before they crumble. On this floodlit stage of nature, where the rays of the sun come from behind you as you gaze seaward, you can actually enjoy spotting the fish as well as enjoy a spot of fishing.

There's something primeval about digging your toes deep into the loose white quartz of an urban beach and then throwing a line to fish. The unknown is probable. The peace is unquestionable. The excitement is tolerable... just.

Because of our State's well-managed fishery, many species of sportfish are still abundant right along the coast within our suburban area. At various times of the year, taylor, skipjack trevally, herring, and salmon are perhaps the most sought after, not only as fare for the table, but for their prowess as fighters on the end of a beach rod and line.

From autumn to early winter each year, one of the largest sportfish to visit our urban beaches is the adult Australian salmon (*Arripis truttaceae*). About March, they congregate in large schools on the south coast of the State and move west and north in a pre-spawning migration, usually travelling close to the coastline, sometimes lying up during the day off rocky headlands. Some eventually make it to the Perth ocean beaches and are eagerly sought by fishers.

In years when the Leeuwin Current is weak, as it is this year, salmon easily travel around Cape Naturaliste and temporarily inhabit the waters from Rottnest to Yanchep. In the past, some have



been caught as far north as Kalbarri.

Australian salmon are members of the perch family Arripidae (which also includes the Australian herring) but, like a lot of animal species, they were misnamed by early colonists who thought they looked like a species from the 'old country'. The fish are cool-water pelagic or mid to surface dwellers that are torpedo shaped and have overlapping scales, which form a protective layer to the tissues below.

Salmon reach maturity at about five years old, when they school up and head for their ancestral birthplace. Spawning happens anywhere from about the South Australian border west, with the intense area being between Cape Leeuwin and Busselton. After finding suitable hydrological conditions, the spawn and eggs are then at the mercy of the ocean. The eggs hatch very quickly and the young free-floating larvae

are transported south and east by the Leeuwin Current. On the journey, they develop into free-swimming fish and head to the eastern extremity of their range along the south coast, even into the Great Australian Bight.

Juvenile salmon often use estuaries and protected embayments early in life, then at about one to two years of age, or 30 centimetres in length, they head out to sea where they stay until they reach maturity. And so the cycle starts again.

As the weather deteriorates for winter so does the opportunity to cast a rod with a prevailing easterly wind, a placid ocean and warm wet sand between your toes. And so also goes the opportunity of catching that humungous, grand-daddy salmon that you've dreamt about all year. You don't have to despair, however, because if you miss him this season he'll be back next year, you can bet his life on it.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Salmon live for up to 12 years or so, and may grow as large as seven kilograms, but are more typically caught when they are around four kilograms in weight and 60 centimetres long.
- Juveniles are called 'salmon trout' as they have trout-like markings and look somewhat like a large herring.
- The bag limit for salmon is four per angler per day and the minimum legal size is 30 centimetres. If you fish for sport, gently handle the fish in water if possible and carefully remove the hook or cut the line before release.

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