

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

The Solomon Islands is well-known for its excellent reef and offshore fishing, but the remote jungles and elusive spot tail bass is a must for any adventurous angler.

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By Ben Job



SPOT tail bass are most commonly recognised as a Papua New Guinea native. Alongside their close relative the black bass, these are a prized catch and anglers travel far and wide to target these exceptional sport fish. However in recent years spot tailed, and the odd black bass, have been documented in various rivers around the hills of the Solomon Islands. The opportunity to explore these parts and chase these elusive fish was too hard to resist!

Close fishing mate Steve Ward and I were asked to go on an exploratory mission to target spot tailed bass in the jungle streams of the Solomons and to discover new areas where these fish might be hiding out.

We were based at Papatura Resort, a well-known Solomon Islands fishing and surfing resort North West of Honiara. The night before our bass excursion our guide Rolly, who is native to the area, instructed us to pack light. We were planning on taking our long boat up the river to as far as we could go, but then we would be on foot to trek the rest of the way into the fresh water pools of the Fufuwana River. We were joined by Bob from Papatura resort who came along to help and show us where they had previously encountered fish. Prior to entering the river we paid our admission to the local village, of which our guide Rolly belonged, before making our way in. Both Steve and I were chomping at the bit to have a cast as we past lay down timbers and tributaries along the way. It was about a 15 minute ride at slow speed to our shallow point where we would leave our boat anchored. I think during this boat ride I must have changed my lure three times as I didn't really know what to expect. Both Bob and Rolly had caught spot tailed bass here in the past, but mainly on bait. Our mission was to be one of the first lure fishing expeditions to ever take place on the Fufuwana River. We all

climbed out of the boat and it became immediately apparent that our choice of footwear - runners with no gravel guards or Crocs - weren't going to be ideal. The river bed, in which we would spend majority of the time walking in was made up of a soft sandy mud and was hard to keep shoes, especially Crocs, on your feet. We debated for a few minutes and made the decision to leave our footwear in a tree and continue the trek bare foot. This seemed like a good idea at the time as we weren't fully aware of how far we were going to eventually trek. The river varied anywhere from ankle to waist deep water, with the occasional deeper pool which might have been 8 -10 feet.

"Now, Rolly is quite good with his English but his sign language needs some work."

The deeper sections were peppered with casts before climbing out of the water and passing the pools via the river bank. There would be the occasional log jam to cross but most were fairly easily negotiated. At the beginning of our trek we really didn't know where to cast. Neither of us had ever caught spot tailed bass before and although we had a fair idea of what to look for, this creek was not like the jack or barra areas we were more familiar with.

As we moved our way up river, we both caught numerous jungle perch and archer fish. We saw juvenile mangrove jacks in the snags but couldn't get a rise out of anything that resembled a spot tailed bass. We were both a little sceptical until Rolly spotted a small spot tail next to a log. Were must have put 20 casts into the area without a

touch. Even though we hadn't caught one yet, at least it gave us a bit of confidence.

We stopped at some shallow rapids with a slightly deeper pool on the upstream side. Bob and I stood back as Steve and Rolly moved up to cast the pool. Steve made a few casts before a bow wave shot out from under a tree 10 metres away before climbing all over his lure. As Steve came tight it shot through the rapids into the downstream section where Bob and I were waiting. The fish surfaced immediately and we saw it was a bass. It was a fairly scrawny malnourished looking bass, but none the less, it was a bass! We shot a bunch of photos, thinking this could be the one and only bass of the trip...

Both of us now had a slight spring in our step as we trekked further into the jungle. I moved to the front position now to get first shot at each pool. As we approached a log jam on a hair pin bend, Rolly moved ahead of us and walked up the bank a little to get an elevated look at the pool before the first cast. There was a raised sandy bank just short of the deep pool and as I made my way up, Rolly was signalling me that there was a nice spot tail just downstream of the logs. Now, Rolly is quite good with his English but his sign language needs some work. He was attempting to tell me to cast at the pool, but he looked as though he was telling me to get down low so I couldn't be seen. I crouched to my knees on the sand bank, which was scalding hot from the sun. I made a cast into the pool and about 10 bass emerged. The school followed my lure, but no takers. I fired another two cast before my lure was crunched. The fish peeled line fairly easily from a fairly beefy barra rod and headed towards a log. I applied some extra drag with my thumb and turn the fish downstream. I had a short battle in close quarters before my fish came to hand. Stoke levels were high! A few photos and a quick cool off in the water and we were back at it.



As we moved further upstream we came across fish more frequently. We were getting follows, hook ups and landing fish at most of the deeper pools and snags that we came across. Then a light rain shower started. Rolly had warned us earlier that flash flooding in jungle creeks is definitely something to be concerned about if we get heavy rain. But for now it was light enough for us to continue. Rolly moved ahead once again as we approached yet another attractive looking pool with several lay down timbers through the middle. I was in the front position, casting at anything that looked promising. As I was mid retrieve, eagle eyed Rolly spotted a nice bass about 20 feet in front of me. I tried to quickly crank my lure in to make a cast at the laid up fish, in my slight panic, I managed to get my lure caught on a snag just in front of me. I tried to shake my lure

free from the snag but it wouldn't come off. I crouched down and tried to sneak forward and unhook my lure but as I did, the bass rose from its position and drifted down stream to about four feet to my right. I froze. Doing my best not to spook the fish, I signalled Steve, who was following behind to make a cast. He presented a perfect cast just upstream of the fish. Steve made one crank of the handle and the fish climbed on his lure. To see this unfold literally a metre or so away from me was truly epic! But as Steve struck his fish, it dove straight under a big log, over another, under a second and then swam into a cave in the creek's undercut bank. We both kind of scrambled towards the log to try and somehow extract the fish. We passed his rod through the first underwater log, then the second. But the fish was still lodged in its cave. I broke away a mass of tree roots and gave his

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

Small lures cast accurately at the snags did the trick on these spot tails.

The Solomons offers a lot of variety, from the jungle streams to prolific reef and offshore fishing.

Ben looks pretty happy with this nice spot tail bass.

leader a bit of a pull and the bass shot out. Quick to act, Steve slammed his reel into gear and finished the fish off in a short fight.

By now, the light rain shower had turned to a heavy downpour and Rolly urged us that it was time to turn around or we could be met with a wall of water. We quickly released Steve's fish and trudged downstream and made our way back to the boat.

As we got back the boat, we pulled anchor and Rolly slowly drove us down stream. Steve and I peppered every snag we could as we moved back into brackish water. We caught another nice bass, along with snub nosed cod and a few more jungle perch and archer fish. We were so pumped. The little jungle creek more than met our expectations. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if we could have kept moving up the river.

The Fufuwana River is only one of several rivers that Papatura Resort has access to. All of which hold spot tailed bass, mangrove jacks and they have even landed black bass there. Fishing a river like Fufuwana should be on all adventure angler's bucket list!

OTHER OPTIONS

Papatura Island Resort is also an unbelievable saltwater sport fishing location. We were lucky



Taking a break from the jungle, the fellas found some awesome action on the nearby reefs.

enough to spend a few days offshore working the coral edges and pressure points; this saw us land a huge variety of reef species. We mainly used micro jigs and medium stick baits on 30-50lb spin outfits. 30- 60 gram micro jigs and 90 - 150mm sinking stick baits seemed to be the most productive. There were some crazy sessions taking place, at times 50 plus fish taken in only a couple of hours. Most of the fish encountered were red bass and bluefin trevally, but we were lucky enough to catch a

handful of Maori sea perch, Maori wrasse, GTs and a variety for trout species.

We also had plenty of chances at some big dogtooth, although we were only fortunate enough to land some smaller models. Here's my advice, take plenty of spare lures and some heavy jigging gear; those doggies are mean!

This trip was made possible by Papatura Island Resort and Solomon Airlines. Steve and I would like to thank both for this opportunity! ●

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