

COLLECTING IN THE KIMBERLEYS, W.A.

by David Wilson



During March, '87, I was transferred to Broome, W.A. Great news: there are plenty of undiscovered species in the rivers and creeks that flow into the Indian Ocean; it should be easy. Wrong!

My wife Robyn and I arrived in Broome in late March. The temperature range was up to about 38°C through most of the day and down to about 30°C at night. A great deal of will-power, energy and concentration was required to drag oneself away from the air-conditioning and venture outside. The heat, coupled with high humidity, was most uncomfortable for those used to Canberra weather. An understanding of the word 'troppo' was perceived during our first couple of weeks at Broome. However, with the arrival of April there was something of a change: day and night temperatures were still high but the humidity dropped noticeably. Broome is in fact quite a pleasant place during the dry season.

Now to the fish. Well, there are no permanent freshwater creeks or rivers within 160km of Broome, the closest being the Fitzroy River, 165km to the northeast. Broome tapwater is pumped from the ground and is not suitable for keeping freshwater fish, sadly.

In May my boss and I drove to Kununurra, which is near the W.A./N.T. border, on the Ord River. The trip was a great opportunity to have a look in some creeks and rivers, to size up possible future collecting sites.

At the end of that month, Robyn and I packed camping gear, fishing rods, collecting equipment and a boat and headed for the Fitzroy River at Willare Bridge, 165km up the Great Northern Highway. The river is really a series of waterholes, connected by a small stream, in the dry season, but in the wet, it turns into a raging torrent, sometimes flooding thousands of square miles. The purposes of this trip were to catch a Barramundi and to collect some small fishes for an aquarium that had been completed the week before. We trolled and cast lures for a couple of hours in the deep water downstream of the bridge. No Barramundi-- but we did catch salmon catfish on

our lures. In the morning, as the sun rose, freshwater crocodiles were to be seen, sunning themselves on the bank. They would let one come within about 10 metres before sliding into the dark green water.

The afternoon of our first day was spent in the shallow water upstream of the bridge, where it was about one metre deep, with a sandy bottom and steep banks, lined with *Pandanus* palms. I baited small plastic traps with prawns and then caught some cherabin with a prawn net. Cherabin is a freshwater shrimp that grows to over 30cm long; they were broken up and some of the flesh was used as bait. As the fish became used to our presence they approached more closely. We caught Archer fish, Sooty Grunter, Salmon catfish, freshwater pufferfish and Spangled perch, but no rainbowfish. The last-mentioned were certainly present but in small numbers but they wouldn't enter the traps or let me get close enough to drop a small baited hook in front of them-- unusual behaviour for rainbowfish. There were large schools of herring and perchlets swimming past, as well as other species that I could not recognise. We put 4 Archer fish, 2 Sooty Grunter, 2 small Salmon catfish and 2 puffer fish in a plastic garbage-bin, to take home.

On the second day of our trip we decided to look for the last of the freshwater before the tidal influence. Tides around the Kimberleys often show a range of over 10 metres (more than 30')--incredible! We towed the boat to a pool which was about 150 metres wide and about 3km long and according to our detailed map, it was the last of the freshwater. We walked along the top of the bank and I saw nine large logs on the opposite side but as we watched, four of them slid into the water. A viewing through my telephoto camera lens confirmed that four of the remaining 'logs' had legs, a tail and large teeth. One of them would have been over 3 metres long! Robyn persuaded me (without much trouble) not to put the boat into the water, so we decided to give up the Barramundi and head for home.

The sun was well up, the day was quite warm and the road was very rough. Unfortunately, by the time we reached Broome, the Archer fish had died. The puffer fish, catfish and grunters were placed in aged Broome tapwater but within five days, all but the grunters had died and even they are not doing very well. It must be that Broome water.

The distances to collecting sites other than Willare Bridge are enormous, the weather is always warm and the roads, other than the Great Northern Highway, are terrible. Broome's water is full of minerals and very hard, so everything seems to be against keeping freshwater natives from this region. However, there are marine fish in rockpools within a few kms of my front door and as much saltwater as one could wish. But that would make another story.
