

# Windlane Milkfish

*Steve Jeston finds milkfish  
in windlanes.*



It all began in my childhood really, watching these big, strong, silver fish cruising Townsville's Aplin Weir every day after school. I was usually the first of the ten-year-olds there after school as I lived very close to the action.

Back then my tackle was very basic. A spin rod loaded with ten pound line and a handful of white bucktail jigs. The tarpon were easy and so were the small barra. The larger barra were easy too – catch a tarpon around six inches long and bash him out on an 7/0 hook with my Dad's eighty pound handline. One was enough for dinner that night.

But it was this other fish which I had witnessed other anglers catching, not often or with any great understanding, but they would occasionally catch them nonetheless. It turns out they were milkfish (or *Chanos chanos* to the scientific types). These critters would loll around the surface in and around the current formed by wet season runoff, seemingly eating something that I could never quite see. Tarpon would do the same but they were easy to hook. It frustrated the hell out of me, even at that age.

I haven't forgotten my first milkfish hookup and neither did my Shakespeare 2400 reel. I broke him off and lost

my bucktail jig. He was one cranky little fellow. My second hookup on a six pounder proved more successful. A couple of years later I purchased my first flyrod (a Diawa Phantom eight weight) from Lounds Fishing Tackle in Townsville. Back at Aplin Weir the tarpon and barra still proved pretty easy. Those milkfish were in trouble now – I THOUGHT! With some budgie feathers tied to a smallish hook with rod binding thread I caught a procession of tarpon. One day though, to my complete surprise, I caught a milkfish. More by good fortune than good management, but me and that Phantom whooped and hollered like cowboys on a muster.

My next encounter was again in the Ross River in Townsville. I distinctly remember it was Easter and unusually cool and still in the early morning. The milkfish were up on the surface in cruise mode doing something I couldn't quite see. This was probably my first sight cast fish. I had to run after the fish because my twelve pound Amilan S backing was taken from Dad's cupboard (sorry Dad) and there wasn't much of it.

Since then I had not caught these speedsters until fairly recently.

**ABOVE:** Milkfish have remained the elusive holy grail of fly fishing around the globe. Given the results to date, fishing in windlanes might make this species far more accessible.  
**OPPOSITE:** Windlanes – one part of a three part puzzle. The other two are a dead drift retrieve, and small flies.

## RESEARCH

Milkfish are a relatively common fish and I have seen many in places such as Hinchinbrook, various locations across Cape York and Papua New Guinea. They are also common throughout the Northern Territory and much of Northern WA.

In my 1965 edition of *Grant's Guide to Fishes* there are some interesting notes on *Chanos chanos*:

*"a brilliant silvery fish reaching a length of four feet in local waters inhabiting mangrove lined foreshores and estuaries. In Papuan waters it has sprung to prominence as a light game fish. These fish are better brought inshore by berlying with stale bread and a floated line carefully baited with bread crust."*

This is interesting indeed considering it is a 1965 edition.

In Australia, regular milkfish captures have to date been thought of as being restricted to berlying fish in Darwin Harbour. There have been a few captures elsewhere around the northern parts of Queensland and over in WA, but only a few of these captures resulted from specifically targeting milkfish in a 'natural' environment. Even on a worldwide scale, milkfish in wild environs are an infrequent capture at best.

They are the most frustrating species fly fishers have encountered, bar none. Countless thousands of anglers have cast at milkfish, with little return. And this has been going on for over 30 years. In fact Lefty Kreh, that wonderfully gifted teacher of fly fishing, once said that milkfish were one species he would love to see worked out. The reasons are

pretty straight forward – they're big, they fight clean, they're abundant, they're in shallow water, and they cast be sight cast too – the very basis for inclusion into the iconic fly fish category (along with fish like permit), except for one small detail – they don't eat flies often. Or do they?

Recent evidence suggests that perhaps a significant step in the milkfish equation has been partially solved. The solution was, in hindsight, utterly straightforward, but aren't most solutions like that? Perhaps the difficulty lay in part with the mentality of northern fly fishing, where species diversity has required less specialisation and abundance of fish has never pushed people to experiment with niche concepts – and those who have generally done it when the fishing is often poor and nothing else will bite – not the most effective process for learning.

This step required amalgamating techniques most common in freshwater environments – windlane techniques and dead drifting small, unweighted flies on floating lines. Yup, that's it in a nutshell – fishing unweighted flies on floating lines down windlanes.

This is perhaps one of the most well known trout fishing techniques in places like Tasmania, yet the combination of floating lines, small flies and dead drift presentations has just been too different to popular fishing methods up north.

Earlier this year, on the Archer River in the Western Gulf of Cape York, a couple of very enthusiastic Melbourne anglers, Gary Dryden and Alf Prestley, made a bit of history







**ABOVE:** this is why people chase milkfish – because they fight harder than any other fish on the flats.

**OPPOSITE:** Small BMS patterns that mimic algae and zooplankton have proved an important part of the puzzle.

by landing thirty of these fish in four short sessions. The largest fish weighed 30 pounds and had a fork length of 110 centimetres. Here's a measurement you won't read often – it had a fork width of 61 centimetres. We would find the sort of windlane you'd expect on Arthur's Lake, drift along it until we saw fish sipping and rolling at the surface, and then cast upcurrent of sighted fish and dead drift the fly to them – which they ate – often. We have since repeated these captures on subsequent of trips.

It is not quite as simple as driving up to feeding fish, hoiking a Red Tag in their general direction, shouting "Tally Ho" and hanging on while every milkfish south of the Tropic of Capricorn comes charging over. There are critical nuances to conditions and feeding behaviour that require observation and understanding.

The fish have definite and different moods. The catchable fish seem to feed on the surface in large schools on particular tides – something I have seen them do for many years in a number of locations. When they're in this mood they are not spooky and carry on this seemingly semi-pelagic gig all round the boat. Food in these situations seemes varied – small brown mangrove worms, minute jelly prawn-like creatures that occasionally break the surface, green weed and also a brown surface scum.

#### **FISHING METHOD**

There are two critical areas we've identified. Presentation and micro-environmental conditions.

Fly fishers with a trout background have a distinct advantage here, especially those who understand and practice dead drift nymphing presentations. Down-and-across presentations seem to work with definite regularity. Simply cast across the current and let the fly dead drift right down the current



until the flyline straightens out. Here seems to be the critical element of this presentation. Under no circumstances, for any reason, ever, both here on earth and on Mars, do you strip the fly. It'll be ignored, as brutally and abruptly as those rejections you got chasing girls as a spotty teenager. There really is a simple commonsense reason for this – the food the milkfish are targetting only move as fast the current they're in.

Presentations are most successful under conditions conducive to the formation of windlanes. The physics of the interaction between water and wind is unbelievably complex and is best ignored completely unless you're a nerd. The most relevant thing to understand is that windlanes form when wind blowing across a waterbody interacts with the water surface in such a way that strips of flattened water form in the same direction as the prevailing wind, their position and shape adjusting to the prevailing wind direction and intensity.

The other essential bit of information, which helps understand why most windlanes have abundant food sources in them, is that this complex interaction includes subsurface currents – some windlanes push water down to the bottom, others bring water, and associated food items, up to the surface. Now you and I could quite easily swim through a windlane, but when you're only a millimetre or two long, the currents are enough to funnel you and your mates up to the surface, and pretty much keep you there. Which is why milkfish love them so much – they sit there with open mouths and let the current do the work for them.

You WILL know when you get a bite. Again, it is quite simple and basic as the fish just simply pulls the line tight. Give a small strip strike and look out.

## TACKLE

Here is where it gets really interesting. In that first week of experimenting we had bites from around sixty fish on a range of flies, all of which had to be unweighted to get any sort of a look in. The most productive flies matched the food items we noticed in the windlanes, and included size 2 green and brown BMS patterns, size 4 white/clear Bay Candies and Crazy Charlies (with eyes removed) in size 4 and 6 in lime green, tan and dark green. Hooks need to be lightweight to facilitate that weightless drift, but strong enough to handled sustained pressure and fast runs. I wish Gamakatsu would make their SL12S hooks in size 4 and 6.

While there is still a lot to learn about fly selection, these patterns work on fish when they are feeding like this and I feel the important part of getting a bite is finding the fish that are actively feeding, rather than those mooching around in hot, super skinny water.

I prefer 20 pound Nitlon and yet still manage to bust a few off. Common thinking would suggest dropping tippet size down for smaller flies and spooky fish, but we have found we just cannot hold onto the bigger fish with anything less. I don't believe we spooked too many fish with the heavier leaders, but that will certainly become a consideration in clearer water.

Floating lines are by far the best choice as they allow a prolonged dead drift with unweighted flies in the surface layers where the milkfish seem to be feeding most actively. We have caught several fish on intermediates, but the floaters are far better for consistent presentations.

We use nine weight rods which are only just enough for the larger fish.





What has been pretty spectacular has been the number of multiple hookups we've had, with conversion rates ranging from good to not so good, depending on sizes of fish hooked. We've even had a triple hook up. This certainly does suggest that we've found actively feeding fish.

Despite having landed a number of fish, and more importantly, having been able to read the conditions enough to be able to pick the best times and actively target milkfish, I am sure there is more to learn. But for now, milkfish do seem to be a genuine fly rod target up north, and dare I say, imminently targettable. And all this on floating lines in windlane conditions.

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## THE FIGHT

Oh my God! We all realise milkies can go hard but we've hooked a fish that had a single straight line run of 800 yards with the boat on the plane chasing it down. This particular fish was the 110 cm fish and gave me a wake up call as to what a thirty pound fish can do. Thirty minutes later the fish was at the boat but out of range of landing net, and this carried on for a further ten minutes. The sheer power of these beasts is not appreciated until witnessed first hand. Even fish around 70 cm are taking ten to fifteen minutes to land. Some jump, but most simply just head off at speeds that test the tolerance of any fly reel.

