



# PAPUAN ADVENTURES

*Barramundi on the coast &  
Spottail Bass in the jungle!*

By Arnout Terlouw  
Photos: A. T. & friends



The trophy of the trip: a huge Spottail bass for the author!



Barramundi offer fantastic sport on light tackle.



On the second day, we witness spectacular feeding frenzies — but always out of reach. At more than 200 to 300 metres away, big fish are repeatedly crashing baitfish on the surface, seemingly moving slowly in our direction. We land a few smaller barramundis, but our attention is constantly drawn to the chaos offshore. We need the boats! I rush back to camp to fetch the boatmen, but when the boats finally arrive, Frank is fighting a powerful fish in heavy current. He eventually beaches a magnificent 104 cm barramundi weighing 25 lb. As we take photos, the feeding frenzy appears to die down — a missed opportunity? We decide to keep fishing on foot, wading the shallows. That decision pays off: several big fish are landed before the falling tide fully exposes the sandbar. It's surreal to stand on this vast stretch of sand, realising that just two hours earlier we were catching fish right on top of it!



Our best barramundi lures: long casting shallow running lures (floating and suspending) of 12-18 cm with 3X/4X trebles.



Frank, 'mister barramundi', hit the jackpot with several 90 cm+ fish including one of 104 cm.

**F**ishing remote islands for barramundi — from the shore — had been on my bucket list for a long time. During a recent trip to the Indonesian part of the island of New Guinea, targeting Papuan black snapper (see *Fishing & Travel Magazine* issue 32), our French guide, Olivier Helloco mentioned his earlier expeditions focused on barramundi fishing around small, wild islands. When tides were ideal, he explained, it was possible to catch large barramundis while wading across spectacular sandbars. New plans were quickly drawn up and, very recently, I returned to Papua with a group of friends from the Netherlands and England. In addition to barramundi, catching a spottail bass also ranked high on my fishing wish list. I had already tried twice to catch this species without success. However, since our last visit, Olivier had explored a new area where, according to him, we would have just as much chance of catching spottail bass as Papuan black snapper.

**A small islet in the Arafura Sea**

November 2025. After a long journey from Amsterdam, we arrive in a small town on the southern coast of Western New Guinea. Olivier is waiting for us at the airport and, early the next morning at first light, we meet our boatmen and their boats. The sea is calm and, after four hours of navigation, we beach our boats on a sandy islet offering just enough dry ground to set up a tent camp. During the night, the wind strengthens and heavy waves crash onto the beach in front of the camp. At first light, we see huge logs drifting past offshore. The sky is grey, just like the sea. We choose to wait for the wind to ease and for the falling tide to expose a long sandbar we plan to fish on foot. Breakfast is quickly swallowed — impatience is high: let's go fishing! After a 200-metre walk large waves are still breaking over the sandbar, but that doesn't stop us from making our first casts into the murky water.

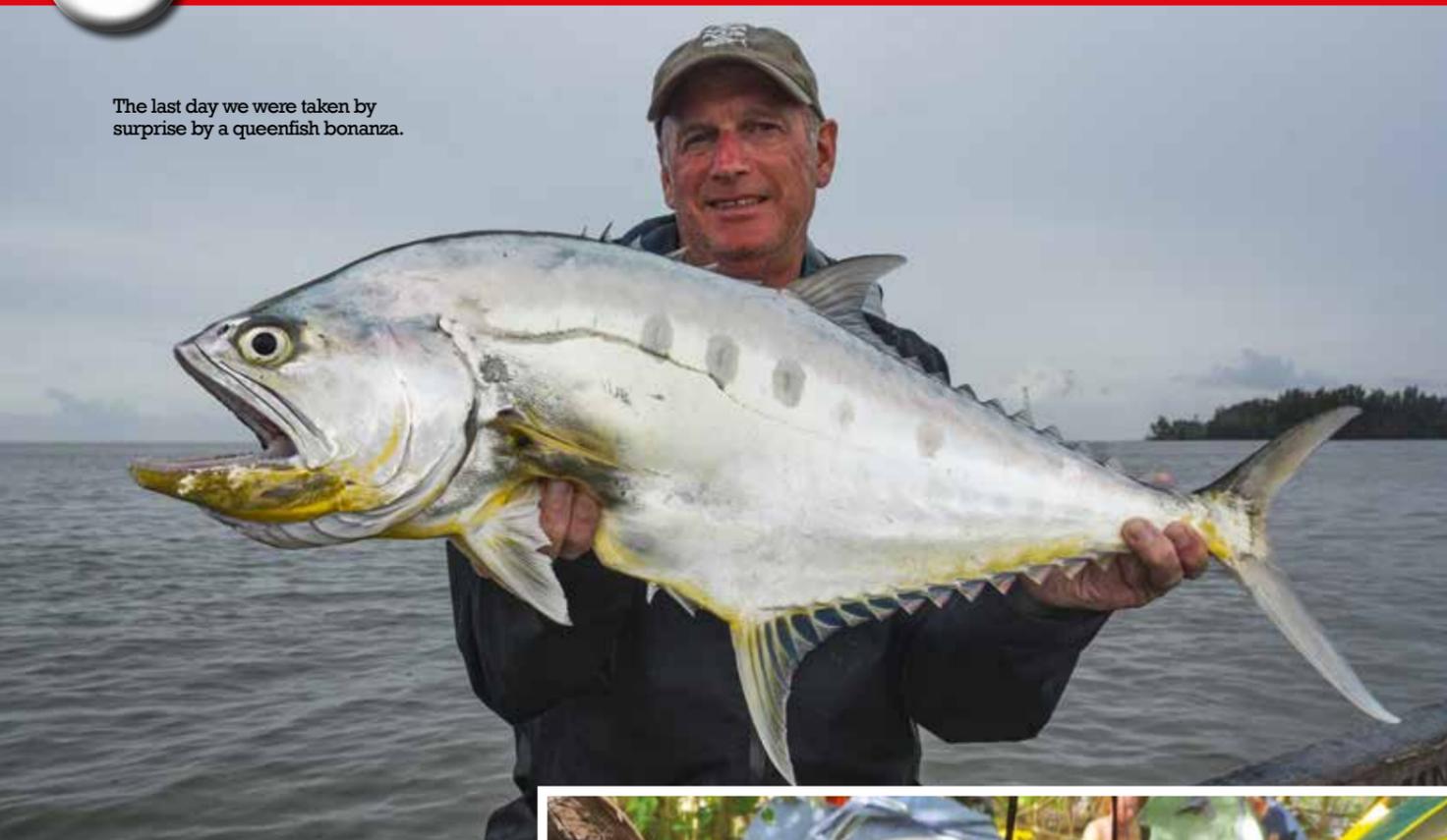
**Lures are flying, and to everyone's surprise Frank hooks the first barramundi after just a few minutes: a fine fish measuring around 80 cm.**

**Feeding frenzy**

Despite far-from-ideal conditions (very strong current, rain and wind), during the first two days we catch several nice barramundis on shallow-running minnows. Most strikes occur in very shallow water, rarely deeper than 1.20 metres. Most barras measure over 75 cm, several exceed 90 cm, and a few come very close to the magical one-metre mark. On light tackle, the fights are intense.



The last day we were taken by surprise by a queenfish bonanza.



On our way to our camp on the spottail bass river.

►► Queenfish festival

This morning, will we witness another frenzy like the day before? This time, we are better prepared and the boats are well positioned if needed. The current is noticeably weaker and the water slightly clearer, with a distinct colour line running along the sandbar. Once again, feeding activity erupts in the distance, but the fish appear smaller than yesterday. After catching a few medium-sized barramundi, we land our first small queenfish and realise they are the fish we have been seeing chase bait all along. We take the boats to reach a clearer-water area beyond casting range. Both boats drift along the current seam and, very quickly, it's a jackpot: queenfish come one after another until I hook a more serious fish, which proves to be the biggest queenfish of the trip.

Back on the sandbar, we suddenly see and hear several large barramundis pushing bait in very shallow water.



Filling pancakes for breakfast. A quick coffee and go!

Excitement peaks, but none of them commits — until one huge fish follows my lure right to my feet before turning away. Frustrating. As the tide continues to fall, we focus on the slightly deeper water along the sharp edge of the sandbar and soon connect with more solid barramundis. Juul also lands a hard-fighting king threadfin (Polydactylus macrochir, a cousin of the African giant threadfin), before larger barramundis arrive to feed along the drop-off. Once again, luck is not on my side. A massive barra strikes my lure at the very last moment and throws the hooks with a violent head shake. Ten minutes later, just as I notice Juul's lure tangled in my line and creeping dangerously toward my tip ring, another big barra hits my lure and launches itself into the air — only to come pinned again. That's fishing. All in all it has been a unique and unforgettable experience, and although we caught plenty of big barramundi I can't help thinking that under more favourable conditions it could be even better.

Jungle camp

After four days devoted to barramundi, a domestic flight takes us to the north coast. The journey continues by dugout canoe and we reach our river base camp the following day. Along the way, before heading upriver, a 1.40-metre

barracuda is caught while trolling. Before pitching the tents our guides discover a nest of very aggressive wasps in a corner of our shelter needing a burning torch to drive them off. Once the tents are set up under this basic structure we head out for a short fishing session: one boat on the river, the other on a connected lake. Little happens on the lake, but on the river Juul and Frank each land a small spottail bass, a promising start.

Cleaning our way with machetes

That night rain falls continuously for six hours. By morning the river has turned chocolate brown. Hopefully the water will be clearer upstream. Before reaching those stretches, we must navigate a true maze of palm trees, where the river sometimes narrows to just a few metres and flows swiftly. At the bow, Rondi wields the machete while Karinus manoeuvres the boat



Our base camp for the coming days on a wild river.



Juul with his well-deserved spottail bass. Note the distinctive spot towards the tail – hence the name.



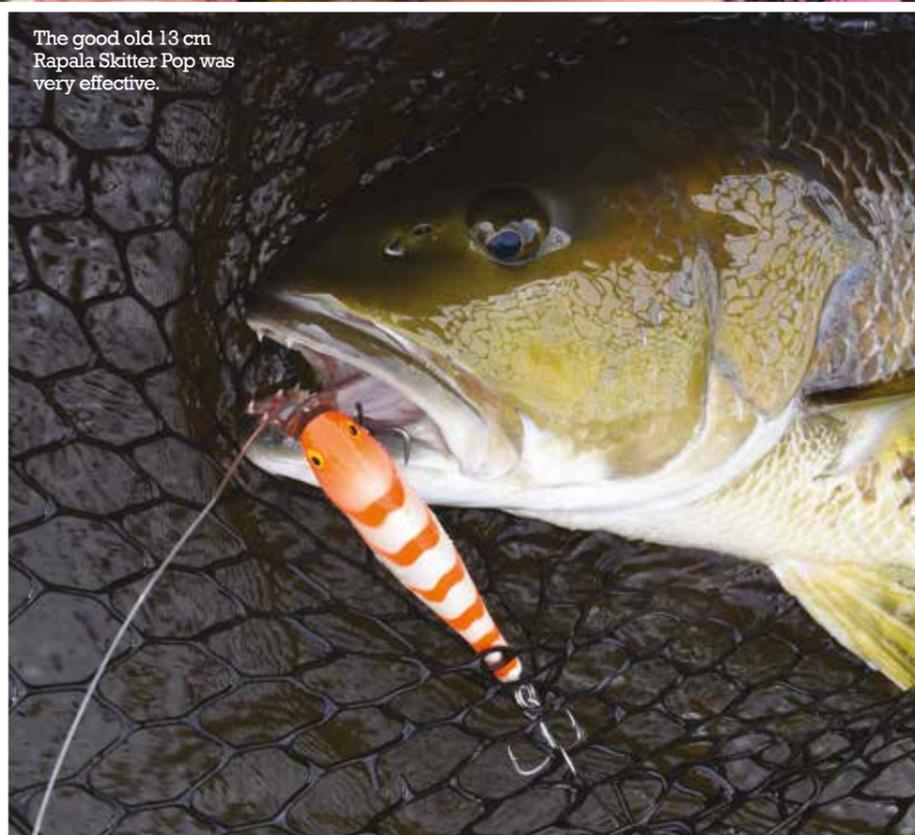
On the lake you were most likely to catch Papuan black snapper.

▶▶▶ through the branches. They regularly have to jump into the water to clear the way — not pleasant at all with all those thorns. To top it off, a large tree trunk blocks the river completely. After another 20 minutes of chopping with an axe, we can finally start fishing. The water remains extremely murky, with barely 15 cm of visibility, and the current is even stronger. Large groups of giant fruit bats take off from the riverside trees — it is hard to imagine bats of such size. A real Jurassic Park atmosphere!

**A monster on a small popper**

After four hours and hundreds of casts without a single strike, doubts begin to creep in. After an early lunch, we head further upstream. An hour later, the water begins to clear slightly — a glimmer of hope.

“Popper,” Karinus suggests. I tie on a 13 cm Rapala Skitter Pop earning an approving thumbs-up. Thirty minutes later, after carefully working another bend cluttered with submerged timber, we reach a straighter stretch. On the right, a flooded beach lies just outside the main current. Nice spot, I think.

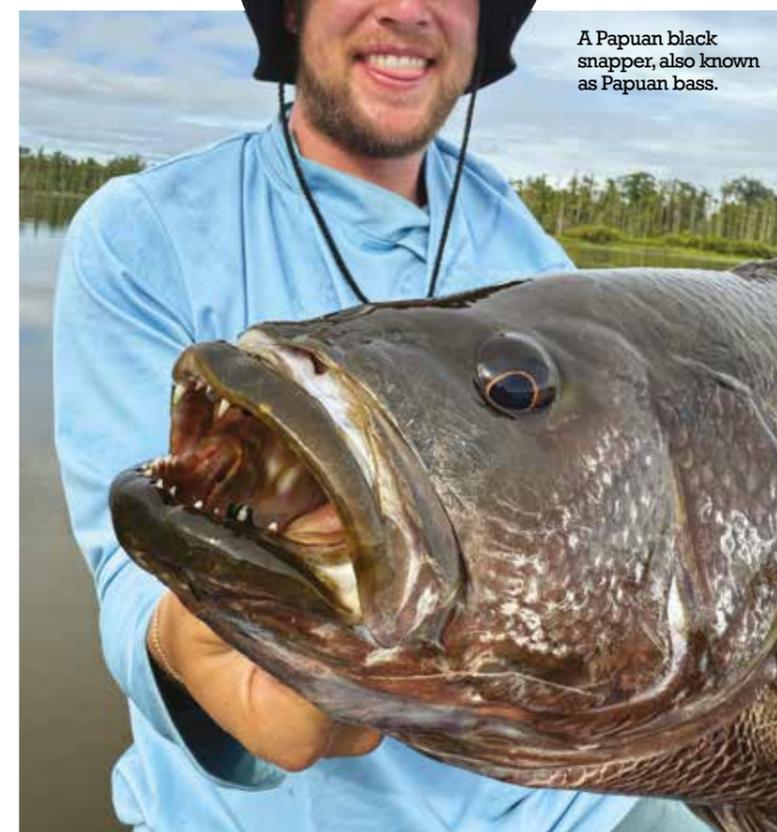


The good old 13 cm Rapala Skitter Pop was very effective.

Suddenly, a bow wave appears. “Fish!” I shout, just as a huge fish explodes onto a school of baitfish on the beach.

**My popper lands first. Chaos follows. The fish smashes the lure and instantly dives into the main current.**

The fish tears downstream toward a tangle of branches. I apply maximum pressure, hoping it’s well hooked. It veers toward the left bank — then stops. Stuck in a submerged tree. Five tense minutes follow as we free the line from branches, with no movement at all. I fear the fish is gone. Then Karinus dives in with his goggles and suddenly I feel a few heavy thumps. It’s still there! The fish is finally freed from the branches and an enormous head breaks the surface. Landing it is



A Papuan black snapper, also known as Papuan bass.



We had to navigate through a maze of palm trees covered in thick thorns before we could reach the upper stretches of the river.



Hundreds of flying foxes; huge fruit bats!



►►► chaotic, filled with shouting and swearing. The scale on the lipgrip pushes past 22 kg, almost reaching 23 kg. I can hardly believe it. I dreamed of a 10 kg spottail — and my very first one is more than double that, a world-record-class fish.

**Tackle used:**

**Rod:** Bone Combat Beast CBB664XH

**Reel:** Daiwa Lexa 300HLS

**Line:** 100 lb braid

**Leader:** 90 lb fluorocarbon

**Lure:** Rapala Skitter Pop 13 cm RH

**An action-packed morning**

On our final morning, we head upriver once more. Conditions are much better: clearer water and a more moderate current. For several hours, surface action is intense.

My white Whopper Plopper, worked quickly with short pulls, proves deadly. I land five spottail bass, including an 11 kg fish. Juul and Frank also catch some fine spottails, although Frank loses a very big one.

A perfect ending to an unforgettable trip — thanks to Olivier and his fantastic team!

Contact: [www.papuaifishingretreat.com](http://www.papuaifishingretreat.com) ♦



What a monster! The head on this spottail bass was unbelievable.

## Papuan Black Snapper & Spottail Bass

Papuan black snapper can be found in brackish waters of the estuaries as well as in inland freshwater lakes.



**THE PAPUAN BLACK SNAPPER** (*Lutjanus goldiei*) inhabits tidal rivers and freshwater lakes of New Guinea and nearby islands. Its reputation is well established: broken rods, anglers brought to their knees while desperately trying to stop the fish from reaching timber-filled hideouts — a true brute. It can exceed 20 kg (IGFA record: 21.68 kg), and even an 8–10 kg fish can already put you in serious trouble.

**THE SPOTTAIL BASS** (*Lutjanus fuscescens*) is a close relative, found exclusively in freshwater in the upper reaches of rivers and sometimes in lakes. It is famous for its explosive surface strikes and its striking golden colour with a distinctive black spot at the base of the tail. Preferring clear, sometimes fast-flowing rivers with heavy timber and undercut banks, it too can exceed 20 kg (IGFA record: 20.87 kg).

Spottail bass prefers the upper parts of the rivers with clear water.

