

THE BEST OF THE

WEST

Laying claim to being the best eating fish in Australia is a big call, but if you haven't tried West Australian dhufish then the jury is out until you do. The only place in the world you can catch this magnificent fish is the south west of Western Australia, and Emma George is one of those privileged anglers to have this sensational fish on her doorstep.

West Australian dhufish are among the best eating fish in Australia, if not *the* best. If you haven't had the luxury of trying this superb table fish, then you don't know what you are missing out on.

The flesh has a very delicate, creamy texture and once a dhufish reaches the legal size of 50cm, it would generally provide enough fillets to feed a couple of families.

Not to be confused with members of the jewfish family, which include the mulloway and black jewfish, the WA dhufish (*Glaucosoma hebraicum*) belongs to the same family as pearl perch, but is only found along the west coast of Australia from Dirk Hartog Island in the north through to Esperance in the south.

Although their eating qualities are magnificent and it is the iconic fish of south western waters, the dhufish's fighting ability leaves a lot to be desired. If you measured it by

power to weight ratio, the species would have to be towards the lower end of the excitement scale. To be fair, it is definitely a table fish and not an adrenaline inducing sportfish. Dhufish are known to suck on baits and it can feel a bit like hooking the bottom, but once you get their heads up, they can have a go for the first 5-10m. Some dhufish will have a crack, especially if they are caught on a jig or soft plastic, and performance is definitely size dependent.

Despite its lack of fighting spirit, dhufish tops the tables for both flesh quality and price, with fillets (when available, and at the time of writing) selling at markets in Perth for \$80 a kilo, and whole fish at \$35 a kilo. They can't keep up with demand even at this exorbitant price, and due to a limited supply, dhufish is often out of stock. Substitutes such as emperor and coral trout are sometimes offered, although retailers openly admit they are not as good!

As you can imagine, dhufish tops the

hit list of fish you want in your esky, but due to increased pressure on fish stocks, their numbers have been in steep decline. Dhufish are a demersal fish, which means they live near the seabed. Research conducted on demersal scalefish species such as dhufish, pink snapper and baldchin groper found that these species were being overfished and that stocks were in danger of collapse. In response, Fisheries WA had to play hardball, and in 2009 they introduced a series of measures to decrease catch rates by 50 per cent in high-risk demersal scalefish.

Anglers and tackle stores were initially up in arms about the new regulations, particularly a closed season for two months leading in to Christmas for about 20 of the state's best eating fish. However, that was three years ago and despite the initial controversy over the tougher regulations, current research suggests that fish stocks are already recovering.

WA dhufish have a close affinity with caves and similar structure. Photo: Cameron Nilsson-Linne

Habitat, Breeding and Size

Dhufish can be found in varying depths from very shallow reefs through to 200m of water. They predominantly like inshore waters with plenty of structure such as reefs, caves and gutters, where they can hide and ambush small prey. They can also be found on limestone bottom, flat coral reef and sand. Dhufish travel in schools, so it is common to pull two or three from the one section of reef, or they may move individually. Studies have also shown that this ambush predator is relatively sedentary, not moving too far from home.

When scuba diving and chasing crayfish around some of Perth's inshore reefs, we have followed schools of 8-10 large dhufish in 10-15m of water. But the biggest dhufish we have seen was a metre plus giant, holding its ground in a large cave just 5m below the surface. It let us get so close that I could almost touch it with my cray loop. It just goes to show, you don't have to fish deep water to find big dhufish; you just need to know where to look at particular times of the year.

Dhufish are a very solid, silver fish with a

purple hue and a black stripe over their eyes. Juvenile dhuies have pretty black stripes and the black band is extremely prominent. As far as size goes, they can grow to 25kg and live up to 40 years, but even a 10kg fish is considered a good catch. If you bought it at the markets, you'd pay \$350 for it.

Little is known about dhufish breeding patterns, however, spawning generally occurs between November and April, with peak periods between December and March when the water temperature is warmer. Some years are better than others, which may be attributed to the Leeuwin Current. This is a warm ocean current that flows strongly southwards along the West Australian coast. Sometimes eggs can drift around the coast and end up as far as Albany and Esperance, or unfortunately at other times they may be carried offshore towards the continental shelf.

Maturity is generally around three to four years, at which time the fish is approximately 30-40cm in size. As the legal size limit is 50cm, this means that all dhufish should have spawned at least once and they are typically six to seven years old before they can be kept.

Fishing for Dhufish

Traditionally, dhufish were only caught using bait, but nowadays with the increasing popularity of jigs and soft plastics, they can be fished for successfully using either lure. The most difficult part is working out where to fish. This requires studying marine charts or your sounder, looking for solid structure, or a good change in the bottom depth. As dhufish generally reside on the bottom, you need to concentrate on the lowest section of the sounder. If you see any caves, definitely mark it on the GPS, as they are a great place to start.

In my experience, dhufish don't always show up on the sounder, as would a good school of snapper. This may be because they hide in caves or under ledges, so ensure you look closely for things such as baitfish, structure or other visible features that might be worth a look. Don't write off a possible fishing spot just because you don't see a huge arch on the screen; if it is good reef then it may be worth dropping a line.

Avoid being guided by depth, as dhufish can be found from very deep to shallow water. The real key is locating reef that is not always



If you purchased this one at the fish markets in Perth, it would cost over \$300.

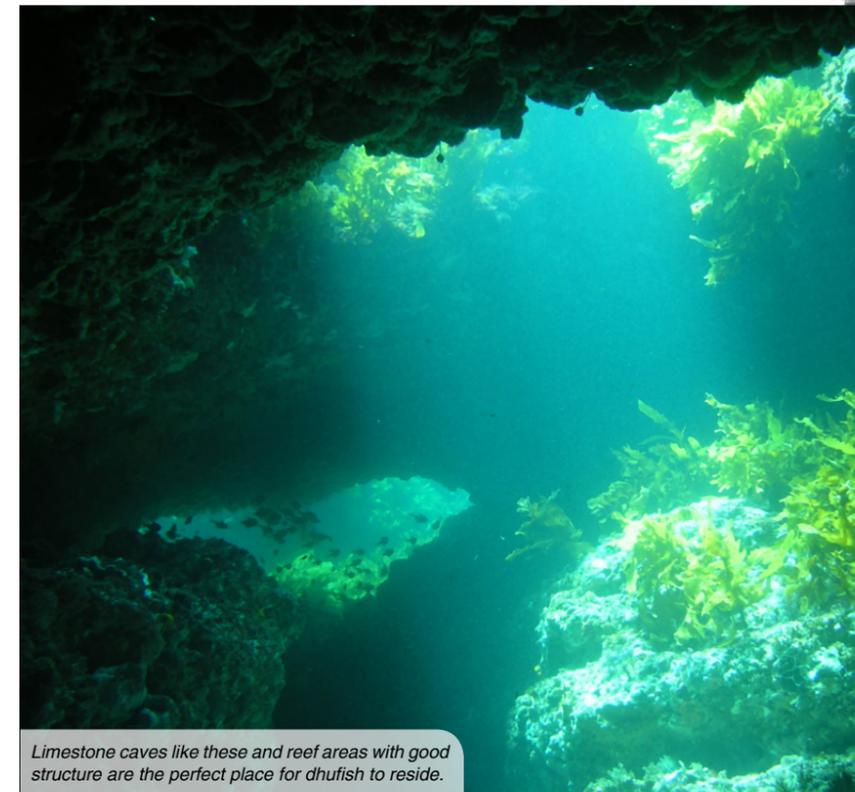
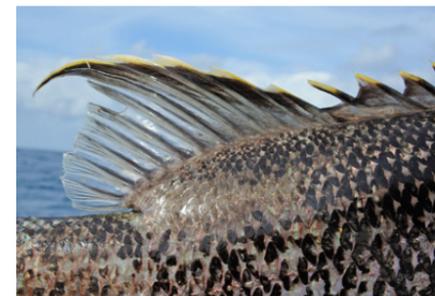


fished by other boats (perhaps the most difficult task). Our greatest success has come from fishing the change of tide in the evening, as it seems dhuies feed more aggressively when the sun starts to drop.

Bait

Dhufish are not fussy feeders and will eat anything from pilchards (commonly known as mulies in WA), to octopus and squid, but nothing surpasses a fresh fish fillet of Sergeant Baker or wrasse. They have a very large mouth, so don't be scared to send down a big bait.

We generally fish a two-hook paternoster rig, often combining this with some Krystal Flash synthetic fibre tied to one of the 6/0 or



Limestone caves like these and reef areas with good structure are the perfect place for dhufish to reside.

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7/0 tuna circle hooks. The flash just adds a bit more interest to the hook and if the bait disappears then you still have a chance of catching something. Tuna circles work well as they hook the fish in the mouth. It also means if your rod is sitting in the rod holder, then the dhuiies will often hook themselves, which is very helpful when running multiple rods.

The fastest way to test out a section of reef is by doing a quick drift to see what is around. You can cover a lot more ground and it gives an indication as to the fishability of the spot. That said, I have found that anchoring with a slow berley stream to be the most productive.

As dhufish often tend to suck on a bait and just sit on the bottom, you sometimes don't even feel a bite, with the first indication being pressure on the line. Drift fishing baits in a big current requires a lot of lead, hence there may be confusion over hooking weed, the bottom, or possibly a very good fish.

Don't make the mistake we did when we first moved to WA and were drift fishing with a friend off Rottneest Island. He thought he had hooked the bottom and for over 20 minutes tried nearly every manoeuvre to dislodge his sinker until he convinced us to back down the line so he could have a better attempt. It was

only then that he felt a couple of head shakes and with more luck than skill, managed to pull in one of the biggest dhuiies we have landed in our boat.

Dhuiie Lures

Dhufish caught on jigs and soft plastics are more fun than bait-caught fish, as they often have a harder bite and tend to put up a slightly better fight. It can become tiring jigging without much response, so sometimes it pays to fish a mix of baits, plastics and jigs.

A slow moving soft plastic or jig can be enough to grab a dhuiie's attention. That way you can have one rod with bait sitting on the bottom and the other with a jig or lure attached. If you need to attend to the bait, leave the jig or plastic about a metre off the bottom and sit the rod in a holder. Just the motion of the boat rocking in the swell is enough movement, and I have often caught fish using this method.

Large soft plastics with paddle tails, big grubs, minnows, and at particular times of the year softies that replicate eels, work well. Elevator heads help to get plastics down in a hurry when you are in deeper water and if fishing into the evening, using luminescent lures can also help.



These are the sorts of jigs and soft plastics which dhufish are attracted to. Anything with a big paddle or grub tail work well and if you are using bait, tie a bit of Krystal Flash to your tuna circle hook which will still entice fish if you lose the bait.

If there are fish around, then jigs will also do well and dhufish will take anything from octopus jigs to banana boat jigs and even knife jigs. The trick is to keep them close to the bottom and maintain a relatively slow action. As with soft plastics, I have had dhufish take jigs when the rod is in the holder, with the movement coming from the boat's gentle pitch and roll.

Caring for the Catch

Dhufish are a very sensitive fish and due to its high-risk status, care needs to be taken before one even gets to the boat. They can suffer from barotrauma, as people do if they ascend to the surface too quickly after a deep dive. If you pull a dhufish too quickly to the surface, gasses expand in its body, causing bulging eyes, or its stomach is pushed out through its mouth or gills.

If you are catching dhufish or think you may have one on your line, just slow down the retrieve and bring it gradually to the surface. This will give it a better chance at survival if you are releasing it. It is law in WA for all boats fishing for demersal fish to carry a release weight. This is a barbless hook effectively attached to a big sinker which is inserted in the fish's mouth to help it get back to the depth it came from. Once

This is a cheat's way to fish with rods in the holders, but it is surprisingly effective. Sunset and change of tide is the perfect combination and with a soft plastic on one rod and bait on the other, all bases are covered.



Tuna circle hooks work really well with dhufish, as it hooks them in the mouth, making for easy removal and less harm to the fish if releasing it.

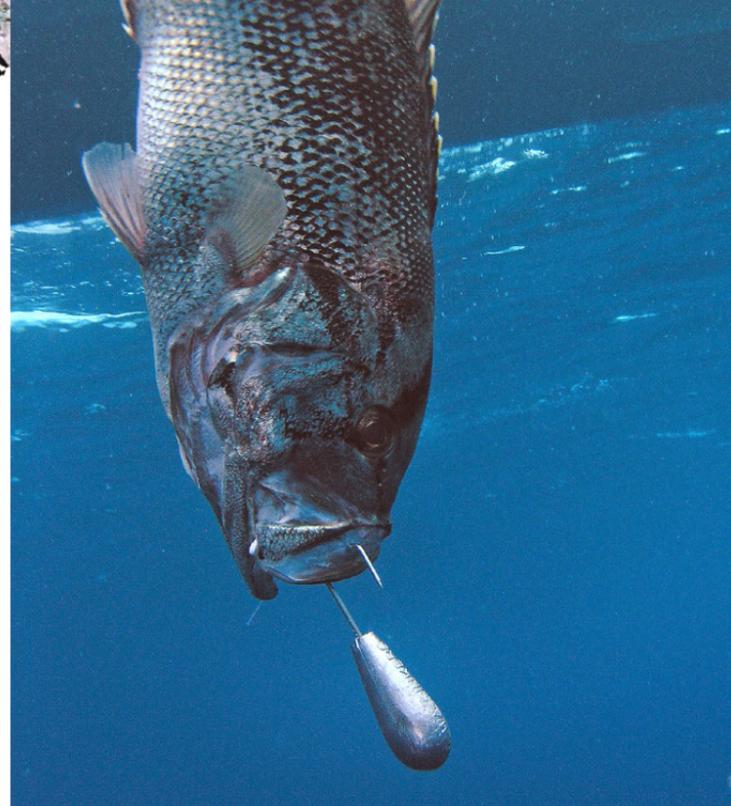
When night falls, big dhuiies come out to play. This 9kg male is a good catch, but they can grow more than twice this size.



you give the line a tug, it frees the fish, letting it recompress, which significantly improves its recovery chances.

Researchers in WA are continuing to gather information about the dhufish's life cycle and how many fish are being caught compared to in the past. One of the ways they do this is by analysing data from filleted skeletons (frames). Fishermen are encouraged to freeze the frames of dhufish, baldchin groper and snapper, and then deposit them at specific drop-off locations.

The good news is that the measures introduced in 2009 are working and current surveys indicate that stocks are starting to recover. After three years of lower bag limits and seasonal closures, the WA government has reported a 50 per cent decrease in the dhufish catch rate. With continued research and conservative angling, the WA dhufish will hopefully be removed from its high-risk status and people can enjoy catching and eating this magnificent fish for years to come. **FL**



It is law that anglers carry and use release weights when fishing for demersal fish in WA. The barbless hook is placed inside the soft part of the mouth and fishing line is attached to the top of the hook. Once the fish is on the bottom, a simple pull on the line is enough to release the fish and the weight can be brought back to the surface.

GEAR FOR DHUFISH

FACTBOX

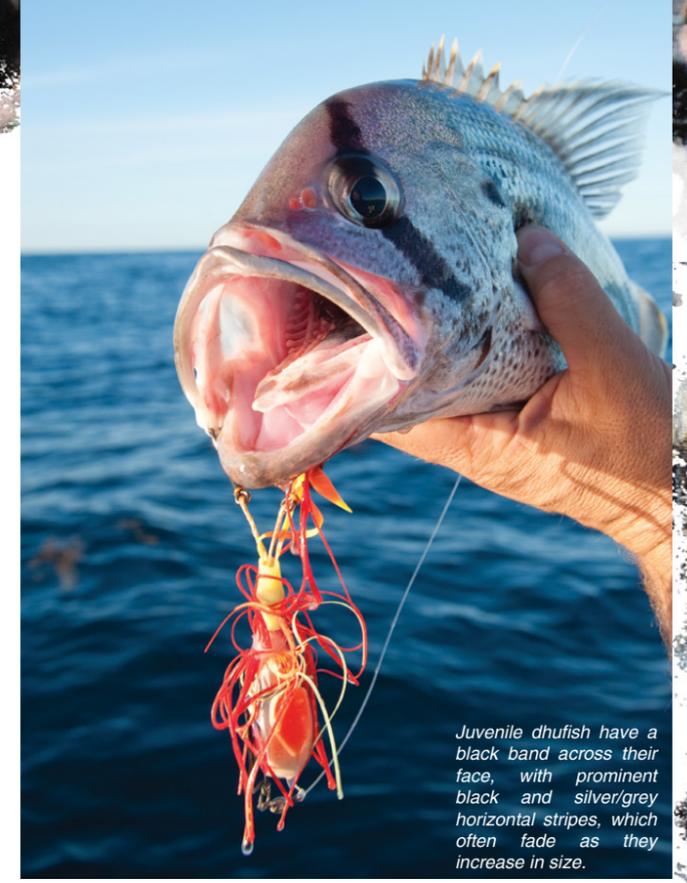
Bait Fishing

- 8-10kg overhead jig rod
- 1.8m (6ft) 15-24kg overhead graphite jig rod
- 24kg braided line
- 30-40kg leader
- Note: A release weight is an essential and legal requirement when fishing for demersal fish in WA

Jigs and soft plastics

- 4000 or bigger threadline reel
- 2.1m (7ft), 8-15kg graphite rod
- 10-15kg braided line
- 30kg leader

Note: While good fun on small fish, fishing too light can leave you under-gunned when a big dhufie strikes, as they can be hard to lever off the bottom.



Juvenile dhufish have a black band across their face, with prominent black and silver/grey horizontal stripes, which often fade as they increase in size.

Colour and patterns vary between, fish even though they were caught in the same place and are of a similar size. The one on the left is female and the other is a male, as it has a long filament in its dorsal fin.



Dhufish for dinner is enough to make anyone smile. This female was caught off Rottnest Island but dhufish are more prevalent in waters north and south of the metro area where there is reduced pressure on fish stocks.



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