



# Comets, Cucumbers

## The Chris Yates interview



**H**aving just collected a well-worn Speedia from Chris for our auction, I started by asking Chris about his views on the proposed stocking of the Upper Stour with barbel:

I will be opposing it! The reason why it's so good up there, and why I love it, is that there are no barbel. Why do you want barbel? There is

a very good balance up there. They have otters up there, which are not a problem because the river is so rich, and there are a lot of pike, so I think nature has found a balance which is just right. But it doesn't take much, for example a serious agricultural pollution as there has been in the past – silage and slurry – to upset that. At the moment it does recover quickly because the

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balance is so good. Barbel could well upset that. It *may* be ok, but I don't want them in there. I don't think you can play with nature like that, it's Ok further down where the river is bigger but up there it is too small. Even if it didn't upset the ecology it would upset me and a lot of other anglers, because we don't go up there for the barbel. It won't happen, so that's it!





# ...ers & Controversy

**I put it to Chris that many anglers are currently single-species specialists, and asked him for his views on this.**

I was really a complete carp-head for maybe twenty years, though I rarely fished for them in winter. Then in the winter I would go after other things, chub mostly. Then I found that I had had enough of Redmire – not because of the fishing but because of the politics – and once I'd caught my big carp it seemed somehow a good time to go and look for something else. I had a friend who fished Redmire, and he said 'you should come barbel fishing with me', and I said 'tell you what, let's leave Redmire and go barbel fishing instead next year' – he was also getting a bit fed up with Redmire, too. And anyway, other people needed to come and fish there, we'd had our turn. So we left and went barbel fishing, and it was one of the greatest things I'd ever done. We went to the Kennet below Ham Bridge. I caught a four and-a-half pounder, and it was stunning.

It was like jumping in to the unknown, it was so simple after carp fishing – and my carp fishing had always been pretty simple! I loved the fact that everything was so fluid, the water was running, it made time go faster, which was interesting – you always had to think ahead. The problems were different, you had to think about the way the current was playing with the bait and of course the fish themselves behaved differently (to carp). It was so mobile, more mobile than carp fishing. That's why I'm sad to see barbel fishing for some people becoming more and more static, almost

pedestrian and boring. Some people fish for barbel with two rods, and sure, you can catch them like that, but you can catch *cod* like that! It isn't fishing, so we won't have any of that! (laughs) Keep it simple, you can usually find them if you go looking for them, it may not be easy but you will.

**I then asked Chris to recall the story of his biggest barbel – a capture I was there to see, and to photograph for him ten years ago.**

That was a perfect illustration of why I think barbel fishing can be so enjoyable, we were moving around all day, with a few like-minded friends, fishing different swims. I found this nice little trotting swim just before the sun went down and I started fishing with luncheon meat – I just wanted to catch something and I thought I might get a couple of chub. I had one and lost one, and thought there might be a barbel under this footbridge, but it didn't happen. There was this little mill stream that flowed up from the weir there (Breamore, Hampshire Avon) so I went down there to the next bridge towards where you were fishing, and started to fish below it. I got this very strong feeling suddenly that I was the wrong side of it, so I moved. No-one had fished there before, it was very awkward with a big hawthorn bush and I knew straight away that it was right, exactly right, and the bait and tackle rolled down, and bang! I knew this was a barbel and it ran under the bridge where it got around some masonry or something on the bottom. I was in despair because it was

the last day of the season (14<sup>th</sup> March 1997) – I got my tackle back but the barbel had gone. The light had gone too, but I managed to sort the tackle out and re-cast. There was a young moon and the Halle-Bop comet in the west so the omens were good. About a minute after the bait had settled, bang! This time I turned the fish, I was using my Avocet and 8lb line, and she came past me going upstream and I knew she was mine. It went 13 ¼ pounds, and remains my biggest barbel. Of course, you caught her in the weir pool the following year.

**I asked Chris what fishing he enjoys today.**

Perch – I love perch. It's not a new love, most people love perch because of childhood, but I have found a new solidarity with them. You have a connection with the fish you started with. Of course, these perch are not half-pounders nowadays; a half-pounder when you are ten is a monster, but these are two and three pounders, and one day if I'm lucky I will get a four-pounder. This last year it has got a little complicated because I've found this fabulous little pond which is producing huge crucian carp and that's been my new summer fishing. I have hardly fished for big carp, king carp, although I did get my annual twenty-pounder two weeks ago – a fabulous fish, the colour of a conker. That was just an hour's fishing, I just had this feeling that this little pool would do it, a bunch of maggots and a quill float, the kind of carp fishing that I like. Right now I just love the subtlety and dignity of crucians. I remember Dick Walker saying that, like the

water vole, the crucian could never attain dignity.

Rubbish! The crucian is a very dignified fish, it fights well, it lets you admire it and never loses its cool! You slip out your little barbless hook, admire it and think to yourself 'this is the most incredible fish in the world'...and this is where it gets complicated, I've got the perch, the king carp and the crucians, but now there is also...the bass. Now, when I catch a bass in the alien environment of a rocky shoreline, I think to myself 'no, *this* is the most incredible fish in the world!' I do still fish for barbel on occasions, on trips to the upper Severn on Waterlog weekends, which is always great. I have a lovely time with about a dozen others, we get well fed and drink too much, though we don't get many barbel. Last weekend we had twenty-five between us, and I only recall one double-figure fish, but it doesn't matter, I love it. It is still important to me to go fishing.

**At this point Chris's youngest, 15-year-old Ellen, enters with a friend. I'd stepped over assorted sleeping-bagged forms when I had walked through the lounge earlier, but the sleepover has ended and they are scouring the kitchen for organic cucumber; I can hear snatches of the South Park movie being recited in the next room, to much hilarity. Chris begins to talk about family, and the joys of single-fatherhood with four growing children.**

Ellen is now 15 and very good at looking after herself,



## The Chris Yates Interview By Jon Berry

and has lots of friends round here, all these teenage girls, it's not good for me so I have to go fishing! My eldest son, Alex, has gone to university and is also a nightclub DJ, and Camilla as we speak is walking towards Everest and won't be back until Christmas. William has just taken over my study and

Sea, it's ostensibly about my obsession with bass. It's being written backwards, I have never written a book like that before, starting at the end. On my childhood holidays we always went to the sea, in August, and I would see things and sense things that I wanted to explore. It was the danger of

is incredibly archaic and yet necessary. It's making contact with a reality that everybody else, more or less, has now disregarded.

**Finally, we discuss television projects and I ask Chris whether there will ever be another *A Passion For Angling*:**

to run too many things at once and neglecting all work to be a father and to be there for all my children. Now, finally, I'm not struggling, and so I am going to write books. I love writing books and enjoy radio – I have a new radio programme out next year – but I don't enjoy the complications of television. I may possibly work with Hugh again, though...I have just seen his footage of Martin Bowler landing a fifteen-pound barbel for their series. Almost makes me want to go barbel fishing again...

**“We are reaching way, way back when we go fishing, and that's why we do it, we are answering something beyond our childhood, back to our ancestral history”**

turned it in to a recording studio. He is the musician I always wanted to be. I can play the guitar and piano to please myself, but he is very, very good on the guitar, and on the keyboard too. They are all doing different things, and I am now more or less a free man! If it wasn't for the writing and this bloody book I'm working on, I would go fishing every day.

**I ask Chris for his thoughts about his books, and his current project.**

It's eight or nine now, but *Casting at the Sun* was twenty-one years ago, so it's not that many. There was nearly ten years when I didn't write a book, mainly because I was co-editing *Waterlog*, it took a lot of energy and deflected me from writing books. I enjoyed it, but it was quite good when finally, after fifty issues, I stopped doing it. Then I got an offer from a mainstream publisher (Hamish Hamilton, part of the Penguin group) which was totally unreal as far as I was unconcerned. It meant that I had an advance I could live on happily for a couple of years, and pay off my debts. Because the study has now been taken over by 17 year-old, I now write in bed, which is very nice, especially in winter. The book I'm writing is called *Towards the*

the sea, the treachery and moodiness of the sea, that I loved, and this book is all about the travelling, not just physically but the inclining towards it, over the last couple of years. It's mainly the fault of one person, called Matthew Spence. I met him on the Avon, barbel fishing, a few times – we chatted, and then one day he said 'why don't you come bass fishing?' Straight away this little light in my head came on and I thought...bass! I hadn't caught a bass since I was 15 or 16, but as soon as I was there it completed a circle. So, it's his fault!

**A lengthy discussion ensues about the traditionalist angler label often applied to Chris, and frequently encouraged by him.**

Every angler is a traditionalist. You cannot get away from the fact that it's an archaic form; there is no need for us to be doing it. We can buy fish in a fish shop if we want to eat them. We are reaching way, way back when we go fishing, and that's why we do it, we are answering something beyond our childhood, back to our ancestral history. It doesn't matter how high-tech you go, whether you use a radar to find the fish or the latest carbon rod, it doesn't matter...what you are doing

No! A producer took me out for supper last week, it was a great offer, but I have a far more important project at the moment with this book. When I have finished writing that, we might talk about it. There is an idea smoldering with Hugh (Miles) but it probably won't happen. I'm being realistic – for the next couple of years, maybe five years, I've got this very nice relationship with the publisher, and they are treating me so well. Since my twenties, when I was doing quite well photographing record covers and the Martel brandy account, I have always been a pauper. Trying

**The teapot has been emptied, and the girls need dropping off in Shaftesbury to shop and do whatever teenaged girls do on Saturday afternoons. Chris and I then go on to his crucial pool, enjoying radio commentary of Saints beating West Brom and England beating the Aussies in the Rugby Quarter-Final on the way. In the last hour of light, I catch the three biggest crucians I've ever hooked. Chris, of course, catches more...JB**

