

With unsettled conditions in the form of heavy rain, fluctuating temperatures, dull skies and exceptionally high water levels, the normal process of walking the banks, spotting and stalking Avon barbel has been nigh impossible. Normally, armed with a good pair of eyes, a good pair of walking boots and a pocket full of boilies, I can spend many happy hours searching for barbel, and once found spend more time watching their response to bait before actually fishing for them.

The golden rule for catching Avon barbel up to October is to never fish a swim unless you have actually seen barbel in residence. There are so few Avon barbel now, and so many empty barbel swims, that simply fishing a nice looking area is almost always doomed to failure. However, when you do find them, they are invariably of a good size.

It was late in the summer this year before the water cleared and I saw my first Avon barbel of the season, and the feelings of excitement and anticipation as I first spotted a pair of fish in a shallow run under the bank were tremendous. There were two barbel sitting side by side in the fast water, almost motionless, and both were doubles. I estimated the smaller fish at ten pounds, the bigger fish at between twelve and fourteen. The swim was also occupied by a salmon of about sixteen pounds, a reddish cock fish that had been in the river for some time, a sea trout, two common carp and a five pound tench. The inevitable chub would not be far away either.

There could be some competition for my boilies, and the fish were sure to be tricky in fast shallow water.

I dumped my gear well away from the swim, and introduced a few bits of broken boilie and paste

This summer has been a really difficult one for the barbel fishers of the Hampshire Avon, and this time we can actually get away with blaming it on the weather

PETE READING

PETE READING WAS BORN IN 1953, CAUGHT HIS FIRST BARBEL FROM THROOP ON THE DORSET STOUR IN 1969, AND HAS BEEN A LIFELONG FAN OF THE SPECIES EVER SINCE.

HIS FISHING STILL FOCUSES ON THE DORSET STOUR AND HAMPSHIRE AVON, BUT HE HAS TAKEN BARBEL IN NUMBERS FROM THE BEDFORDSHIRE OUSE, KENNET, SEVERN, TEME, LODDON, AND THE WARWICKSHIRE AND BRISTOL AVON, AND FISHES FOR THEM MORE EXTENSIVELY THAN EVER.

PETE ALSO FISHES FOR A WIDER RANGE OF SPECIES THESE DAYS, ON BOTH RIVERS AND STILLWATERS, AND CATCHING NEW FISH FROM NEW VENUES IS NOW MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE TARGETING OF THE LARGEST SPECIMENS.

HE IS RESEARCH & CONSERVATION PANEL CHAIRMAN OF THE SOCIETY.

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Hampshire Avon b



by hand. The use of a bait dropper was sure to scare these fish off, although in deeper weedier swims bait dropping crumbled boilie, hemp and tiny pellets is a good ploy.

It was possible to judge where the bits of boilie and paste ended up, and the carp soon confirmed their liking for the bait by moving in and ripping up the bottom in a little depression behind a weedbed.

The barbel soon followed suit, and the bigger fish actually shouldered the big salmon out of the way as it worked its way upstream to the baited patch. The barbel was so intent on getting at the bait that it turned the salmon on its side, and confirmed that it was a dark, reddy coloured fish. It swam off sulkily and surprisingly meekly, leaving the coarse fish to grub about in its former lie. The carp and barbel would munch away for a few minutes, then drift off for a while, returning regularly for another snack.

Carp competition was going to be a problem, and I waited until the fish had left the swim before I introduced a three ounce inline lead, and a strong size 8 hook armed with a nice paste wrapped boilie and a PVA bag of crumble and pellet. No need for a back lead here, as I was doing little more than lowering the lead over a thick weedbed. I prayed that the barbel would return before the carp.

The rod was arranged to point directly at the lead, with the tip sunk beneath the surface to avoid the constant nuisance of drifting weed and debris. The bites would be fierce pin spins, the semi fixed lead ensuring the barbel would bolt as soon as pricked by the hook, which is what barbel do ninety nine percent of the time!

It was a good few hours before the centrepin screamed and signalled a hooked fish, but whatever

it was came off almost instantly after shooting off downstream at a rate of knots. A few more hours passed before anything came back into the swim, but thankfully it was the two barbel and only one carp. The smaller carp must have been the first fish to make a mistake, but luckily it had not spooked the other fish too badly.

You need plenty of patience with fish that

I could tell it was the smaller of the two barbel, but after a typically scary and dogged tussle it was netted, and I was very pleased to weigh it at just on eleven pounds.

The big one could be even bigger than I had hoped!

Chub and more chub, greedy and ravenous at this time of year, moved in for the evening, and the disturbance of catching them, along with the loss

have a good taste for my boilies by now. This time there would be no freebies; the fish were used to eating my bait, and I nervously lowered another hook bait with the PVA attractor bag, aiming to provide a single patch of bait with my hook bait in the middle. The response should be instant this time.

It was an hour before anything happened. I was worried that the salmon had



*Spotless Avon
11-pounder*

are feeding a bit warily in clear shallow water, but careful quiet observation, crouching low and moving slowly, can help to inform you on how and where the fish are feeding, and how they are behaving. It is also absolutely fascinating, and proves how often we can have fish in the swim and remain completely biteless!

It was late afternoon before a barbel made a mistake, ripping line noisily off the pin in no uncertain manner, and even in the failing light I could eventually make out the unmistakable outline of a double figure barbel as a powerful fish was eventually turned and grudgingly made its way back upstream towards me.

of its companion, had inevitably rattled the bigger barbel.

It would mean a return next morning to try again for the bigger fish. He was definitely worth another go!

Next morning, it was with very anxious eyes that I peered into the swim, hoping that the barbel would still be in residence. Sometimes, even more fish can arrive overnight, particularly over a bed of particles like hemp, which filters into the gravel and remains attractive for days.

I was delighted to see that the big barbel, the carp and the salmon were back again. I would be very satisfied with that one fish, however. He looked enormous in the shallow water, and he should



become more aggressive, and bullied the other fish out of the swim.

I was worried that the carp, chub or even the tench would grab the bait before the barbel.

I was worried that the minnows had whittled the hook bait away to nothing.

Then the pin gave that sudden, fabulous screech, and I was soon connected to a fish that hurtled off downstream in the shallow water, then stopped momentarily and hurtled off some more into thick weed. It was behaving like a carp, it would be a disaster if it was a carp.

I glanced into the swim, just under my straining rod top, and there was a big common carp grubbing about on the bottom. I have

never been more pleased to see a carp in the river. Unless I was very unlucky, I was attached to my big barbel.

It was big too, and several times it wallowed and thrashed defiantly on the surface as I struggled to bring it under control. Watching a big Avon barbel fighting in clear water is always a memorable experience, an absolute pleasure, but not as pleasurable as when it is safely in the net.

I knew this fish looked around fourteen pounds, but at 13.12 it is still a huge fish for the Avon, and I think a huge fish by any standards. We forget that a fish of 13.12 held the national record for

many years.

The fish was quite lean, and slack in the belly, and had it been as bulky as the eleven of the previous day it would have been a good two pounds heavier.

I felt very satisfied indeed after a plan had come together, and watched as the fish was allowed to recover in the big landing net, still impressed by its bulk as it swam off strongly to sulk under the weed

The autumn rains will

soon put paid to the chances of searching out, spotting and stalking barbel, and there is not the same enjoyment in sitting in the gloom of winter, or even worse at night, waiting for unseen fish to find your bait. I much prefer stalking to trapping, and next year I will be out on the banks of the river again, hopefully with brighter, drier weather to make stalking Avon barbel even more of a joy!

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*Sooner be spotting
on a sunny day than
waiting on a dull one!*