

Pete Reading River Diary Season 2007/2008

Last day on the Loddon

12th March 2008

I have not visited the Loddon for some time, and with the Avon seemingly very crowded, and after a couple of days of not fishing due mostly to unpleasant weather, I got talked into a last trip of the season up to the Loddon. The target was simply to end off the season with a barbel, regardless of size, and from a venue where you do not have to queue up or get there before dawn in order to get your swim. Those days are gone for me, not sure whether it is due to lack of enthusiasm, but certainly due to lack of desperation.

Thank goodness the barbel have some respite from the 24/7 merchants coming, with the close season almost here. Barbel can hide more easily on the big rivers, but on the stretches which are little more than small streams, the incessant pressure that fewer and fewer fish are subjected to by more and more hardnosed, determined and almost fulltime anglers is becoming questionable.

The stretch I fish is quiet, mostly because the fish are not enormous, but it still gives the chance of two or three fish each visit, and there are a few doubles, up to about fourteen tops. The biggest fish have still eluded me, but the fishing is always interesting and enjoyable. In the summer you can see the fish, but the river carries a lot of colour in the winter, and I am still trying to work out where they ought to be, and get more consistent results.

I decided on my usual swim, and a fish of eight and a half, with a fat belly and a lot of stamina, took hold first cast. He gave me the impression that the day was going to be more productive, and it may well have been had I

moved, but no more bites were forthcoming, although I knew the area always held a number of fish. I decided to make him my last barbel of the season. Maybe he was the only fish there, but more likely catching him spooked the rest of his shoal for the day, a symptom that perhaps they had been fished for hard, and hooking one was enough to scare the rest off for a long time.

They deserved a good rest, I decided, and I think I do too.



Flooded end of season Loddon



Fat Loddon eight pounder

Last day on the Frome

8th March 2008

The Frome has been fishing rather poorly for grayling lately, despite the colour and levels appearing to be ideal, but a last opportunity to fish a stretch soon to be lost to the game fishing interests was not to be missed. The grayling are usually getting into their spawning condition at this time of year, and apart from being very mobile and unpredictable, the bigger fish often turn very dark in colour and get a bit ragged. I have not seen them spawning, but I am advised that they do a lot of chasing about and there is often fierce competition between the bigger males, as is the case with salmon. A big grayling, big twos and above, are rarely likely to survive the rigors of spawning, and it is not often that we see the same three pounder two years running on any of the stretches I fish. They grow fast and die young, and a six year old is an ancient grayling, I am told.

I was as concerned as ever to see the Himalayan Balsam starting to come through with the early spring seedlings, and even more concerned to see the bare patches where the heavier balsam growth from this year had died back and exposed loose soil to erosion from wind, rain and river water. The effects of all the soils washed in to the river may not be seen for some time, but low flows and extra sediments are not good for any of our gravel spawners.

I was cheered up enormously when my companion took a fresh looking grayling of 2.12 early on in proceedings,

but became even more cheerful when a 2.15 decided to reward my efforts. I thought for a while that I was playing a big brown trout or salmon kelt, but it looked more than impressive when I first sighted the huge dorsal, and tail like a marlin, as it leaped out under my rod top. Both fish were clean and bright and fin perfect, so not yet prepared for spawning, and with a bit of luck they may survive until next year and put on a few more ounces.



Heavy bank erosion where balsam has died off



Baby grayling, fish of the future



2.15 grayling, bright as a button

Baby trout followed by big barbel

1st March 2008

Went out this morning to check on some of the baby brown trout being raised in schools and colleges as part of the Trout in Schools project organised by the Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust. We have eight little hatcheries on stream this year, in schools and colleges from Salisbury to Christchurch and Southampton, and there are always one or two problems to iron out. The system in Salisbury library has been a real success so far, but the trout were looking a bit groggy, and a flush of fresh water and check on the cooler and filters in the pump were needed. The little fish had hatched from eggs, watched with interest by all the visitors, and had been feeding well until today. I left hoping that the fresh water would revive them. The trout rearing has been successful for four years now, but I am always nervous about their survival until we let them go in the river around Easter. After that, the tanks are used to emulate the river environment, with gravel, green weed and a range of invertebrates and small fish, which fascinate those who are not familiar with the diversity of underwater life in our rivers.

A trip to the Stour for the afternoon had been promised, and the river looked really inviting, with a nice late winter tinge and a feeling of spring-like warmth in the air. I did not bother with the thermometer at all, and just fished with a calm and confident attitude. First cast was all that was needed, and a big whisker was soon to signal approval for my aromatic paste. Just as the last big Avon fish had, it fought in a carpy manner; dashing downstream in an initial sizzling run, then hanging in mid water and shaking his head angrily. He finally settled down and thumped steadily upstream, fighting like a barbel should, slow and deep and resolute. Another big

thirteen, again with a frame that could hold a pound or two more, perhaps reflecting minimal feeding in the preceding cold spell. The bait had been taken well back in the mouth, so the fish had been guzzling greedily when it took my bait.

Next day was a resounding blank on the same stretch, despite apparently ideal levels, flow and temperature. Must keep trying, but trying for some perch again before I have another go on the rivers.



Trout hatchery at the Salisbury Library



13.11 Stour barbel



Deadly paste, PVA and particles combination

Big honest Avon barbel

28th February 2008

There are times when I wish I had not been given this bloody thermometer, because after many years of not bothering, I am getting into a habit of thinking about water temperatures too much. A phone call to another Avon regular will soon tell you the information anyway, and all the knowledge does is make you feel more or less confident than you already feel, and I often think there is a danger in knowing too much information. It does not stop me from going fishing, but it winds me up a bit more than is desirable. The other variables are so many, and so unpredictable, that temperature readings are generally of little use,

I have caught them when it was too cold, and not caught them when it was apparently ideal, and winter barbel on the southern rivers are now becoming so few that any relationship between such variables as temperature and catch rates is pretty unreliable. Really, all you need to know is you stand a better chance when it is warm than when it is cold, is it not? Today the river looked good, conditions felt right, and the magic 50 degrees Fahrenheit had been breached.

A nice lump of paste was plopped into a hole I had been thinking ought to hold a few fish, but had failed in a few times recently. There were no rod rest holes or worn patches, and I was thinking how nice it would be to get a fish from here, when the pin gave a sudden, short screech, then tick-ticked in the way that says there is

something still on the end. The rod tip was buried well under water to avoid drifting debris and the full strength of the current. I picked up on what felt like a chub until it came to the net, and was sort of pleased to land a barbel of about four pounds. It was the sickest barbel I had seen in a long while, all google-eyed, with red sores on the flanks and a nasty gash in the side. It may have been scarred by a predator, and infections set in, but it was a sad little fish, and returned very quickly. The next bite was the long, strong determined scream of the reel that sometimes signals a big fish, and it fought in the way of a carp, long fast runs, and rising up in the water and shaking its head a lot. Had I lost it, I would have consoled myself that it was a carp, but when that first sighting of a pale gold flank four feet down came, I started to panic a bit. It was a big barbel, and I guessed at fourteen plus with no messing. It refused to weigh fourteen, however, and I was nonetheless very content with a satisfactory thirteen fifteen. A very good Avon fish, and extremely welcome after a lean spell on the river.

Last cast produced the sick little barbel for a second time; he was clearly still well enough to feed and get caught again within three hours of the first capture. I hope he recovers enough to become a little wiser.



Sick little Avon four pounder



Very welcome thirteen fifteen



Fifteen pounds long, but a big fish for the Avon

A day on the Gordon Bennett

20th February 2008

Now that I was a perch expert, it was time to experiment with some new stretches of the Kennet well worthy of investigation. and armed with a load of lobs, red maggot and smaller redworms, I tried out a bit of the old Gordon Bennett that I had never seen before. I was assured it had some form for perch, as well as a few decent chub, or rub a dubs. I do get bored with the rhyming slang after a minute or so, so enough of that for now, although thinking it up for our main rivers can kill some time.

Laying on with a big wriggly lob in a slack behind a tree soon saw some action, but it was a sprightly chub that had grabbed the worm, and he gave me some fun as he tried to head back home under the branches. I bait

dropped red maggot and chopped worm all afternoon, and although the chub responded well, no perch were forthcoming at all. I had five chub in fairly quick succession, all between three and five pounds. Good average for the Kennet, but not worth me travelling up here for chub fishing, with the old Clean Shaven, (Avon), or Happy Hour, (Stour), on your doorstep. The Avon / Stour chub are a much higher average size, and the expectation of a day on my local rivers is for a couple of fives and the good chance of a six or even seven pounder, on the cards.

Next bite resulted in what felt like a much bigger chub that I had ever imagined I would hook in the Kennet, but it ended up being a greedy barbel that took a liking to a bunch of worms laid on in a slack on a cool February day. Nice surprise though, and I noted the swim as a potential barbel swim for the future. I expect to catch some perch from it when I next fish it with barbel in mind. My first barbel on the float for a very long time, but an indication that the warmer weather had woken them up a little. The dusk period, and first hour of dark was enough to discover that the perch were either not around, or not on the feed, so I packed and headed home with a strong southerly wind in my face, and barbel on the agenda once again.



Five pound Kennet chub



Spot the float



Kennet barbel with taste for worms

Reservoir perch make a change

18th February 2008

Rivers are fishing hard, certainly for barbel, so a bit of stillwater fishing would make a nice change. I was invited to fish a Midlands reservoir I had not fished for over thirty years, which was well known for the pike it produced at the time. I had fished it only with pike in mind, and I remember taking fish to over seventeen pounds at the time, when a twenty was a monster. I was not much over twenty then myself, and yet the lake did not seem to have changed much at all, certainly less than I had. It was now producing thirties fairly regularly, but also some cracking perch.

Not a fan of live baits these days, I was happy to try big lobworms, fished under a big waggler, just tripping bottom or laid on. The fishing area was liberally fed with chopped worms and red maggots, but no expert perch

fisherman, I was unsure how much difference the loose feed would make. The perch were very obliging, however, making the long trip most worthwhile. Sport was steady throughout the day, and we managed a good bag of the striped fish between us, with several over three, and my companion taking a superb four pounder. Perch are a most handsome fish, even when they are of modest size, but the fat stripy twos and threes are quite magnificent, and fight remarkably well, with a mixture of determined kiting, head-shaking and some quite powerful runs. We elected to fish fairly light, and with float rods or light quiver tip rods, the bold biting and dashing, hard fighting perch were a welcome change from winter barbel tactics on the local rivers, where one or two bites in a day are an event.

I am a perch fan now, and aim to try fishing harder for them on my local rivers. A big Avon or Stour perch will be even more handsome than a reservoir fish, I think, and relatively unfished for.



Avon perch grow fat on these



Three pounds seven of bristly perch



Four pound reservoir perch

Water Framework Directive interferes with fishing

11th February 2008

Attended a very interesting meeting with interested parties regarding the impending Water Framework Directive, WFD. It entailed being involved in WORKSHOP and BRAINSTORMING SESSION, which took me back to the old days in the education profession. Lots of very knowledgeable and informed and genuinely caring people were there, and we were full of great ideas and shared and learned a lot about the issues and threats facing our watery environment in the future, and the ways in which they could be challenged. Trouble is, the situation is rather big on threats and a bit small on the funding to deal with them. Let us hope our Government and the EU will come up with the funds to protect our rivers from the future increases in pressure. We could do our bit by saving water, and it is easy to do with a bit of thought.

Later in the week, took Simon Asbury for his promised day on the Frome, and although the river was not really fishing well for some reason, we managed a very pleasant day with him getting a few big grayling and enjoying

a bit of unusual fishing for someone used to the fishing in the Birmingham area, not noted for its chalk streams. We thought the local cormorants had unsettled the fish, or maybe the cold snap was a bit too sudden even for the grayling, but we had to work hard all day to get a dozen or so grayling. I had a couple of brown trout and a big rainbow I should have killed, but felt a bit sorry for. I meant to give Simon one of my cormorant quill floats, but forgot, so he will have to make do with a photo of one instead. The deluxe version is whipped with otter whiskers.



Simon hunting grayling on a wintery Frome



Simon and big grayling



Cormorant quill float, ideal for grayling

Quest for Avon roach continues

4th February 2008

I am continuing to spend the odd afternoon in the apparently futile quest for a big Avon roach, and the dream of one of those huge redfins from what was a difficult stretch when the big roach were more numerous seems to keep me going for some reason. The Avon valley in winter has a quiet calm beauty on still, cold days, and on the hard stretches there are no anglers to speak of either, so you can keep dreaming wistfully about monstrous roach, quite undisturbed. Bites of any sort are an event, and when the tip flew round in the bold way that roach often take, I was soon out of my dozy state and wondering hopefully what it was that was thumping awkwardly, kicking hard in the current, and rising resentfully to the surface. This is the way the big roach fight. It was a chub, and why it chose to fight like a roach, I do not know; sometimes they do it just to provoke or tease you. A lovely, bright and sparkling Avon chub it was, however, and about five and a half, I suppose. As is usual for a chub, he chose to act all chubby at the net, and dive into the marginal weeds as soon as his act of deception had been seen through. He was returned without much satisfaction, but strangely would have been quite welcome if I had been chub fishing.

As the light faded, and the odd unidentified fish began to roll enticingly on the crease, another roachy bite and

way downstream, and the well mended ones are lively fish of bright silver and clean lines, likely to return again next year. The sad old kelts, all rangy and full of fungus, are most likely otter fodder, I expect. Avon salmon are still declining, and increasingly rare, like the big roach, but the crashing of the kelts in the darkening river showed that they are hanging on for the time being.



Famous Avon roach swim



Roach impersonating chub



Pesky sea trout

Back to the silver fish

28th January 2008

The weather continues to be rather unsettled, and another cold snap and a few dry days meant that the Frome was worth a visit in search of the grayling. This is the time of year when the bigger fish can group up, attain their heaviest weights, and provide some excellent and reliable sport. First trot down and the heavy, solid thumping fight that typifies big grayling resulted in a chunky 2.12, all clean and silvery and a most agreeable way to start.

I left it in the landing net to recover, ensuring it had plenty of clear water around its head, and resumed fishing. Barely a few feet of trot had elapsed, and the float stabbed down again, and another big fish was on the end. I was forced to land him in the net with the other, and took a quick shot of peas in a pod brace of two fish of identical weight, though the latter fish was a bit leaner and longer. Lovely stuff, but time for a break and after a nice cup of hot tea, I moved up to the next pool and took another pair of twos. I ended up with six over two and a few nice young backup fish, and it was nice to get some bites for a change and get the rod bent.

Next day was a resounding blank on the Avon after the elusive big roach, but I did find a dead carp, which was some recompense, I suppose. I had seen a big dog otter swimming brazenly down the river on this stretch a few days ago, but blaming him for killing and eating the carp was only based on circumstantial evidence. The body was eaten around the throat in typical otter manner, but it seemed the rest of the body was unmarked, and I have usually seen a lot of claw marks on fish that are more obvious otter kills. Next day the body had disappeared without trace, no doubt dragged off by fox or badger. I do not know if otters return to carcasses and

feed on subsequent occasions, or scavenge on dead fish. One less carp anyway.



Nearly three pounds



Brace of two twelves



Dead Avon carp, is Mr Otter the culprit?

Floods on the Loddon

21st January 2008

Every couple of weeks it pays to make a trip further a field in search of barbel, and the heavy rain and warmer temperatures made a visit to the Loddon worthwhile. The stretch I have been visiting is usually fairly reliable for two or three fish and a good chance of a double, although there are no real monsters, and it is generally quiet and peaceful. The river takes on a lot of colour after rain, and at first sight I was a bit worried that it would be too high and too full of colour for the fish. I am advised the fish do not mind, so I plonked in with a measure of confidence, especially since the banksides did not indicate any heavy fishing pressure lately. It is never nice to sit in somebody else's muddy footprints, and I am not used to swims that are all worn and second hand. A nice scrappy seven pounder took hold straight away, but then it was a repeat of my recent experiences; no more bites were forthcoming, and yet I knew the fish were not far away.

Perhaps they had been well hammered the night before, maybe they were full of worms, or someone else's pellets, maybe they were just not hungry and feeling a bit scary. All those musings are part of what makes fishing so interesting, and thankfully we will never have all the answers. It seems to be that the barbel fishing has been very patchy and inconsistent countrywide, ever since those unseasonal big floods in the summer. I have spoken to people who are blanking regularly in hitherto reliable swims in what appear to be ideal conditions, so I am glad it is just not me.

I waited well into dark to see if that would pay off, and was rewarded with a fat Loddon chub that fought like a little barbel for a while. Even in normal, clear water conditions, these Loddon chub are pale silvery creatures, but they are solid chunky specimens, and I have had them to nearly six this year. They may well grow even fatter on

all the barbel food the river gets, so a seven is an increasingly likely capture. Like the chub of the Kennet, they are not as sought after as they deserve to be, and I may try some chub focused tactics next time I come up to the friendly little Loddon.



Flooded brown Loddon



Little fat Loddon barbel



Big fat Loddon chub

Catch a falling Stour

14th January 2008

The Avon has reached the highest levels of the winter, and looks like keeping that level for most of the rest of the season. The water supplied by the chalk aquifers seems to be inexhaustible at this time of year, and the river appears capable of holding the same level for weeks, without the apparent need for any rainfall at all. The groundwater levels are at record levels, at least the highest for over sixty years, so many swims on the Avon will remain unapproachable, unless you are stupid enough to wade across country and fish standing up with all your kit on your back. No fish is worth risking your life for. There are a few spots you can get to, and a few swims that actually fish better when the water is this high, but they are few and far between and tend to get heavily fished. The river is now holding at a bank high level, mostly in the fields, but running at a clarity you would expect in the summer, good conditions for chub, but not the best for winter barbel.

A trip to the Dorset Stour was called for, which now acts a bit like a spate river these days, ever since the big dredgings in the Seventies, and it drops very rapidly as a rule once the rain stops. The colour was a very nice pale brown, and the temperatures in the high forties. The river was clearly dropping steadily, yet still flecked with a sort of dirty froth that never looks quite right, and probably a result of sewage treatment works outfalls. Not as bad as the foam rafts I remember seeing on the Trent in the sixties, which could envelop you totally if blown off the river by the wind!

An almost immediate bite produced a nice pale Stour barbel, followed by nothing for the rest of the day, even when I moved swims. Next day was a repeat performance, with a barbel first cast, then a fishless follow up. It

was as if I had dropped on a single fish, or maybe a pair, and that is the shoal size these days. The barbel populations in both Stour and Avon are pretty low now, and a single fish is a good result, I suppose. The multiple catches of twenty years ago are now unheard of, but the fish are much bigger. I was hoping for a fourteen or fifteen this week, an impossible target in the Eighties, but now not an unreasonable expectation.



Flooded Hants Avon, river on right somewhere



Pale Stour nine pounder



Lean Stour barbel, first cast again

Blanking on the Avon

10th January 2008

The weather has warmed up a bit, and I continue to suffer startling lack of success on the Avon, with several successive barbel blanks. The fishing I really relish on this river involves searching, spotting and stalking in the clear waters of the summer, and I have never really enjoyed the misery of sitting in liquid mud, cold and damp under a windswept broly, and watching a pair of inert centrepins. Some people seem to like it; they even sit there for hours at night, but it all seems a bit grim and uncomfortable for my liking.

The conditions are still a bit borderline, but it has to be said that the excitement of the reel suddenly and unexpectedly screaming to life is good fun, and the slow solid thumping fight of an unseen winter barbel can be very scary indeed. This time, however, the bite that came at dusk and got me all wobbly and adrenalined up turned out to be another of those annoying invasive species, a common carp. A fish of about ten pounds, it got me really worried for while, but they are supposed to be a handsome fish. I admired it for several milliseconds before I slipped it back.

This year, the black swans are starting to turn up in pairs, and they are a little bit more shy tolerable than the native mutes. The black ones enjoy swimming up and down, wiggling their scruffy backsides and honking plaintively, as if they are yearning for the outback, but the mutes enjoy attacking them and beating them up whenever they get the chance. Not very welcoming. The news that H5N1 bird flu is killing some swans in Dorset

makes me think twice now about sitting in swims smothered in swan excrement, or even getting too close to wild birds. The pheasant that I was feeding in June has now become so tame it sits in the lap of anglers who encourage it with pellets or hemp, but I think I will give him a wide berth next time he starts begging for food. The shooting season is well underway, so his days are probably numbered.



Unwelcome common carp



Unwelcome Australian



Dumb Pheasant

Still too cold for barbel

3rd January 2008

It is never really too cold for barbel, as I am always hearing of the odd fish taken from the rivers when conditions are apparently not favourable. There are those that will go out and barbel fish regardless of conditions, but I much prefer to wait until it is ten degrees and rising, and consistent warm wet and windy weather has given me the confidence to have a proper go. The weather has really been too cold and unsettled for me to feel very positive about barbel, and it pays to give yourself a rest from them.

It is important, I think, to vary your fishing as much as you can, and also vary your associated interests. This week, for example, we have been trying to catch some salmon broodstock to provide eggs for the experimental egg box scheme being carried out by the Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust. Last year, we raised several thousand salmon fry by catching and stripping eggs and milt from fish that were doing their business on redds on the upper river. A better understanding of this process may be of help in future support measures for failing salmon populations. The EA had given us special dispensation to catch salmon off the redds by rod and line and electro fishing, but this year we arrived a week or two too late, and did not get enough fish. The exercise was nevertheless worthwhile, and the sight of the huge redds, where fairly small fish have managed to shift tons of gravel, along with a close look at salmon in spawning livery, was a fascinating experience. Rivers with failing barbel populations could also benefit from such research, as there is the likelihood of some research into egg boxes being used for barbel. Barbel do have the biggest, non-sticky eggs of any coarse fish, and are invariably gravel spawners, like salmonids.

Taking someone else fishing has interest and reward as well, and I had been looking forward to taking Bob Buteux on the Frome to try and catch him a grayling. Bob is of advanced years, and not as athletic as once he was, and I took pleasure in sitting with him and listening to the wealth of tales he had to tell about his exploits in years gone by. He had many stories concerning the angling greats such as Walker, Taylor and Stone, and it should never be forgotten that these guys were giants in their day, not only breaking new ground in angling, but were also accomplished writers of such skill and talent that would make some of the stuff you read today shameful. We got Bob his best grayling, but he had to use maggots and a float instead of his beloved legered bread. He was also very appreciative of the beauty of the grayling, and some specimens have a bright, coral/orange stripe along the top of the dorsal, combined with greeny-blue pectoral and ventral fins, which some tropical reef fishes would be proud of.



Salmon in spawning colours



Bob Buteux, fishing the Frome



Coral/orange dorsal and vivid blue/green ventral fins

Captain Parkers chub

27th December, 2007

I hate Christmas with a vengeance, and poor fishing conditions do not improve the mood. The Grinch and Ebenezer Scrooge are pussycats compared to me at this time of year, so fishing in isolated spots is best for all when that seasonal ill -will afflicts me.

The cold and clear conditions mean that a chub or two are a possibility, so I visited a quiet, unfrequented bit of the Avon, once frequented by roach legend, Captain Parker. His book on fishing the river, first published in 1948, is excellent reading, and the old photos of the river are a fascination. The first edition has the best ones. One swim in particular, which we now call Parkers Corner, is illustrated near the back of the book, and shows Parker waiting patiently with what looks like a bamboo roach pole. The stand of alder trees and the landscape have not changed that much, but the river has. I guess there were more roach in the river in 1948, although the average size these days is much bigger. The numbers of roach in the middle reaches is painfully low, but if you do get

one it will be nearer to three than two pounds. I record a three pounder from this stretch every year, but I myself have not had a roach of any size from this fishery for three years. There are some places free on the syndicate, if you are brave and foolhardy enough!

Parkers Corner now produces the odd chub, and it was nice to get a couple of fish that were spotless and probably uncaught for a long time. They love chomping maggots at this time of year, and it is common for them to regurgitate a mess of maggot that has been thoroughly chewed or macerated by their throat teeth. With feeder fishing, it is not uncommon to reel in with no hook and a shortened hooklink due to a bite-off. Short hooklinks avoid this, and improve self hooking of course. Six pound chub are now an unremarkable event on the Avon, but I always try and keep a sense of proportion, and welcome the opportunity a good head of chub gives for some nice fishing when the barbel are chilled off.

The chub were lovely clean and scale perfect, but my last grayling from the Frome looked a bit worse for wear. As I walked round a corner to approach one of my favourite swims, I was disturbed to see FOUR cormorants take off out of the pool. Needless to say, the pool produced no bites, but in a little swim further upstream a grayling with fresh scars showed that the birds were hunting the fish hard. Another fish that day showed similar scarring. I had always hoped that nippy fish like grayling, in fast shallow water could outrun a cormorant, but they have always shown clear signs of beak damage on this stretch.



Parkers corner river view



Chub and chewed maggots



Grayling damaged

Gone cold again

14th December, 2007

The window of barbelly opportunity has closed, and cold, dry clear weather has put them off for a while it seems. I managed a nice nine and a half pounder, along with a perfect fish of about eight on the last warmish day before the hard frosts settled, which is a result on the Avon for any time of year. I was fishing a swim that has not produced for me for about ten years, but I keep going back there for some reason. Some barbel were bound to

swim past eventually, I suppose, but the Avon does become less swimmy in winter, when the heavy weed has gone, and at times of high water it can often be regarded as one big barbel swim. The fish are certainly great roamers, and in recent years the evidence of the long travels of some individual fish is impressive.

I went with Peter Wheat to the recent BS Regional meeting in Bournemouth, and Ray Walton gave one of his fascinating talks. Rolling meat is not really for me, but it clearly works, and Ray is the undisputed maestro of the method. He also provided the photographic evidence that fish will swim from the Royalty, round the Clay Pool and Upper Harbour and then up the Stour to the lower end of Throop. There is a fish they call The Wanderer on Throop, and Two Bars on the Royalty, same fish, it seems. It swam a hell of a long way, unless it got on the bus. Very interesting, and much more evidence of fish movement is out there, although the radio tracking research that has been done in the past has always confirmed that they will travel great distances, often returning to exactly the same spot a few weeks later.

Peter Wheat had encouraged me to take him the next morning for another day on the Frome, and it is always a delight to fish with him. I tend to just sit and listen, and much of the time we were just chatting and reminiscing, sharing experiences, though I learned a lot more than he did. Peter is an incredibly intelligent and knowledgeable angler, and a very nice man; a true gentleman. He was as delighted as I to catch another pb grayling, and insisted we take a quick shot in a Santa hat he had brought along, just in case. I took him to a dace swim, where grayling are rarely caught, promising him a few nice dace to end the day, and he immediately, first cast, caught another grayling almost as big! I shall never forget his face, and the comment, as what turned out to be two and a half pounds plus of grayling tore off and hammered his rod round;

"Just how big do the bloody dace grow on here?"



Last Avon barbel for a while!



Huge eye and pectorals of baby salmon



Peter and pb silver lady

Welcome warm wet flush

10th December, 2007

A few days of wet and windy weather, with warm south-westerlies and a sudden rise in temperature, is ideal as a window of opportunity for a spot of winter barbellling. It was apparently my turn to drive Steve up to the Loddon for a day on that interesting little river, and it made a change from the white-knuckle ride that a trip with him in charge of the wheel entails. Trouble is, he is full of advice as a passenger, and I quickly renamed him Hyacinth as he constantly advised me to look out for pedestrians and stationary lorries, never mind him trying to act like some sort of human satnav. We got there eventually, and I was not too keen on the colour of the river. It goes as frothy and chocolatey as the Stour when it is carrying extra water, but we knew the stretch fairly well, and despite the heavy colour and additional foot of water, we still found a couple of fishable swims. Hyacinth chose to fish a new swim just below an island, and I elected to drop in under the bank in a spot that had been kind to me in the past.

Sometimes, a single smelly hook bait can be all you need, and I simply lowered a big boilie wrapped in paste under the rod top, still employing a big backlead to avoid the leaves and dead weed coming down.

The barbel would not be far away, and I thought that droppers of loosefeed and the almost inevitable PVA bag could be dispensed with on this occasion. One big single bait fished in what the carpers have called glorious isolation can prove irresistible, and pick up fish that would otherwise do a quick raid on your loosefeed and never return. It seemed to work, and two fish of about seven pounds took a liking almost instantly, dragging the rod round in a most confident manner within a few minutes of casting in.

The temperature of the water was almost fifty Fahrenheit, and the fish were clearly on the hunt. I rested the swim, and checked to see how Hyacinth was getting on. He had lost a good fish that had snagged him momentarily under a branch, and slipped the hook. I wound him up with a barrage of smug advice, and returned to my swim.

Once again, within a few minutes of casting in, the rod curved round slowly and the pin made that long slow purring sound as a fish charged off into the middle, and gave one of those interminably strong, persistent fights that make you start to think you may have hooked something very special. It was a tough, well-conditioned ten pounder that had me thinking he was half as big again, but a warmly welcomed barbel. Hyacinth got a nine pounder at the death, which made the journey home a little more bearable, although I was glad he helped me avoid a collision with a stationary tree.



Fat seven pounder from Loddon



Big smelly paste wrapped boilie does the job



Loddon ten pounder

Purple Policemans Helmet and Tiger Walking Stick

7th December, 2007

The week started with attending a seminar on invasive plants, and although I expected a fairly grueling affair, it was absolutely fascinating. The event was organised to raise the awareness of local riparian owners and local authorities, and landowners, Environment Agency, Natural England, Wildlife Trusts, Rivers Trusts and angling interests were all there. The cost to us in terms of hard cash and loss of biodiversity is going to be considerable unless we act together and act now. One ten acre site for the Olympics is costing 70 million pounds to rid of Japanese Knotweed. This stuff is a real menace in Wales, where it comes in your windows and under your living room floor. The Welsh call it Tigers Walking Stick, because of the stripey stalks, I suppose. The amount of silt and sediment released from Himalayan Balsam dieback in the winter will choke gravel beds already degraded by low flows and agricultural sediment, and all gravel spawning fish will suffer. HB is called Policemans Helmet, due to the shape of the flowers. The dreaded Floating Yellow Primrose is on the way from France, aided by climate change! I do not even want to think about Marbled Crayfish. Luckily, we have a chance to nip these invasive in the bud in my local area, but it is only one battle in the war against them. If you see them, pull them up or report them if not sure, although actually you should only attack the Balsam. The Knotweed needs special treatment, and Giant Hogweed can cause serious skin blisters or blindness.

Going fishing next day was a bit of a relief, but with lots to think about. The warmer weather had given me a chance of a barbel, and a nice eight pounder from the Stour was a good result for an afternoon in a favourite floodwater swim. I found the head of a more unfortunate barbel on the bank when I arrived, picked clean by crows and foxes, and probably a natural death, although some of my fellow fishermen were eager to blame the evil otters or ravenous Poles for the demise of the fish. A much bigger barbel rolled like a bronze porpoise, which is unusual on the Stour. Most of the barbel people see rolling on the Avon are salmon, or common carp. This was definitely a big rolling barbel, but even though I stayed well into dark, no more bites were forthcoming, and I was forced to merely mark him down for future reference.



Purple Policemans Helmet



Dead barbel head



Surprised looking Stour eight pounder

Unpredictable barbel, as usual

28th November, 2007

I was invited to fish a very prolific bit of the Kennet, and with conditions looking very favourable, I had high hopes of a good catch. The level and colour were spot-on, the water temperature was 47 Fahrenheit and rising, and the swim had not been fished for a couple of days at least. An eager angler on the other bank stopped to chat, and informed me I was bound to have a good day; his pal had taken a big bag of fish from a nearby swim in colder conditions earlier in the week. I baited cautiously but confidently, and prepared for a steady day of sport. I counted the droppers of maggot and hemp religiously as they laid an irresistible carpet before the obviously hungry barbel that were bound to be gathered unsuspecting at the tail of the swim. I had counted two maggies as I drove down the track down to the fishery, and loudly wished them good morning. I counted two robins that were sparring with each other, ready to compete for any spare maggots. I had also counted my barbel before they were hooked, however.

A sluggish nine pounder grabbed the bait a on the second cast, but nothing else happened all day, until a last minute four pound fish broke the slightly confused monotony. I had baited carefully, I had fed sparingly, rested the swim for an hour, and then given a sudden flush of ten droppers. I had tried long tails, shorter tails, even went to two maggots on a 14, and replaced the feeder with a nice PVA bag of maggot threaded up the hooklink. Nothing seemed to work.

More often than not these days, fish seem to refuse to read the rule book, and it seems to be becoming increasingly common for them to ignore what we think are ideal conditions. Neither my host on the fishery nor I could work out why the barbel were being so uncooperative. He fared as badly as I, taking a nice fish first cast, then nothing else all day until he lost one at last knockings. Gives you something to think about though, or

maybe we think too much.

I returned to another blank on the Stour, fishing a reliable swim that I had lightly prebaited with costly bespoke boilies, using two rods and the smartest of rigs, presented in a secret and cunning way with specially designed backleads. I fished hard all day like this. An eight-year-old kid arrived on the opposite bank, flung out a donkey choker pellet using a six-foot sea rod and a half ounce lead and hooked a barbel straight away. I tried not to be pleased when he lost it, but it was difficult.



Looks irresistible to me, superglued maggot.



Ropey old Kennet nine pounder



Robin makes a quick getaway

More silver ladies

21st November, 2007

More cold clear conditions, and a chance to fish a new stretch of the Frome for grayling, which is a most accommodating species when the rivers are low and cold, and the thought of sitting still in a chill wind is not very inviting. At least you can keep moving, and on an unfamiliar piece of water the next bend is always more full of promise than the last. The Frome is not short of bends, and the first hour on this stretch had me almost dizzy with confusion and unfulfilled promise, after the exploring float had failed to dip in response to anything other than the occasional minnow. I had traveled a twisting winding route of at least half a mile, but barely a couple of hundred yards as the crow flies. Then, a slightly deeper little run under the bank produced four spanking silver grayling in a row, all about a pound, but solid, fresh young looking fish that fought like terriers. The float stabbed down boldly every time, and the fish were clearly hungry today, if you could find them. A few more trots, but the best had been had from that little shoal for the time being.

I had sprinkled a few maggots in a hole a few yards downstream, and I moved on and gave that a few minutes. No joy, but something told me to persevere, and change tactics slightly. I increased the depth, and held back hard at the tail of the swim, where it started to shallow up. This time, the waiting grayling were fooled, and a nice

brace of twos was the result, peas in a pod at two five each. This time, the more solid, dogged and determined fight of the bigger fish was a real pleasure, especially on the centrepin, which enables you to dictate and relish the fight a bit more. Another fish of just under two and a few more smaller fish, as well as a small salmon and a sea trout, and the bitter wind and setting sun said time for home.

Frome grayling grow very fast and very big, and those silver fish were probably two year olds. The big two I had the next day was maybe five or six, and I have been told that a seven or eight year old is a real pensioner. We certainly never catch the same three pounders two years running; they are old fish that cannot survive the rigors of spawning. They live fast and die young, and do not do well when subjected to heavy fishing pressure. They need careful handling and plenty of recovery time, much like barbel, and no doubt their musculature and hard fighting qualities result in a big oxygen debt after exhaustion. I leave them alone to recover in the net, allowing them to simply breathe, and stressing them as little as possible. They should not be held, stroked, splashed or massaged or mauled about any more than barbel; it probably causes more stress than just leaving them to their own devices.



Nice silver lady



Winding bit of Frome



2.11 grayling showing its colours

Too cold for barbel

14th November, 2007

The first heavy frosts probably put me off more than the barbel, but those initial nips of winter send me off after chub and grayling. I took an old mate to the Frome to catch his first grayling, and it was a pleasure to share in his delight at catching his first grayling, then beating his pb four or five times in a day! Big John was very appreciative of a perfect day on the river, waxing lyrically about the countryside, the fish and the fishing. His last fish was a lovely, hump-backed, steely grey two nine, and we were both shaking in anticipation as he put it on the scales. The big ones are impressive creatures, and like barbel, they fight their hearts out, and take a lot of care in recovery. John lovingly watched his fish slowly come round in the net, and as he nursed it back to health, he kept telling me he was thinking he had died and gone to heaven. Nice to see, and it reminded me of how

much enjoyment you can get from watching others catch fish.

Next day I went after some big chub from the Stour, but they did not want to play. I caught roach, bleak, gudgeon, dace, pike, one tiny little chub, and a few nice perch. One was almost two pounds, and had me thinking he was a big chub as he snaffled my red maggot and dragged the tip round. The Stour perch are making a big comeback, and threes and the odd four pounder are now reported. This chunky perch was as brightly coloured as any brown trout, and I am tempted to join the ever growing ranks of the Stour perch fishers, seeking out the untapped potential of those bigger perch. The trouble with perch is, they always seem to get their own back on me, and I always get spiked and bloodied by them in some way.

It was then my turn to get a pb for someone else, so I took Phil Smith for a day on the Avon. He had been suffering on Throop for a day or two, so I showed him a nice Avon chub swim, gave him some bait left over from our grayling session, and told him where to cast. He was delighted to bag a seven four, and the grin on his face tells it all!

Wait until he gets the bill.



Big John with big grayling



Nice little gudgeon



More BS Business, not enough fishing!

7th November, 2007

Went on a long trip to the Upper Thames with John Found as company, in order to meet with EA officers in charge of the Upper Thames Barbel Project. We met at the very inviting Trout Inn at Tadpole Bridge, and were soon inspecting the excellent progress the EA have already made in reinstating some of the side streams and structures that were either filled in or blocked off from the main river in the name of flood relief in the past. The river engineers of the Seventies and Eighties would be prosecuted for some of the work they did in the past, and John and I were impressed with the knowledge and commitment shown by the current generation of EA Fishery Officers, and I have to say that my discussions in the last few years with EA staff from several regions certainly backs that up. They are constrained by funding cuts and come in for a lot of unfair criticism. The work on the Great Brook is something the BS has pledged to support, and John and I left with a few good ideas on how we could direct our contribution most effectively, enhancing the work already done on the system by the Agency. We also took away some ideas for further R and C work from next years budget.

We paused momentarily outside the Trout Inn as we were leaving, but thought better of a pint and a pie, and headed south to fish the Loddon for the afternoon and evening. We blanked soundly on a very interesting little stretch that we had never fished before. Like so many of these minor rivers, the swims all looked even more inviting than the Trout Inn, but not all of them contain barbel. We never had so much as tweak or a twiddle, even fishing into the dark for half an hour. Next day I went to a bit of the river I knew better, and had a couple of barbel in the last hour, but again no indications at all until the dusk period, despite me using plenty of maggot to try and stir them up a bit. Maggot or caster can usually get fish going at any time of day, but perhaps the twenty four hour pressure that some of these stretches gets has an effect. On the other hand, I have had good results in the daytime on stretches that are heavily night fished, by using particles like caster or maggot for fish that are heavily bombarded with big pellets and boilies.

It is a funny time of year, and the fish can never be relied upon to follow the rules!



Great Brook leaving the Thames for the first time in 25 years



This will be a stream soon, with our help



Ten pound Loddon barbel, with a liking for maggots

Stour stocking goes ahead

1st November, 2007

Not much fishing this week, with various meetings and trips out on BS business, but the highlight was the arrival of the 3000 barbel which we hope will be the first batch of a significant stocking programme.

I waited nervously at the first stocking site, along with representatives from the clubs involved, and was pleased to see that the river was in good order, with a very slight colour and no sign of floodwater, that would have given the young barbel a bit of a hard time.

The EA landrover and trailer arrived in good time, and was also carrying several thousand roach, chub and bream for restocking a part of the river upstream that had suffered a fish kill earlier in the year.

I was eager to see if the elastomer inserts had remained intact, and it was clear that the retention rate was very high. All of the fish checked were still carrying clear marks that would now stay with them for life and enable monitoring of their movements and survival. The barbel were extremely fit and lively, and after a bit of confusion, they shot off and took cover as soon as they were released.

I helped the transfer of the other two batches of fish, and took as many photos as I could at the other two release sites further upstream. The river looked inviting, plenty of cover in the form of ranunculus beds and tree branches, but the ravages of the big dredging exercises in the late seventies are in need of further repair, and the funds donated by the BS and local clubs, as well as considerable input of funding and expertise from the EA, will go a long way towards restoring even more favourable habitat.

The river seemed a very large place, and even those 3000 barbel looked a very vulnerable few in the face of the potentially hostile environment they now had to grow up in. I quietly wished them luck, and continue to hope that with a bit more help, a self sustaining population will establish in a few years. The habitat improvements will also benefit all other species of fish, and indeed all wildlife, but I look forward to landing a ten pounder with a

little plastic tag behind her eye in the next decade!



Red tag barbel ready for stocking



Little barbel going into a new home



More barbel for the Stour

Barbel failure, chub success, Frome finale

27th/ 28th October, 2007

Simon Asbury came down for a day to try and catch an Avon barbel, which I have promised to aid and abet him in doing. On any specific day, it is by no means guaranteed that I will catch a barbel from the Avon, let alone catch one to order for someone else! Not a river for guiding and expecting to catch barbel, that is for sure, but any day on the Avon is a special event, and both Simon and I are both wise enough to anticipate and cope with failure on the barbel front. We fished a swim that contained barbel; we saw them eat the loosefeed, roll lazily on their sides, and generally swim about enticingly, but they were only half switched on, and we had to be content with a couple of PB chub for Simon, and a bit of advice on how to fool them on the maggot feeder. At least the crystal waters of the river allow you to watch your quarry take advantage of your freebies and yet refuse the most carefully presented hook bait. Even the chub were cute and scary, and as soon as a fish was hooked and landed, the rest of the shoal shot off and sulked for an hour or more, all moody and out of casting range. We arranged the next visit with mixed feelings, but it is only a matter of time before Simon gets his Avon barbel, and my list of excuses is getting shorter and shorter.

Next day was another guiding session, in aid of the Research and Conservation Auction Fund, and BS member Dave Redfearn was insistent that we take the day on the Frome despite the weather forecast and my heavy hints that heavy rain and strong wind did not favour trotting! We both got absolutely soaked, and yet the day was a real joy, an experience I will not forget for a while. The rain persisted almost all day, the gusting wind nagged and harassed us constantly, and yet we never really lost hope or allowed ourselves to become downhearted. Dave is a smashing bloke, very positive and good fun, and the worse the weather got, the more we laughed about it. He caught a salmon parr, several minnows, a few grayling to about a pound and a half, and then at the end of the day, he followed my advice by putting on a single maggot a bit under depth, and winkled out a nice fat 2.7

grayling that had him whooping with excitement when it finally came to net. Dave does some work as a professional magician, so I actually knew he would pull something out of the hat by the end of the day.



Simon concentrating on the Avon



Simon and the smaller of his 2 PB's



David with his pb grayling

Calverton and 3000 barbel

24th October, 2007

I spent a few days this week in Nottinghamshire, helping the EA officers from my local region mark up the barbel that are to be stocked into the Dorset Stour shortly. The BS started the ball rolling on this one, writing to local clubs and EA and offering funds to attempt a stocking of barbel in the middle river.

The clubs were all keen, and matched our funding to a total of over four thousand pounds, and then the EA came back and offered to supply barbel free of charge from Calverton. They also suggested we spend our cash already committed on habitat improvements instead of fish, and maintain both this and the stocking over a few years. Brilliant result! A BS initiative and a small cash injection has turned into a long term river improvement project that will probably amount to the expenditure equivalent of tens of thousands of pounds over three years.

The fish farm at Calverton is impressive, and is run by a devoted team of hard working and highly qualified professionals. We saw stews containing hundreds of thousands of chub, roach, dace and bream, and the barbel, raised from Loddon broodstock, are superbly conditioned fish. The staff were extremely knowledgeable and helpful, and I learned a huge amount during my visit, not least that Prickly Pear extract is an invaluable stress relief treatment for fish, and that barbel have the largest eggs of any coarse fish species.

We worked hard over the three days, carefully transferring, anaesthetising and then injecting each fish with a tiny amount of inert elastomer that will stay visible for a lifetime. The three colours are distinctive and fluorescent, and the movements and survival rate of the fish from each of the three stocking sites will now be much easier to monitor. It was tricky at first, trying to inject the liquid plastic under the translucent skin on the heads of tiny, groggy barbel, but the fish seemed none the worse for the experience, soon recovering and swimming strongly

in the holding tanks. The bio security, absolute cleanliness and rigorous rules and routines, combined with massive experience and knowledge about raising and caring for fish, means that the quality of health and subsequent survival chances of those barbel is first class. More news on the stocking at a later date, but watch this space as well as the angling press for further details in the next few weeks.



Calverton barbel with red elastomer mark



Right, who`s next!



Marked barbel returned to holding tank



Just a few of Calverton`s holding tanks

Large Woody Debris and barbel

20th October, 2007

You could be forgiven for thinking that Large Woody Debris is the name of an American folk/blues singer, but it is in fact a very important concept for those trying to maintain and improve the riverine environment. Large Woody Debris, or LWD, is considered to be a vital component of healthy rivers, and has often been removed by angling organisations who view it as untidy, or constituting undesirable snags. Elements of the EA

responsible for land drainage or flood relief have also cleared it up efficiently in the past. More enlightened river managers now realise that fallen trees, logs and big branches are a valuable habitat for all sorts of creatures, not least fish, and although the wrong sort of debris in the wrong place can cause problems, LWD and the less bulky CWD, Coarse Woody Debris, are now viewed as very desirable features to be encouraged and yet carefully managed.

If the plans for the BS fishery at Bransford come to fruition, we hope to combine the removal of large overhanging trees with the retention and possible introduction of LWD and CWD within the river. We all know that barbel love cover like this, particularly on smaller rivers, and the range of other plants and animals that benefit from woody cover mean that retaining it is crucial to a healthy and balanced ecosystem. The BS inspired project on the Dorset Stour will also involve a good deal of instream work, to try and repair the damage done by excessive dredging and clearing of the river in past years. The new stock of barbel to be introduced will welcome plenty of cover and hidey holes too!

The last barbel I caught from the Stour was not far from a substantial bit of LWD, and although it was clearly a fish from the older generation, a bit long and lean and battle scarred, it put up a tremendous fight and tried hard to get back into the woodwork that it was undoubtedly using as shelter for much of the time while the river was low and clear. I thought it was another thirteen, but failed by a couple of ounces to make the weight. It will certainly fill out this winter, and I think it could make fourteen later on in the season. Another deep bronze, richly coloured fish, however.



Large Woody Debris on the Loddon, home to many barbel!



12.13 Stour barbel looking resigned to capture

Balsam and barbel

13th October, 2007

England, but also attended by representatives from local fishing clubs, EA, Wildlife Trusts and riparian owners. There is a big push to deal with the big three invasive plants, which include Giant Hogweed and Japanese Knotweed as well as the Himalayan or Indian Balsam. The latter is the most widespread and most rapidly invasive, however, and it looks as if plans to attack the key infestations next year will come to fruition if the will to kill can be funded and maintained! I suggested that anglers are going to be key contributors to the control of the balsam, but need to be made aware of the problems it can cause. Apart from the loss of biodiversity along river banks, which will have incalculable effects, the plant is an annual, and after dieback each year will leave bare banks that are then eroded and deposit silts into already choked gravels. Gravel spawners like salmon, trout, barbel and chub are the first to suffer. Hopefully, the local clubs will help educate their members and contribute to the work needed to both identify and treat outbreaks all along rivers and streams. Anglers have long been the eyes and ears of the waterside environment, and the threats from these invasive species are considerable.

The Stour is not yet subject to balsam attack, and that afternoon I was happy to fight my way through bramble, nettles and tall reeds to a sneaky little swim where I had spotted a big barbel a few days earlier. The river was still quite coloured, but I could make out a big grey shape working on the baited patch I had been feeding. It flashed again, and I was encouraged to see that it was a very deep fish and no doubt a good double. Second cast, and it took my half boilie, hurtled off upstream and burrowed strongly into the weed that was still very green and tough. The line squeaked and creaked under the strain, but eventually it tired, untangled itself and after a long and dogged fight under the rod top it wallowed into the net that was by now held in shaking hands. It was a really fat, clean, young looking fish, with the deep rich colours that can make barbel as handsome as any common carp. At thirteen ten, my best from the Stour for a few years, and with the look of getting even bigger in the next few.

I can see myself giving the Stour a bit more attention from now on. I have been spending a lot of time on the Avon, but there is still a good deal of water to explore on the river, as well as some old stamping grounds to revisit.



13.10 Stour barbel, fat and fighting fit 13.10 recovering in the net

Crucian diversion

10th October, 2007

A bit of settled warm weather gave the chance of what was likely to be the last visit of the season to the crucian lakes with Trevor and Budgie, who had been pressing for another visit in order to bag a few fat crucian carp before the frosts arrived. We stopped at an amazing cake shop on the way and stocked up with a blueberry and lemon, a chocolate slab, a ginger and orange, and other assorted goodies to pass the time if the crucians were not biting. Trevor is Chairman of The Roach Club, and insisted that we had to admire the latest additions to the fry tanks in the back garden before we left, and also discuss the plans for rearing more Avon roach from eggs for eventual release into the river. It was therefore late morning before the rods were even set up, and even then it was necessary to sample the cakes along with a cup of fresh hot tea before casting in.

We actually knew the crucians would not feed until the afternoon anyway, which is a pretty good excuse for the casual start to proceedings. We sat in adjacent swims, and swapped exclamations of disappointment every time the floats slid slowly away and our strikes met with nothing. Typical of the cagey crucians, and mostly only line bites as a rule. As the afternoon wore on, the crucians were starting to bubble a bit, and the occasional splashy roll told us they were at least in the swims.

The sudden screams of a flock of magpies alerted us to a bit of red claw nature, and Trevor grabbed his camera and crept up close to a sparrowhawk that had killed a pigeon in the woods nearby. The bird calmly dismembered and ate the unfortunate pigeon alive, while the magpies protested loudly, flying madly around the scene of carnage.

After a while, the satisfied hawk flew off, the magpies quietened down, and we got back to concentrating on the fishing. It was a delight to see Budgie grin as he took his first crucian from the water, and we all admired the chunky golden specimen, and vowed to come back next year in the early summer, when the fish are a bit easier to catch. I managed a couple of smallish fish, but it made a nice change again, aiming for tricky little fish on light tackle, and concentrating hard on every indication of a bite. One of the crucians did give me a barbel bite when I was not looking however, hooking itself and making the pin scream like a demented magpie, but I still counted it, despite Trev and Budge disapproving.



Roach Club fry tanks



Lovely little crucian carp



Sparrowhawk enjoying a pigeon at Marsh Farm

A Day on the Dorset Frome

5th October, 2007

It was time for the first visit of the season to the Frome, to check out the state of the river and also to get an idea of the grayling populations. It is usually possible to spot a few fish at this time of year, and I was pleased to see the river still clinging on to its summer dress, with some clear golden gravel and plenty of weed growth showing in the crystal clear water. The swans had massacred the ranunculus in the lower pools, but the upper part of the fishery looked like a miniature Hampshire Avon. The Frome is the most sinuous and serpentine river I know, snaking a path through a lush flat floodplain, and full of character and a mostly natural riffle and pool habitat is still to be seen. The Himalayan Balsam now blights the banksides, and it was irritating to be constantly surprised by exploding seedpods as the vegetation was disturbed for the first time at some of my favourite swims.

There were one or two nice grayling and a fair few brownies in residence, but as ever, many of the fish were very spooky and most remained well hidden. I trotted a few of the deeper pools, and was rewarded with a small selection of fish. A few dace, some salmon parr, and a nice mix of grayling of all sizes.

It is fascinating to watch them swirling and swooping for maggots, the more eager fish competing greedily and rising to the surface to take the bait. The bigger fish were more reluctant, and needed to be fed constantly for several minutes before they became confident. Even then, they were cute enough to ignore hook baits a lot of the time. The baby grayling are a pretty little fish, but not as brightly coloured as the brown trout, which looked as if they had been freshly painted in oils, with vivid orange flanks and a mixture of red and chocolate spots. The trout are a bit of a nuisance when after grayling, but I suppose the roles are reversed for the trout men on the river.

A couple of fish just under two and a half, and the sight of some small groups of fish of similar size bodes well

yet thick-shouldered body of a two or three pound fish invariably gives a stubborn dogged fight when hooked on light tackle. I will return after the first floods, and preferably on one of those cold clear frosty days when only the grayling can be relied upon.



Baby Frome grayling



Balsam, watercress and ranunculus still in profusion



Two and a half pounds, more of a handful



Brightly coloured brownie

Interesting recaptures

28th September, 2007

Working hard to find fish on the Avon at present, and although the Golden Rule is to find fish before it is worth fishing, it can sometimes be worth visiting spots that you know have been productive in the past. Some of the deeper, weedier areas are very hard to spot fish in, even when the river is clear, but they can throw up a fish when you try them out, fishing blindly, but relying on past form. First cast in an old favourite, deep and mysterious swim, and a hungry seven pound barbel, all fin perfect and sprightly, put in a very encouraging

appearance. He was nicely coloured, with no hookmarks, and was swiftly returned, and off with a splash.

Then it was the return of the chub with no face, a fish with a deformed top lip that I know I had caught twice before, from the same swim last year. He obviously liked the area, and there was no mistaking him. I am constantly amazed by the way that fish will stay in the same swims year after year, and also at the way they will travel great distances, for no apparent reason. It is the striking fish, with noticeable features, that you actually do notice, and it also seems to me that we are recapturing fish far more often than we realise.

The one-eyed barbel that I caught last week was instantly recognised as the fish I caught from half a mile upstream two years ago. It had gained about half a pound from the time of the first capture, but without the distinctive missing eye, that fish would have been put down as just another nine pounder. Another chub was to make an appearance just before dusk, and then I made the final cast.

I was staying a few minutes later than normal, because of a long and tiresome phone call from my sister LILLIAN, and then had the misfortune to have to play and land a low double figure common carp in the dark. It gave a terrific barbel bite, and fought like a barbel at first, then started thrashing around on the surface in a typically annoying way. The same carp I had taken from that swim a few weeks earlier, and a recapture I could have done without.



The Chub with No Face



Stour chub, six pound three



Old one-eyed barbel



Double figure common nuisance

Misty fruitfulness

24th September, 2007

Another fruitless visit to my new stretch of the Ouse, and after an early start and the early Autumnal mists had cleared, I was still disappointed to see that the river had still not cleared enough to see into the likely swims and spot fish. I saw some hungry chub and bream under the bush I was fishing, just visible as dark shapes moving over the sandy brown riverbed, and also a carp that had no doubt escaped from the nearby lakes during the floods. I caught a few nice chub, a bream, and a rainbow trout, my first from the Ouse, and another invading escapee. It tasted quite nice the next day, grilled and simply seasoned. I was devastated to observe a gang of Crays fighting over my bait spillages in the shallow water at my feet. They scurried about menacingly, squabbling nastily with each other, and indulging in displays of aggressive claw jousting. I had never seen crayfish in this area before, and have subsequently been told that they are now well established, which is a great shame, because they are a major pest, quietly devouring the hardest hook baits, which often need to be left out for long periods for cagey barbel.

I decided to have another try at another unproductive bit of river, a stretch of the Dorset Stour that has been fishing very slowly for me this year. The recent rains had coloured it up a bit, and I had to rely on prior knowledge of runs in the weedbeds to offer a bait in a clear area. Conditions looked good though, with an inch or so of extra water and not much debris drifting through. The reed mace beds that typify so much of the middle Stour had changed with the change in season, and the autumnal equinox saw them strangely brown and withered before there had been any frosts to speak of.

Evening mists were starting to form before I had any sign of a fish, and then the rod lurched slowly round and sprang back as what was clearly a line bite from a big fish indicated that I was in with a chance. I hoped it would not be a carp or bream in the swim, but the bite that followed the preliminary liner was from a most welcome eleven pound barbel, that fought like a carp, but turned into a barbel under the rod top.

No hookmarks, and even in the dusk it glowed with the rich chocolately bronze that Stour barbel so often exhibit.

I left feeling a bit more mellow, with a good result from the Stour and hopes for a fruitful autumn.



Signal crayfish emerges from a gloomy Ouse



Early Autumn on Dorset Stour, reedbeds suddenly browning off



Eleven nine Stour barbel

Loddon comes up trumps

19th September, 2007

We had planned to combine a visit to the Loddon with the collection of some more of Glyn the Baitmakers excellent bait, but he ran out of eggs at the last minute, and we went to the Loddon anyway. I have enough of the bait in the freezer for another week or two in any case, and a fair bit of dry powder and flavours to make my own hook baits. These Loddon fish are quite pressured, and I had decided to make some hard little boilies, about the size of peas, to use on the hook over a hemp and caster loosefeed. The plan was to use small hook baits on a size 12 over particles.

Steve was still moaning and panicking about waiting a bit for the bait he had ordered, so I put him in the best swim yet again to try to reassure him and calm him down. I had been terrified by his driving all the way up to the river; it was like an episode from the Wacky Races, but I was impressed by the fact that he could name at least five of the contestants from that superb cartoon series. He was equally impressed that I knew them all, as well as the name of Hitler's dog, and also the reason why Subbuteo is called Subbuteo. Bombarding him with such fascinating facts eventually drove him away, and I was able to concentrate on my swim, which is a typical Loddon hole in the weed, only really visible when the sun is up, and requiring lots of staring in and very careful casting to ensure the bait gets to the bottom. I have found that the fish are quite happy to swim through quite thick cabbage and potamogeton weed, and are more likely to take a bait there than in the more open runs. There was a nice big barbel in residence, perhaps two, and even though the fish appeared to be hungry and confident, I fed sparingly with droppers of hemp and caster and crumbled boilie for a couple of hours before casting in. The occasional glimpses of flank or fins or tail confirmed that at least two fish were working over the bait. Steve came back to visit, but I got rid of him by trying to explain all the positive feedback mechanisms for

global warming. As soon as he had gone, I lowered a tiny hook bait into the hole in the weed and sat back.

The sun was high and bright, the day was fresh and clear, and to play and land barbel in such fine and fair weather is most enjoyable. Even more enjoyable when the barbel are big, and I was soon attached to a very big fish, that had dragged the rod round in a slow positive manner barely half an hour after casting in.

As it burst through the weed and charged off upstream I was delighted to see the broad, thick shoulders and considerable body length of a substantial barbel illuminated in the sunlight. Cabbage and strands of ribbon weed floated to the surface as it burrowed furiously into the dense weed growth, but there were no hard snags to contend with, and the strong little hook was doing a fine job. I knew it was a pb for me from the river as soon as it was placed on the mat, and I was more than happy with a thirteen one, first cast. The other fish took a few hours to come back, but I was packing at dusk after taking a chunky 9.12 from the same swim. These Loddon fish are either quite old or very heavily fished for, because it is usual for them to have a lot of marks and fin deformations, and they have a tired look to them sometimes. The second fish had a tiny, twisted tail fin, and I think I had him last year in the winter at a bit over ten.

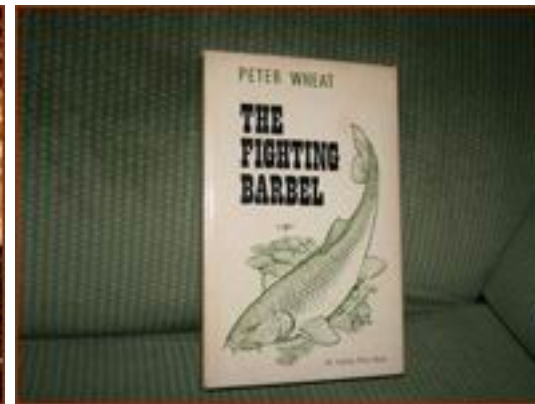
Steve was happy with a couple of smaller fish, and drove home in a cheerful and lunatic way. I found that keeping my eyes closed most of the time made the trip a bit less scary.



Front end of Loddon thirteen one



Deformed tail of Loddon barbel



Nice clean signed copy, bid for this on the Auction!

That will do nicely!

14th September, 2007

I am increasingly worried about the spread of carp in our rivers, and I was concerned to hear today that they are showing quite often now on the Severn below Diglis, in a stretch of river that will probably suit them well, but where they have been almost unheard of until recently. No doubt these fish got into the river during those incredible floods, but they are here to stay. Let us hope they fail to reproduce, and will die away in time. A carp

explosion on our rivers could, however, be on the cards as average temperatures rise and fry spawned in the river manage to survive the winter. I have witnessed them spawning on the Hampshire Avon, but fortunately there is no real evidence that their progeny survive their first year. Avon carp are escapees from lakes, and are a bit of a nuisance at times, but with luck they will never become a serious threat to proper river fish. I have been pestered by carp in a swim that also contained a rather large barbel, and a few times the screaming runs of a possible barbel turned out to be a double figure carp. They fight differently to barbel as a rule, dashing off on fast runs and then jaggging and flopping about in that annoying way that carp often fight, constantly changing direction and being positively irritating. Barbel are much more sedate and self-controlled when they fight, equally dogged and determined, but much more thoughtful battlers, somehow.

I watched today as a big thick shouldered fish demonstrated a greedy interest in the mix of crumbled boilie and micro pellet I had deposited under my feet in a deep, scary swim, and when I finally hooked him, he shot off like a carp, running fast down river for twenty yards, stopping momentarily, and then running some more. I prayed it was not another carp, but was both gratified and terrified to see a great big barbel hanging in the current, on a long line and dangerously close to horribly thick weed. It took a long time to ease the fish back up against the current; following downstream was not an option. It plodded remorselessly past me and upstream, occasionally going head down, tail up and thumping away as the big ones so often do. I was sweating and shaking and finally smiling broadly as a slab of a fish came to the net, and smiling even more broadly when it registered an ounce over fourteen on both sets of scales. I carry two pairs, to use when a notable fish is taken, and to maintain a check on each other's accuracy.

A fourteen is a very big fish for the Avon, and it looked stunning in the sunlight, both in the pictures on the bank and as it swam off across the gravel after recovery. That will do nicely, I thought, I can afford to spend some more time exploring further afield for a while, with some laurels to rest upon for now. Up to the Loddon again next, picking up some more bait from Glyn the Baitmaker on the way, and looking forward to trying out some new swims. Not looking forward to his coffee, though.



Pesky carp, but a pretty fish, a fifteen pound dinner plate



Lovely fat fourteen from the Avon



Fourteen recovering in the net

Gotcha!

9th September, 2007

The pain of losing a big fish takes a while to subside, and I have been plagued by the vivid pictures in my mind of that big barbel that was so unjustly and cruelly denied to me last week. I had to try again for it, and had decided to leave the swim for at least a week to give the fish a chance to forget the unpleasantness of our last meeting. I returned early this morning in the earnest hope that the fish was still in the area, and as calmly and patiently as I could, I baited the area frugally, flicking in bits of broken boilie, and waited for the sun to rise high enough to see clearly into the swim. I was more than encouraged to see the big pinky fins and urgently wagging tail of a big barbel, head down as he dug around in the gravel for the bait, just as he had a week earlier. It had to be the same fish, and he was still in residence and willing to feed. He was very spooky, and at times shot out of the swim in a very nervous manner. No room for any mistakes this time, I had been given a second chance and was determined not to waste it.

I gradually trickled in bait for a couple of hours, watching the reaction of the fish each time, noting where he came from and how quickly he responded to the bait. A bait dropper of crumble scared him away for a few minutes, but he returned within minutes to grub about with ever increasing confidence. Hookpoint was checked and double checked, knots were tied slowly and carefully, and soon a little bit of boilie on a size 11 was in place and waiting for him. The rod walloped round within minutes, and I was dismayed to find myself playing the smallest barbel of the season instead of the biggest. A pesky little three pounder, rarer than a double on the Avon, had sneaked in and wolfed the bait. He was worthy of admiration, and I forgave him his greediness, hoping that the disturbance had not spooked his big brother. More likely big sister, actually. Good to see fish of that size in the river, because they are the thirteen pounders of tomorrow.

Fortune was to favour me, and after a few more hours of careful baiting and cautious casting, the fish made a mistake, and once more I was connected to my biggest barbel of the season. The fight was like an action replay of the last battle; first burrowing under a far bank weedbed, then boring upstream, then thumping about under the rod top, stubbornly refusing to surface and approach the net. I was to experience an emotion at the opposite end of the scale to the way I felt when that fish had dropped off the hook under my rod top last week, and I yelled with joy as it finally gave up and splashed into the net.

Gotcha!

All the anguish and self recrimination and misery from the previous encounter was forgotten, and I spent the rest of the day in quiet satisfied contentment, reliving the pleasant memories of the capture of a what proved to be a spanking fit 13.7, well within my estimates of the weight I had put it at when I lost it.



Fish of the future, Avon three pounder



Gotcha! Best of the season at 13.7

Great Ouse revisited

6th September, 2007

It has been a few years since I last fished the Ouse. It holds fond memories of some exciting barbel fishing, and particularly of bigger than average fish. In fact, the last time I fished the river I sat and tried to tempt a shoal of barbel that included a well known fourteen, two fifteens and a great big sandy fish with a damaged tail that swam about imperiously in mid water, and was clearly the famous Traveller. It would have been a good nineteen at that time. I hooked and landed one of the fifteens, and that caused the departure of the others for the day. The fifteen was easily recognised as a ten pounder I had caught from almost the same swim five years earlier. Situations changed, and that stretch became inaccessible to me for a few reasons.

The chance of fishing a similar stretch of river means that I intend to make a few visits this year to try for one of the Ouse monsters. My first visit was meant to be more of a reconnoitre than anything, but after walking the stretch and being unable to spot fish because of the murky water, I elected to try and fish under a far bank bush that looked a very likely swim. The first fish was a nice Ouse chub, very stocky and well conditioned, and very nearly almost six pounds. A good start, and I studied him closely for a while, noting how the Ouse fish seem to be more silver-black, almost sooty in appearance, darker and more subdued than the brighter, brassy, colourful Avon variety.

The arrival of the local Mink Hunt made life difficult for a while, as a pack of lolling hounds decide to search for mink in my swim for a good while, crashing into the water from the high banks and baying wildly. Their handlers, quaintly attired and blowing little horns at the naughty dogs, were quite apologetic, and we discussed the likelihood of their dogs harming otters, and the view that otter presence should drive the mink away in any case. Apparently the dogs can tell the difference, and some mink are still about in the area. I remain unconvinced, and yet can not pretend to be able to predict how otters will affect riverine fish populations. A single otter may be preferable to a gang of mink, and could actually be of benefit. They may as well have been Barbel Hounds, because there was only the capture of a few more sooty Ouse chub and a bream that gave a very convincing

barbel bite to end the day.

I had found out a bit about the stretch, and will make a few more visits before the season ends. The chance of a sixteen, seventeen or even eighteen pounder adds a certain edge to the fishing on the Ouse. Late season could give the hope of an even bigger fish.



Flood debris still evident on the Ouse



There must be barbel under that bush!



Fat silvery/black Ouse chub, five fifteen and a half

Hopelessly disconnected

3rd September, 2007

Bright sunny weather means more opportunity to walk the Avon banks and spot fish, East bank in the morning, West bank in the afternoon, and a bag of boilies to flick into likely swims to try and raise interest from a few fish. I used to walk about with buckets of hemp and a bait dropper rod, but a pocket full of quality boilies will give you enough bait to get chub and barbel to show themselves these days. After a long and gruelling walk, I found a swim that looked the business, and was most gratified to see a double figure barbel make an appearance and start hunting and grubbing about for my bits of broken boilie within minutes. Then an even bigger barbel, a great, pale purply fish with huge pink fins glided in, and showed a definite interest in feeding. I was soon setting up my stall in the swim, and a few droppers of crumbled boilie had both fish showing even more interest.

It is nice when a plan comes together. I had found a big fish after hours of walking and peering into the river. I had fed him and encouraged him to gain confidence, not rushing things, and feeding him up over a few hours while I decided where and when to cast in. The bigger fish, at least a big twelve, maybe a fourteen pounder, was the bolder of the two, and I soon had him rooting about confidently in a spot that would make fishing easy. I swung the lead into position; it dropped at the head of a weedbed, and the long tail allowed a hook bait and small PVA bag of boilie crumble to swing round and settle safely under the weed, where the barbel was sure to take it. After two casts and less than an hour the rod hooped round and the pin gave that long slow purr that

signals a take from a big fish.

The bigger fish it definitely was, and I was feeling strangely calm as I watched almost every second of the fight; the first emergence of those great fins from under the shadow of the big weedbed, and the awesome thumping rushes upstream, all over golden sunlit gravel. It was a big, big fish, and the first time it came to the net I was shown a deep flank and a broad, thick back as the barbel made one last determined run.

I brought him back to the net, and was poised to envelop a wallowing, gasping barbel in the meshes when the hook popped out, the rod straightened uselessly, and I watched horrified as the fish righted itself, and swam lazily off under the weed. I stood stock still, unbelieving, and suddenly feeling hopelessly disconnected from the fish I had wanted so badly to land.. Only an angler can understand that feeling of loss when a big fish gets away at the last moment.

The smaller fish was still keen however, and after a period of mourning for loss of my big barbel, I persuaded myself to fish for it, and was rewarded with a bright and beautiful, fin-perfect ten and a half pounder, a welcome consolation of sorts.



Watching the rod for me



There are worse places to lose a fish



Fat and spotless Avon ten pounder, consolation prize

Back to the Avon

28th August, 2007

The Hants. Avon is finally beginning to get into proper Summer order, with clarity improving every day. The whole point of fishing the Avon in the warmer months is to walk the banks spotting fish, then to fish for barbel you can see. The sight of double figure fish scooting about over your bait, warily stalking it or spookily avoiding it, not only represents the peak of enjoyment, but teaches you so much about barbel behaviour. The knowledge gleaned from watching them helps you in those fascinating and so often fruitless efforts to try and outwit them when you can not see them so easily.

small, single sea-winter fish of less than ten pounds that traditionally were ignored by the old school of Avon salmon fishermen. They are now of interest to some of the few remaining serious salmon anglers. Barbel are of far more interest to me in the coarse season, and it was after several hours of hard walking and the beginnings of an eyestrain headache, that I caught sight of a tell-tale coral fin hiding under a weedbed. The swim had a lot going for it, apart from a herd of stupid swans that insisted in indulging in noisy, splashy, infuriating swanny disputes every few minutes on top of my baited area. An interesting invasive escapee in the form of a black Australian swan joined the pointless melee every so often, just to add a bit of colour to proceedings.

Thankfully, the fish are used to these demonstrations of typical waterbird stupidity over their heads, and although the barbel were hard work, wary and not really on the feed, I managed a lovely, sandy, yellowish-coloured fish of just under twelve pounds after trickling bits of boilie between the weed and pinning a little bit of broken boilie to the bottom. A two ounce backlead and the line held onto the gravel with rod tip resting on the river bed was vital to avoid drifting weed. Both the floating weed strands ripped up by feeding swans, and the annual crop of silkweed breaking away from the shallows made fishing very difficult. Nice to work hard for a fish, and particularly nice to play it out from bite to netting in clear water, watching every moment of the fight with that painful anticipation that playing fish you can see embodies. Two brace of spotless fat Avon chub, with two over six and best a chunky 6.14 were welcome icing on the cake. A long walk back to the car is always a bit shorter and more sprightly when a few good fish have made your day.



Three stupid swans; how did evolution produce this?



Lovely fish just under 12lb



Avon chub at 6.14, should be a mid seven this winter

Relaxing on the Kennet

27th August, 2007

A trip to the Kennet was now in order. It had to be possible to find some fish somewhere that I was capable of catching. There is no doubt that the river is on a bit of a high as far as barbel are concerned, and a new river

record last year confirms they are getting bigger. They are also still very numerous, and catches of a dozen or more in a day are not unexpected on some stretches. I fished two swims I had never tried before today. The first was another washout, and when particle fishing on a prolific stretch it pays to press the panic button after two or three hours and move on. First cast in my second choice resulted in a savage bite within less than a minute, and a fit and very welcome five pounder was eventually persuaded to the net after a vigorous tussle. A bit of a wait for the next fish, but well worth the wait as a nice fat 12.10 came to the net after a fantastic, dogged and determined struggle. The fish was clearly in excellent condition, but perhaps had ten ounces of my bait inside him judging by the big belly!

My confidence was restored after three more fish, including another double, took a liking to my baiting pattern, but I reckon I could have doubled the catch if I had fished the swim from the off. I packed up early, before some anglers who think you can only catch at night were arriving, but was more than satisfied with five fish in a short afternoon, on what is becoming an increasingly attractive river to me.

The clarity on the Kennet is never very good, no doubt due to the suspended solids from the boat traffic on the canalised sections, and the river regulars inform me that the once lush ranunculus is suffering and declining as a result. The fish do not seem to be suffering unduly, although the roach and dace are not as numerous or as big as once they were. It is not easy to untangle the effects of man from natural cycles in population structures, but we should never be complacent about our fishing, or think that barbel are the only quarry worth thinking about.

The crayfish are being cropped hard on many bits of Kennet, but remain a worrying pest. The H.Balsam and some Orange Balsam and Japanese Knotweed are slowly encroaching, and the increase in boat traffic and water demands from more homebuilding are not going to help the river much. Perhaps, like all our farmers at the moment, we should make hay while the sun shines!



John Found with a nice ten pounder



Big fat Kennet 12.10, and new teeth which cost £700



Kennet double comes to net

Visit to the Teme

23rd August, 2007

We intended to do a survey of the BS stretch of the Teme at Bransford in the Spring, but the unseasonal water levels rather delayed things. The horrific flooding of the Midland rivers in the early part of the year meant that the river was indistinguishable from the surrounding farmland for much of the time, and the evidence was there to see on our arrival. Debris from floodwater on fences is not uncommon, but not when the fence is probably twenty feet or more above normal water level! I was accompanied by our fishery expert, Nick Giles, Ron Lander, Bransford bailiff, and representatives from the EA and Teme Rivers Trust.

Nick will be producing a report with recommendations on how to best spend our allocated monies from the Research and Conservation budget, and it is expected that the project on Bransford will be used as an example of how fishery lessees like the Society, riparian owners, the EA, Natural England and local interest groups can work together to make positive and sustained improvements to river environments. At the end of the day it was clear that we could see BS funds kick-starting a much bigger project than we had first imagined, and we made good contacts and good friends with some very knowledgeable and sensible people. More news on the Teme works as our plans unfold, but we are hoping to arrange a members work party and fish-in in late October to get the ball rolling.

The damage done to banks and bankside trees was considerable, but it was not difficult to see where our priorities lie with regard to improvement and conservation work. Tree management is of vital importance on small rivers, and we need to strike a balance between total non-management and the excesses in the name of flood defence so often seen practiced in the past. Over-shading is to be avoided, but lots of woody debris and instream cover is also desirable for fish and other animals. The bane of the bloody Balsam is also apparent on the Teme, and the effects on bank erosion are already becoming apparent.

Nick and I talked incessantly about river management all the way there and all the way back, amongst other things, and I am becoming really enthusiastic about the way BS supported projects on the Teme, Thames and Dorset Stour are going to make a real difference. The BS Research and Conservation Auction is about to kick off, so make sure you take part and provide us with some more funding to promote more BS led work! Non members can bid via a BS member, of course.



Teme at Bransford in placid summer condition



Flood debris twenty feet above river level



Big scour hole in need of repair, and willow in need of coppicing!

Hard times

14th August, 2007

It is not unexpected to blank when barbel fishing on the Hampshire Avon. It is a hard river, with a low barbel population, and after a few fruitless sessions it was time to blank elsewhere, so I went and blanked on the Loddon, with my mate Steve in tow. I gave him the best swim of course, and careful instructions on how to fish it, which he studiously ignored. He fished under his rod top with a boilie after I had insisted he fish under the far bank with caster and hemp, drawing the fish out of the overhanging bush where I knew they lived. He showed me up by catching his first two Loddon barbel, while I failed gloriously in a great looking swim a bit further upstream.

A few days later I decided to take a trip to the Warks Avon for some easy fishing on a productive stretch where I would be guaranteed to recharge my failing barbel batteries. Another startling blank; the river was totally off form, all grey and chalky coloured, rising a bit after some cold rain.

Time for a rest from the rivers. So went for a day crucian fishing, and took a nice bag of four over two pounds, best a tad under three. It was nice to watch a little float dithering around, while big golden crucians flopped and crashed all around, rolling enticingly and bubbling madly, but only making the odd mistake. I missed a dozen bites, but really enjoyed the solid thumping fight of those heavyweight crucians on light tackle and an old centrepin reel.

It is important not to get too obsessed with barbel, or even river fishing, or even fishing itself, and a wider experience is good for keeping a sense of perspective and enjoyment of what going fishing is really about. I finished the week with a morning on the Frome with Hugh Miles, feeding and filming some grayling for him. We were entranced and excited as two pound plus fish swooped and swirled after maggots in front of his underwater camera, and a few hours watching fish in his company was a joy. The new series Hugh is putting

the final touches to will be more than a milestone; it promises to be quite the best fishing programme ever made, with underwater footage that is nothing short of spectacular.



Big Loddon barbel



Hugh Miles ready to insert his underwater camera



Big crucian, nearly three pounds, makes a nice change!

More news on the Avon balsam problems

7th August, 2007

We met with an officer from Natural England to discuss the problems of Himalayan/Indian balsam on the Hampshire Avon. I am used to sitting in amongst the stuff on the Loddon and Teme, and dread the thought of it taking over on my local rivers. The effects of invasive species on our rivers is not to be underestimated, and although the prospect of fighting your way through a jungle of Japanese Knotweed and beds of slimy H. Balsam to fish for catfish and hordes of ornamental carp that might get to your bait before the crabs and crayfish sounds far fetched, the future of our river fishing could become such a nightmare.

Loss of plant biodiversity will have long term effects on insect life, and indeed all other fauna, and the accelerated bankside erosion that will result from winter dieback of balsam will impinge on fish habitat also.

Little wonder that the EA and NE are taking invasives very seriously, and considerable funds are being allocated to eradication plans. I was horrified to find that large beds of HB twenty or thirty yards long are establishing on the Avon side streams, and odd plants are popping up all over the place from Salisbury to the sea. We agreed to contribute all we can to the eradication programme that will soon start, and raising awareness is the first step. There are hopes that some form of biological control, in the form of fungus that attacks the leaves of HB, may make the job of getting rid of it easier, but in the meantime, it is likely that physical and chemical removal over a period of several years is the only option.

I will keep pulling it up whenever I see it.

I went to the Loddon next day, and with cover of balsam behind me, I managed to tempt a ten pounder on a bed

of caster, after it refused to fall for my special paste and crumbled boilie. It was one of the bull-nosed, blunt-headed variety, but a handsome fish nonetheless.



Balsam meeting, with the horrible stuff as a backdrop!



Insects like these need diverse plant habitat



Hampshire Avon, before HB takes over!

Shakespeare`s barbel

4th August, 2007

A blank or two on the Hampshire Avon encouraged a visit to the Warwickshire counterpart, and to a stretch that was supposed to be very prolific. It would be nice to set out my stall for a good bag of fish in new surroundings. The day was pleasant enough, but the barbel were not as enthusiastic as I was, and hard work it was to entice a mere five fish from a swim I knew was capable of twice as many on average.

The debris in the trees above my head bore witness to the raging floodwater that had hurtled through the valley only a week or so ago, and maybe the fish had fed up well as the levels dropped, or had even been scattered by the unseasonal heavy currents.

These Shakespeare barbel are pretty, young fish on the whole, and as brightly coloured as any I have seen. They fight like stink as well, and the journey was still well worthwhile. I learnt about a few other swims, and that the fish are growing steadily. The Warwickshire Avon will be producing some real lumps in a few years, and although I did not get a double on that trip, they are there in increasing numbers. I shall return next week with some hemp and caster, and give them a change from the pellet and boilie diet that seems to be most commonly employed by the locals.



Fat Warks Avon seven pounder



Pretty, brightly coloured Warks Avon fish

Temporary disappointment

31st July, 2007

Simon Asbury came down to try his luck for a Hampshire Avon barbel, and I was worried that the river had not been fishing too well in the previous day or so. We selected a very reliable swim, that always held barbel, and where the nuisance chub would possibly beat his chub pb, at the very least. We baited and waited, and peered into the swim at regular intervals, then baited and waited some more. We went for a walk to rest the swim, and I showed Simon the grandeur and beauty of some of the surrounding countryside, as well as the swim where Dick Walker caught the 12.12 barbel described in his classic book, No Need to Lie. We took photos of the spot and paid homage, and returned to a swim that appeared only to hold one very spooky barbel. I told Simon that I had hardly ever failed to get an Avon barbel for a guest, but the words had hardly left my lips when I realised the inevitable consequences of such a rash statement. Four hours later and we had pressed the panic button; the barbel were either not in residence or not responding at all.

The day was glorious, the surroundings made a real impression on Simon, and we determined to at least get him a big chub to save the day. We moved to another swim, where I foolishly guaranteed that a big five would come our way unless we were very unlucky. We were very unlucky. I blamed the sudden change in atmospheric pressure, the bright sun, the full moon, and the weedcutting upstream that had discoloured the water, These factors, combined with some poor judgement and basic incompetence on my part, meant that Simon failed to catch more than a few little chub and dace, and a fat gudgeon.

We had a nice day, nonetheless, and good company in nice surroundings had to suffice, this time. We will try again later in the year, and as soon as I can think up another list of excuses.



Dick Walker caught a 12.12 here



Simon waiting patiently



5.14 chub, a few ounces bigger for Simon next time!

Barbel under the bushes

28th July, 2007

Very few swims on the Hampshire Avon are created by holding areas such as overhanging bushes or snags, and it is actually unusual to find barbel under that sort of cover. The river is big enough, and weedy enough, and sufficiently varied in bottom contours, for the fish to be quite happy away from the sort of woody cover that typifies barbel swims on smaller rivers like the Teme, Upper Ouse or Loddon, where the overhanging bushes are invariably home to a few barbel and chub. Avon fish love the weed, and do not need to hide in trees as a rule. I had fished this swim briefly last week, with one rod under the bush and one out in mid river, and both the brace of barbel and the chub I took that day came from the mid river swim, where the current and weed was clearly to their liking. The much more attractive overhanging trees were clearly not as attractive to the fish as to me; they were obviously not reading the text books.

I knew there were more fish in the area though, and could not resist putting a bait under the trees a second time. The river was as unpredictable as ever, and on the second visit to a swim where the fish had already had a taste of the bait, and which I was certain had not been fished by anyone else in the meantime, failed to produce a bite on either rod for most of the day. I was ready to leave and spend the last hour in another spot further downstream, when the bush rod curved round smartly, and I was soon attached to a very heavy, slow and ponderous fish that was very conveniently heading upstream and away from the woodwork.

It looked huge as it swam up under the rod top, but the fairly brief fight was an indication of an older generation barbel, a little tatty in the fins, slightly flabby, but a satisfying chunk of a fish at a little under twelve. It was probably fourteen plus in its prime, but I admired it gratefully before resting and returning it. It blew plenty of bubbles before regaining its strength and composure, but was soon gulping and breathing strongly. I have never subscribed to the massaging/burping advice that some people give as a supposed help to recovering barbel. They are quite capable of ridding themselves of air bubbles, and rubbing and massaging

removes slime, and must cause stress or damage to internal organs. Leave them alone, let them recover naturally with minimal handling, and you are treating them safely, in my view.

While checking out the area for the accursed balsam, I noticed how bright and vigorous the native Purple Loosestrife is this year, It may be because I am searching for the purple HB flowers more keenly, but the stands of loosestrife seem to be particularly striking lately. Meeting with Natural England next week to see how the spread of balsam can be checked, so should be interesting. They can pay me to pull it up, no problem!



Purple Loosestrife in bloom



Older generation of Avon barbel,
11.15

Last knockings success

26th July, 2007

I wish it would stop raining, although the mere inconvenience in this part of the world is nothing to the destruction and tragedy people are experiencing elsewhere. The evidence for climate change caused by global warming caused by the excesses of humanity continues to build, but I fear it will take further damage and death on a global scale before the message gets home to all of us, and we accept the expense and changes to our lives necessary to avert the more serious consequences that the unbridled use of our resources will produce. Fishing helps to stop you thinking too seriously about such stuff, and the morning rain eventually cleared, and flocks of fairly verminous geese became the next source of annoyance. The Canada flocks are apparently growing in numbers every year, and there are nearly a hundred in the group that seemed only half that last year on this stretch. They were joined by what I think were Greylags, first about five or six, then a much bigger group wheeled overhead, but at least they are natives. The invasive Canadas make a lot of noise and mess, undoubtedly compete with native species, and even worse, they will adopt lost cygnets and bring them up as their own! I hear that in Canada they cull the things hard, and turn them into goose burgers.

A very enthusiastic chub gave me a barbel bite as the rain stopped, then did the same a couple of hours later,

which helped to break the monotony of a day without many fish of any description. The capture of the same chub twice in a day is not unusual, and I remember catching one three times in a day last year. It probably happens more than we think, as it is the unusual or striking marks that you notice that make you realise the recapture is occurring in the first place. This chub had a big, well-healed scar on his shoulder that made identification easy.

I felt sure there were barbel in my swim, and resisted the urge to move on. Always a dilemma when coloured water prevents you from seeing the fish. I decided to stay and wait until dusk, and was rewarded with a slow confident bite just as I was getting my untidy scattering of tackle put away. The swim was fairly weed-free, and it was nice to play the fish out in open water, almost enjoying the fight as it surged off on several scary runs, first upstream and across, then downstream and worryingly close to an overhanging bush. It weighed bang on eleven, and was still pretty lean for the time of year. Very welcome indeed, after a miserable, damp, goose-plagued day.



Various assorted geese



Nice Avon eleven pounder, last knockings



Very hungry chub, twice in a day!

Triple double

24th July, 2007

Spent the best part of the day today fishing a deep and mysterious swim I had not fished for many years, not far in fact from where I had caught my first Hampshire Avon double. The swim had not changed much really, apart from being much more weedy and much less fast flowing than I remembered. It is so much more satisfying to catch fish from where you think they ought to be, in fresh areas unfrequented by others, than to queue up to fish the favoured spots and attempt to recycle the hookmarked barbel already taken by others. Not easy to be consistently successful, though, and I failed to do more than imagine the barbel that should have been lurking in my mystery swim. There were two or three big salmon crashing about all day as well, which can put the coarse fish off the feed, as the more aggressive silver tourists muscle in and vie for possession of the best lies,

so often good barbel spots as well. I passed the time by watching a family of buzzards wheeling and mewing overhead. They seem to really enjoy just playing in the sky, soaring, diving, and occasionally teasing each other with feint attacks. Probably Mum and Dad and a pair of this years offspring. I have already ordered a longer lens, so I can get more than just fuzzy outline shots.

I packed up mid afternoon and moved to a swim I had actually never fished before, but one of those more well known to Avon regulars. Out went two droppers of crumbled boilie, followed by a carefully prepared PVA bag of crumble nicked onto a size 9 seven shilling hook snuggled up to a paste-wrapped boilie.

Glyn the Baitmaker always supplies some dry mix and flavours so I can make a single egg mix of paste each time I go, more than enough for a day.

It was early evening before the slow, confident whirr of the centrepin signalled the interest of the first barbel, a chunky scraper ten pounder that fought a bit like a big bream at first, just hanging and kicking in the current. Next cast, a leaner but very pigeon chested 10.8 made for a very satisfying brace, which more than made up for the frustrating fishless hours earlier. I was feeling well pleased with myself, and even more confident of the new bait recipe, when the third barbel of the evening dragged the rod down and round. A lumpy fight, mostly under the rod top, and I was delighted to meet an old acquaintance, who was normally a resident of an area a few hundred yards upstream. There was no doubt that it was a humpy, cranked barbel that I had caught two years ago at 10.7, but was still around and getting bigger, despite his apparent deformity. Humpy now weighed 11.2, and even his ragged tail appeared to be mending nicely. I double checked when I got home, and no doubt it was the same fish. These barbel with twisted spines are not uncommon, and clearly recognisable as a rule. I have also had pike and dace with the same deformity over the years, and I am sure it is quite natural. I can not remember the last time I had three doubles in a day from the Avon, and those three obliging fish certainly saved the day in style!



Ten and a half and getting fatter



Buzzard in outline



Cranky hump backed 11.2

Testing new bait

19th July, 2007

Travelled up to the Loddon valley to collect some fresh bait from my bait maker, Glyn. He is a an enthusiastic angler as well as an enthusiastic bait maker, and we discussed the ins and outs of application and ingredients, as well as his latest carping exploits, over a couple of cups of Glyn`s revolting coffee. He makes excellent bait, but horrible coffee.

I always feel confident fishing with my custom built boilies and paste, and although the Avon barbel and chub were taking the bait avidly, I wanted to test the bait on the Loddon. I declined the offer of another cup of coffee as politely as I could, and headed on to the river with a good few kilos of frozen bait secure in my big polystyrene bait box. I knew from experience that it would stay solid all day in there, well insulated from even the hottest conditions for many hours. I always combine the bait collection with an afternoon on the local rivers, either Loddon or Kennet, and I was eager to try out the bait on fish that had not seen it before.

I baited with some remnants of hemp and caster from my last trip, followed by four droppers of crumbled boilies. These fish were a bit shy of big baits, so only half a 12mm boilie was fished over the bed of bait, combined with a little PVA bag of boilie crumble.

I sat back and watched the Red Kites doing a display while the swim matured, as the barbel caught the scent of Glyn`s latest creation, and hopefully homed in on the hook bait. The kites are an impressive bird, they seem to be spreading southwards as well, and there have been sightings on the Avon valley. I tried to photograph them, but soon realised that a new lens will be needed for any such long range shots to be worthwhile. The fuzzy pic I did manage is nevertheless quite nice, I think, the classic outline of the kite, with the cranked wings and forked tail is unmistakable.

Three fat Loddon barbel proved the bait worked that afternoon, and they also tested my new line to the limit as they smashed the rod round and rampaged through the thick weedbeds. The bait clearly has instant appeal, and shows what a waste of time heavy prebaiting is under most circumstances.



Red Kite on the wing



All three barbel had hookmarks

Bird trouble

16th July, 2007

The number of invasive or ornamental species that are popping up on our rivers is on the increase, what with Himalayan Balsam, Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogwort, Pennywort and now three different species of crayfish, to name just a few. The EA and Natural England are apparently working towards a big push to address these invaders, mostly because of the stringent future demands of the Water Framework Directive. It may be too little too late unless we see some decisive action soon.

I was joined by a pair of pretty little ducks, of a species unknown to me, who begged for food all day today. They seemed very amenable and quite decorative, but who knows what their effect will be on native mallards, or other wildlife if they become established? Even native species can become troublesome if they breed excessively and reach plague proportions, as Mute swans have on the southern rivers. I was horrified to see that a herd of thirty or so non breeders had established itself on my favourite bit of Dorset Frome when I made a quick visit the other day. They had stripped the river bare of ranunculus for a mile or so, and therefore removed all cover and dropped the level by a good foot, and I shudder to think of the effects on fish fry and other wildlife. I do not like swans; they are stupid, aggressive and destructive, and the mild winters and lack of control of their numbers is causing a bit of an environmental disaster in places.

A nice pair of barbel gave me other things to think about later in the day, and the Avon ranunculus gave them plenty of cover and somewhere to run through when I hooked them. The sound of the line creaking and squeaking as the barbel burrowed into the weed was both welcome and worrying, but it sounds worse than it actually is. Firm pressure, alternated with a bit of slack line invariably sees the fish kicking itself free. The fish weighed 9.4 and 10.8, and the ten pounder had a particularly good set of whiskers. The barbels on a barbel are not barbules, by the way. The latter are the little hooks on bird feathers, that hold the filaments together. Birds have barbules, but barbel have barbels!



Weed eating swans on the Frome



Two mystery ducks



Big whiskered Avon double

Avon roach project

14th July, 2007

This Close Season I have been helping Trevor and Budgie of the Roach Club with a project which is aiming to try and help with the repopulation of the Middle Hampshire Avon with roach, which are becoming virtually extinct on many stretches where once they were numerous. We have collected roach eggs and fry, and are housing them in tanks in Trevor's back garden and feeding them up ready for return to whence they came, hopefully with a much higher survival rate than in the wild.

This technique has been employed very successfully on the river upstream, and with support from local EA, fishing clubs and also the Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust, we are also hoping to make a difference, giving the failing roach populations a helping hand. A friendly trout farmer supplied us with large fry tanks, we built the platforms to support them, and the circulating pump to provide water movement, and Trevor has been feeding them daily with boiled egg and trout fry crumb. Roach Club members and local tackle dealers are also supporting the scheme with donations and encouragement. We are currently nurturing a couple of thousand little roach. I spent several happy hours discussing the next steps, feeding the roach, removing detritus and predatory water boatmen from the tanks, drinking tea and eating cake, and engaging in the sort of fishing-related activity that can be infinitely more satisfying than just merely catching fish.

There is an increasing need for us to put more back into rivers than we take out, and it is short sighted and selfish to become too species-specific, or solely fish-oriented when it comes to our attitudes to river angling.

I left Trevor and Budgie, who were eating the larger share, as usual, of the cake I had brought to our meeting, and spent a couple of hours on the river, in a cosy little swim where you poke your rod through a reedbed and wait for the reel to scream. A very welcome barbel of a bit under eight pounds took the bait boldly within ten minutes, followed by a pair of brassy chub, and I left feeling nicely satisfied. A bit more cake would have helped,

though.



These little roach may be two pounders one day!



Roach Club tanks, 1000 fry in each



Avon eight pounder, notice the big nostrils!

Blankety Blank

12th July, 2007

Another abortive trip to the Kennet today, with my mate Steve, who moaned non-stop all the way up the M3, mostly about wanting to stop for breakfast, the price of hooks, and why he had not yet been supplied with the latest of elegant green hoodies from Ringwood Tackle, when I already had one on. I bought him a bacon roll at a service station, which shut him up for a while. Some brands of barbel hooks now cost nearly seven shillings EACH, apparently. I wore my new hoodie proudly and blatantly, commenting constantly on the quality, and attractive green colour. Annoying Steve helped to pass the time.

We had agreed to explore a new stretch of the river, and were eager to take it apart. No such luck, however. Some bits of the Kennet have been kind to me, and I would still be disappointed with less than ten fish in a day from one or two spots. Some stretches are much harder, with fewer and bigger fish, and the venue today had a reputation for producing a few big fish, rather than the potential of a bag of shoalies. We lost a couple of fish that may have been barbel, but resolved to try an easier stretch next visit, especially since Steve was not familiar with the river.

It can be hard to locate fish on the Kennet; it is nearly always tinged a sort of insipid grey, which is blamed on the boat traffic and the associated fine suspended solids produced. We fished some very fishy looking swims again, but small roach, the odd chub were our only reward. The river upstream seemed much more interesting than the slow, deep section we had decided to start on, and in places there were signs of ranunculus attempting to establish itself, and some pool and riffle features that made it resemble a little Hampshire Avon. The local slugs showed more interest in our baits than the barbel, and I had difficulty fighting them off at times.

The slug attack was becoming too much to bear, and after Steve had lost what seemed a good fish and started to become very grumpy, we packed up a bit early and slunk away. They evaded us this time, next time will be different!



Attack of the killer Kennet slugs



Another Kennet barbel swim with no barbel in it!

Loddon revisited

9th July, 2007

Although my local rivers are now dropping fast, a sudden whim called me back to the stretch of the Loddon that I have been finding out about recently. The Stour was falling like a stone, as it now still does as result of the criminal dredging in the early Eighties, and the Avon was clearing nicely and starting to fish a bit better, but something called me to try a Loddon swim that I thought would fish well, especially since I had hooked three fish there on my last visit in quite unfavourable conditions. I was convinced I would bag up, and was soon sitting confidently behind my rod, poised for action after a pint or two of hemp and caster had been dropped in, and the swim left to mature for an hour.

Four hours later and no response. The fish just had to be there, the water was clearing, but still tinged enough to deny me a view of them, but not so clear as to make them spooky and nervously hiding in the weeds and woodwork.

I moved, and fished two more usually productive swims, to no avail. I am told the Loddon is a moody river, and fish can switch on and off unexpectedly, and by early evening I had nothing to show for my efforts A long way to go for a blank; I can do that far more cheaply on the Hampshire Avon.

that fish had moved on to the carpet of feed. A greedy eight pounder within minutes of casting in proved they had, quickly followed by another of identical weight. A damaged tail on the latter fish was similar to damage seen on other rivers, but could be bad handling, spawning damage or otter attack, who knows.

A longer wait for the last fish, a chunky 10.4 that certainly helped to make the trip well worthwhile. The two eight pounders both exuded lots of yellowy white stuff from the vent. Perhaps the reason the fish were a bit off the feed was because some selfish twerp had been prebaiting the swim with milk protein type bait; it certainly looked like it.

These little rivers do not need that type of feeding, and I have seen people putting in carrier bags of pellet on that stretch, and then disappearing, hoping to give themselves an edge next visit, but uncaring about the effect on the fish and other anglers.



Casters look irresistible to me!



Tail damage on Loddon barbel



Fat Loddon ten pounder

First Avon double

7th July, 2007

Surprised to find the floodwater running away quite fast on both my local rivers, and it is strange to be informed by EA hydrometric report that both rivers are still running at only about 80% of long term average flow. The behaviour of rivers and the interactions of rainfall and aquifers is a complex science, and not easy to predict. The Avon looked in fine fettle as I made my way through soggy meadows to my swim, an old favourite where I once saw a younger Fred Crouch catch a few fish, and produce an interesting article for Anglers Mail. He had a bag of fish that would be rare now on the Avon, and I was glad to take two barbel in afternoon, a strong fish of a bit under eight, and a lean but nicely coloured ten pounder; first Avon double this year. The smaller fish had a badly damaged tail, often attributed to otter attack, but I am not so sure. I have seen this sort of tail damage before, and certainly in the days before the otter revival. The upper lobe had grown back almost completely, but

the lower lobe looked freshly damaged. Let us hope the otters were not responsible, but we will never know for sure.

I was pestered mercilessly today by little chub, all about six to eight inches long, and greedy enough to take a 12mm boilie, yet stupid enough to just sit there and give no indication that they had hooked themselves. Nice to see them though,; the Avon chub are clearly breeding well, and populations look secure for the future. Another six pounder came along in the evening, a long, lean 6.6 that came in like a wet sack, and well spawned out.

I stayed fairly late, which is only dusk for me, and was pleased to be mugged by a group of greedy woodmice, who fed ravenously on my offerings of hemp and trout pellet. They were either very hungry, or very stupid, or probably very young, and they squeaked loudly and leapt into the air whenever I moved too suddenly for them. There were at least six of them, and the bravest eventually took to munching hemp on the toe of my boot. He was too camera shy for a shot sitting on my boot, but I got a nice pic of him in the grass.



Otter damage, or not?



Avon chub pest



First Avon double, 10.4



Greedy woodmouse

Even more rain

4th July, 2007

Went to two EA consultative meetings this week, and not missing the fishing, since both Dorset Stour and Hampshire Avon are up and coloured and rising. The issues facing our rivers are not just low flows and freak flows as we are experiencing now, but the threats of even greater abstraction, and the long term effects of climate change. The Environment Agency are doing sterling work in many ways, even though hampered by year on year cuts in funding from Government.

Heard some good news about habitat improvements happening this year on the Avon, in the shape of an island being reinstated, and a welcome fish pass on the Frome, both of which will benefit coarse fish as well as salmonids. Research on temperature changes in local chalk streams shows a real link with global warming, and raises concerns about effects on salmon recruitment and other biological changes.

The recent DEFRA report on trout farm effluents and effects on salmon is worrying, and I suggested that coarse fish were likely to be affected as well! Much debate to come on that one.

Fished the Stour after the meeting, and was astounded to find the river as high as a heavy winter flood, spilling into the fields and the colour of brown Windsor soup. No barbel, but a very pretty 6.4 chub, clean and fat and scale perfect. These southern river chub are growing well, that makes six sixes and a five fifteen I have taken so far this season, as barbel fishing bonus fish. How big will they be in the winter?

A quick trip to the Kennet produced a glorious blank, apart from another hefty chub of 5.14 and a lot of trouble with little roach. How nice it would be to be pestered by small roach on the Avon, where they are all but extinct on most stretches.



Flooded Dorset Stour



Kennet roach pest



Kennet barbel swim, no barbel in it!

If it don't stop rainin` momma.....

July 2nd, 2007

A trip to visit family in the Midlands gave me an opportunity to try the Warwickshire Avon for a day on the way home, and it was not a pretty sight when I turned up in the car park. Brown and boily, and at least two feet up and rising, and full of rubbish. Not ideal conditions to explore what was a new stretch to me. I had fished it for an afternoon last August, but blanked, which is not unexpected on a first visit.

Nice to find out about new fisheries yourself, instead of being told which swim and where to cast by others, but would have been nice today!

I chose a smooth deep glide. that from my dim last years memory was fairly clear of weed, just upstream of where the river narrowed and on the inside of a bend. This helped to avoid the worst of drifting weed and debris, and with a big backlead I was able to keep a bait clean and on the bottom for a good thirty minutes.

All I needed for the first bite, and the pin screamed in a most welcome and excited manner as a Warks. Avon barbel grabbed my Spicy Shrimp and Prawn offering and chugged about in a very determined way for a good while. I thought he was twice the size, but a nice fish of a bit over eight, well spawned out, but in fighting fit condition.

The heavy downpours made it an unpleasant experience in between bites, and the river continued to rise and colour up for the rest of the day. I ended up with another fish, a fat and healthy seven pounder, but resolved to return in better conditions and catch a few more later on this summer.

This rain is bad news for barbel recruitment, and I would guess that most spawn or hatchlings will struggle to survive the cold flush and flood conditions this year.



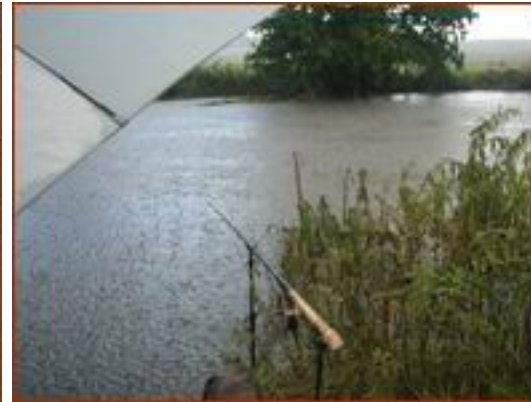
Backlead rubbish collection



Nice Warks Avon eight pounder



Muddy swollen Warks Avon



When will it stop raining?

Birthday boys

Day Two, 29th June, 2007

A late night involving curry, beer and much banter and gossip meant a late start, and the rain was a nice excuse as well. We had planned to reconvene on the same stretch, and I arrived to find the three already blearily pretending to fish. I had been delayed by several seconds by the opening of my birthday cards.

I was not keen to fish, but Alan persuaded me to try for a birthday barbel, after we had spent some time thumbing through an album of photos from the old days that he had kindly brought with him.

The swims were hard to recognise, and so were the anglers. It does not pay to see forgotten photos of yourself at nineteen, when you are fifty plus and feeling a bit tired and creaky.

Gary interrupted our journey through the past with a desperate call on his mobile; he was playing a barbel! We tottered upstream in time to see him land a nice nine pounder, from a swim Alan had baited the previous day. We were all generous in our congratulations, and were all pleased to see the obvious excitement on the face of the captor. Pics. to arrive later.

Alan continued to bully me into fishing, so I settled in a swim not far downstream from him, where I had taken some nice fish in the past.

A few droppers of hemp and crumbled boilies, and a good heavy bomb to hold in the rising, coloured and boily waters. It was not long before the birthday barbel made an appearance, a sparkling six pounder that fought like a fish twice the size. Two more barbel took a liking to my paste-wrapped boilies, both a little over seven. All solid clean fish, and of a size and condition that gives hope for the future.

Five chub also came my way that afternoon, best three were 6.14, 6.2 and 5.15 and the other two were low fives. These Avon chub are getting big!

Alan came and photographed the best fish, and before the three new friends departed, we promised to meet up again soon. No more barbel for Gary, Alan had a couple of eels. Keith blanked.



Fit Avon seven pounder



6.14 chub returned



Avon weirpool

Old friends, new friends and new nuisances

June 28th, 2007

Arranged to fish today with an old friend, not seen each other for over thirty years. Alan was a regular at the

We met and fished at Throop in the late Sixties and early seventies, and I was still in my teens when Alan shared his knowledge, and wisdom with me, and the other budding young barbel anglers who stayed over those years at Rosalie, under the motherly care of Mrs Daph Sainsbury, a lovely, caring lady who is missed by us all. Alan and his two mates, who had arranged the reunion in honour of a particular birthday of his, met with me on the Avon near Ringwood, and I guided them to what I hoped would be hot barbel swims, though we all knew that chances were slim.

Before my guests arrived, I was on the river early and witnessed the latest gang of goosanders busily working their way upriver, and I mused and muttered quiet expletives at them as they paddled past. Another fish eating species now establishing itself on the river, not immediately welcome, but hopefully not a serious threat to an increasingly pressured fish population.

Alan, and his two friends Gary and Keith were a pleasure to meet, and while Alan and I shared reminiscences, we remained largely fishless. It did not really matter, the day was a social, a reunion, and a meeting of like minds. We shared jokes and gossip and memories. There was always tomorrow, for catching a fish.

I impressed them all with my knowledge of local livestock, and the herd of Redpolls were a source of constant fascination to us all. Beautiful animals, very gentle and inquisitive, and the rich colour of slightly melted chocolate. The matriarch of the herd is called Sylvia, and keeps the whole herd in order, guiding their grazing, cud chewing and angler teasing with calm bovine authority. She watched us fail to catch anything but two chub and an eel. Keith blanked.

There was always tomorrow.



Gloomy Avon near Ringwood



Gang of goosanders



The lovely Sylvia

Hard rain falling

24th June, 2007

We have been lucky down south regarding the dreadful flooding that rivers have suffered in the Midlands and further north, and a journey to the BS Committee meeting in Worcester yesterday provided me with a view of a brown and surging Warwickshire Avon and Severn. I had planned to fish the Teme on the Sunday after I had recovered from the rigours of the meeting, but did not fancy clambering down slimy, muddy banks to fish a raging torrent. Even the Severn was not an attractive option; I love to settle into a swim at Beauchamp Court, Diglis or Pixham, bait up and imagine those ravenous, hard biting and hard fighting barbel moving in on my feed. The tactics employed, and the conditions you must tolerate on a flooded Severn are not to my taste as a rule, so I decided to opt for a session on the Loddon on the way home on the Sunday.

After a delicious meal, good company and a comfortable bed, courtesy of John and Linda Found, John and I had a trip to the nearby Loddon. Lovely little river, with a good head of barbel, and a learning experience on a new stretch for us. I generously put John in the best swim, nobly advising him on how to fish it, and while I unselfishly blanked, while bravely exploring a new swim in an honourable way a bit upstream, he took two barbel in quick succession. I somehow persuaded him to leave early; he had far more important things to do at home, and he suggested I take over his swim, actually my swim, as he departed.

The rain hammered down all day, but I tolerated it, and was lucky and cheeky enough to benefit from John's baiting and bag another two fat Loddon barbel, including the season's first double at 10.10. A really dogged and determined fighter, that had me imagining it was even bigger, as a fifteen or sixteen is not unlikely, even at this time of year. I sat in a rain storm, in a mud bath, with eight foot of that bloody Himalayan Balsam again on both sides and on the other bank, but when the pin screeched and a barbel zoomed off downstream, all seemed well.

I will be back in dryer conditions.



Balsam overpowering nettles



Wet and muddy Loddon

More bloody balsam



First double of season

First barbel

June 18th, 2007

The early season barbel fishing on the Hampshire Avon is generally very slow and faltering, and it has not been unusual for me to have to wait until July before that first unmistakable wrench on the rod tip heralds the first whisker of the year. This year has been no exception, and the decline in numbers in Avon barbel has meant that they are even harder to find, especially in the coloured water that typifies spring and early summer conditions. I had seen some spawning barbel on the gravel shallows near a bridge in the last week of May,, and am sure that most fish are still scattered and unsettled, and only just beginning to gather in their normal haunts and start feeding properly.

An evening session on a famous salmon pool, just below a weir was to provide me with that first scarily assertive bite that signalled a hungry barbel. A healthy looking eight pounder was to open my account for this year, and my new recipe boilie had proved itself to be effective, and no prebaiting needed!

Six chub were to show that they liked the bait too, including an impressive brace at 6.12 and 6.4.

The bream that usually pester you in this swim were nowhere to be seen, maybe a bream proof barbel bait has been discovered! I suspect not.

My success with the fishing was marred by the discovery of patches of what looked horribly like Himalayan Balsam in the undergrowth and along the n bankside paths. I pulled it up and started to worry.

Although the Avon Valley is largely free of this vile invader, it could take hold easily, and you can say goodbye to plant biodiversity then! The Severn, Teme and also the Dorset Frome are all now lost as far as HB is concerned. To lose the Avon to it would be a tragedy.

I am going to get the samples identified, and seek advice from Natural England, who apparently have access to

huge funds for fighting invasive plants, and with the Avon being a Special Area of Conservation, more than a mere SSSI, we should see some EU money being used to save us from the cursed balsam!



Looks like balsam to me



Early season Avon swim



First barbel of season, good set of whiskers!



Big bronze 6.12 chub

Watching the river flow

June 16th, 2007

I may be a bit old fashioned, but it will be a dark, grim day when I can no longer experience the excitement and anticipation of a glorious sixteenth on the river. The fish are rested, the swims are refreshed and a true river angler is happy to forego the twenty four seven, 365 days a year intensity that some anglers seem to increasingly thirst for, and is content in the knowledge that another round of bankside forays are in the offing for

the next nine months. Although anxious to see the changes the winter floods have wrought, and whether old reliable swims are still there, or new ones created, the urgency to be on the bank at midnight or dawn is no longer there for me, and I was happy this season to stroll down to the Hampshire Avon on a bright, moist mid-morning and partake in the annual ceremony of first cast, or first tangle, as is often the case.

An opening day barbel is not essential, and would be a bonus, and today I did not really expect or try very hard for one. I had a nice chub of about four pounds, fed a mad pheasant that had clearly been trained to accept crumbled boilies, and just relaxed, watching the river flow past and drinking in the atmosphere.

I reminisced about the old ash tree stump just upstream, now almost to be reclaimed by the river, yet twenty years ago I had sat and fished with that tree at my back, and another ten feet to the water's edge. Erosion had moved the river, toppled the tree, and only been halted by a few hundred tons of concrete rubble skilfully placed as reinforcement, yet now almost invisible under the lush marginal growth.

Season started, back on the riverbank, but that first barbel can wait, for now.



Ash Stump pool



Well trained pheasant

[Back](#)