

## **Pete Reading River Diary Season 2008/2009**

### **Ending the season with more stripeys**

14th March 2009

I returned to my barbel swim, full of enthusiasm and convinced the river was now paved with hungry barbel obsessed with hunting for the bait that I had recently had a bit of success with. The result was the almost inevitable blank; but the wind had changed, now cold and in my face, the day felt different, the river looked cool and glassy and uninviting, and the evening was definitely of the cold, clear still variety that filled me with impending disappointment.

I decided my barbel season was over, and felt a sense of relief that would undoubtedly be shared by the fish as well. I dread to think how they would fare if they were to be pursued as mercilessly as we seem to think is acceptable now, all through the warming months as they gathered and innocently fed prior to spawning. Wild stocks of barbel on small rivers are far more vulnerable than we think, and it seems that fewer and fewer barbel are now being targeted by more and more determined anglers. They need and deserve a rest, in my view, and those who argue for an abolition of a rivers close season really do need to think more deeply about it. It is not simply a commercial argument, and the attitude that pervades our society these days of wanting everything instantly, wanting it cheap and wanting it now, with 24/7 access all year, is a bit sad; we are a bit greedy and desperate for fulfillment or success, with no thought of calm, relaxed self-restraint. Fish on smaller rivers especially are very easy to disturb when spawning, and a missed year can have profound effects further on down the line. Big rivers could cope more easily, but to make rules for individual rivers and stretches, or taking into account late spawning years, is ridiculous. A blanket closure is the only way, and current dates are still sensible. I have seen barbel spawning in June, and the twits casting baits at them, but they usually get it over with in late April early May, and have time to recover a bit before we start fishing for them. The BS will be

initiating a national survey of barbel spawning shortly, so keep an eye out for more details.

The last day was spent perching, and although the conditions were apparently good, even the perch were tricky, although I was delighted with an impressive 3.10 as well as another three plus and a nice two pounder in the afternoon. They seem to favour the afternoons, with little feeding bursts after long periods of inactivity. Are they there all the while, just cautiously inspecting my lobworm and not quite stimulated enough to grab it, or do they just cruise into the swim, doing their rounds? I intend to do bit more perch watching next year, just to see how they behave when baits are put in front of them. The rivers should be clear enough to see a few barbel for a change as well!



Seasons end and a big perch



Find the Float Competition No.73



Last perch of the season

## A barbel at last

9th March 2009

This must be one of the worst seasons I have had on the Avon in recent years, and the amount of barbel fishing I have been doing since Christmas has been limited by bad weather, bad luck and a bad mood most of the time. The recent warm spell resulted in me dragging myself to a likely area of the river, which I had decided to fish most of the time now until the end of the season. I had seen no sign of a barbel, but I had one of those hunches that they could be there, despite not having caught a barbel within a couple of miles of this particular swim before. There is still a lot of the Avon that is very lightly fished, and the thought of getting a fish without a name or recent hookmarks kept me going back over the winter. The results had been poor so far, and a few average chub and a long string of blanks were all I had to show for the barbel sessions that were lightly interspersed between my recent perch fishing enthusiasm. Perch are much more reliable than barbel, I have found, as long as you can find them!

The first bite in a long lonely session proved to be another chub, probably five and a half, and a very clean young fish that would be getting bigger than he deserved with all the fancy barbel bait he had been eating. The chub

walloped the rod round like a barbel, but fought in a bouncy, jaggging fashion that told me instantly that he was a chub and no barbel after all. I admired the spotless chub and released him without weighing. How strange that such fish are now just average and I no longer bother to weigh a chub unless he looks six pounds.

The dusk was falling when the rod top jerked suddenly, with no line taken from the reel, and I picked up on what was surely another chub; a series of sharp jerks and donks on the rod top, and a fish rose up the water with little resistance. I prepared myself to deal with another medium sized Avon chub when the weight on the rod became much heavier, the tip was pulled suddenly and strongly downwards, and something that was certainly not a chub gathered its composure and thumped off upstream, commencing to draw line off the `pin in a steady authoritative fashion. I lost my composure and slithered down the muddy bank, fumbling about for the landing net. First sight of the vast golden flank of the fish as it rose out of the gloomy water confirmed that it was a barbel, and of very respectable size. It surged off again, apparently waking up after the initial shock of being hooked and starting to fight properly, acting like a barbel instead of a chub. I guess it had just been shaking its head, trying to rid itself of the hook and perhaps not realising what was going on. I have seen barbel do this before, and typically the ones that are not regularly caught or well fished for, and not used to being hooked, behave in this way before going off on more typical powerful runs. I was absolutely delighted to weigh it in at 13.14, and not a bad estimate, because I put it at a good fourteen to begin with. All the miserable hours of grumpiness and negative thoughts were forgotten, and suddenly I was convinced once more that I could catch barbel again. Off again tomorrow with much increased confidence!



Five pound plus Avon chub



Thirteen fourteen Avon barbel; lovely!



13.14 Avon barbel

## Salmon eggs and pond perch

2nd March 2009

The Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust is running a little research project on survival of salmon eggs, using salmon eggs from fish caught and stripped on the River Wylve. It was my turn to go and clean out the egg boxes, which are specially designed containers full of gravel, and connected to a head of water which gives a constant

flow of fresh water to the developing eggs. Some of the eggs were actually fertilised by what are called precocious parr, tiny salmon barely a few months old that will still try and mate with huge hen fish that could easily swallow them whole. The rest were fertilised with milt from similar sized cock fish, and we have about five thousand eggs in the boxes in total. The eggs have already hatched, and the evidence for this are the egg cases that are seen drifting to the top of the boxes. It will be a few more weeks before the little fish are ready to swim up out of the gravel, and then they are captured in little trap systems within the box, counted and then released at a suitable site further down river.

In previous years, the survival rate was almost ninety percent, far higher than achieved in the wild, since the eggs are subject to both higher levels of fertilisation, and protection from predators. Once in the river, the fry are at the mercy of all natural predators, but there are many more of them. Egg boxes are used to support failing populations of trout and salmon as a matter of routine, and there was talk of trying out the system for barbel, but the incubation period is thought to be too short, since barbel and most other coarse fish operate at much higher temperatures than salmonids. The boxes were gathering a fair bit of silt and algae, but a few flushings with clean water after complicated adjustments of pipes and valves and the precious occupants were again hopefully benefiting from a good flow of cool oxygenated water.

Next day and a visit to a stillwater for some more perch action, and although sport was slow, I still managed four fish, three of which were three pounds plus, with a nice fat three seven as the best fish. These perch are either full of spawn or full of food, since they are very solid, full-bellied individuals, and fight like stink on the fairly light float tackle that is employed. One of them was mistaken for a carp as it bored off across the lake in a long powerful run, but when it turned out to be a particularly hunky perch I was very pleasantly surprised. One again, the lobworm was a killer bait, combined with a constant trickle of red maggots, which may be a stimulus either to the perch directly, or to small fish which then attract the stripey predators. The perch are sometimes stuffed to the gills with maggot, but maggot on the hook rarely produces a perch.



Salmon egg boxes on the Wylfe



Fat perch that fought like a carp



Three seven perch, fit and fat-bellied

## Exploring the Kennet for perch

19th February 2009

The news that a big barbel had been taken from one of the swims I had been targeting was enough to put me off the barbel for a while, and seek justice elsewhere! Perhaps the barbel gods were trying to tell me something. I decided to try for some river perch, and went up to the Kennet to explore some out of the way places, and target some relatively unknown fish. Perch are a species very much on the up lately, and they are increasing in numbers and in size all over the place. They are quite obliging as a rule, and if you can find them they seem keen to engulf a big lobworm and swim off with it without much subtlety. The thought of finding some untapped and unpressured perch was exciting, and the lack of other anglers on the bank was rather welcome as well. There was a deal of travelling and walking involved, but the whole area appeared to simply ooze perch, with deep pools, smooth glides, and little slacks behind overhanging bushes. Travelling light, with a few maggots and worms and a light bag and landing net made sure that I never got bored, and although most swims proved unproductive, I did find a few Kennet perch, including a couple of two pounders that made the whole journey very worthwhile. These perch are solid, spiky little chunks of muscle, and very pretty fish, with bright fins and a greedy yellow eye! I had a few small specimens that looked in the best of health, and ensured that the current generation of bigger fish would be replaced in the future, but the twos were by no means old and tatty. Not sure how long perch live, or how fast they grow, but I would imagine they grow fast and die young, like pike and grayling.

They are also likely to pop up in some surprising places, and the appeal of searching out those unfished for specimens that are growing fat in carp waters, overstocked commercials or minnow-rich stretches of lightly fished rivers is becoming very strong for me. The perch of the Avon and Stour are now reaching three pound plus in some stretches, and the Loddon is well worth a look these days, likely to mirror the Thames in the areas where there are plenty of small food fish.



Bristly little perch



Fat two pounder



Kennet perch and irresistible worm

## Cold water species still best bet!

12th February 2009

The local rivers are clearing and falling a bit, and after a recent spate it was worth a try for some chub on the Stour. The debris on the trees and fences showed that the water had been about four feet higher last week, and it amazes me how fish manage to stay fairly resident on some stretches, although I was hoping that this flush had relocated some barbel that had been absent for a couple of years. Still too cold and crisp for me to barbel fish the Stour, however, so I tried for some chub with my favourite maggot feeder approach. Even on coldest conditions the chub will take a red maggot or two, and it is good fun watching the quiver tip and reading the early warning signs of a bite. This was one of those days when the initial knocks and twiddles on the tip were absent, and the chub just obligingly hooked themselves and walloped the rod round. Playing a big chub on fine tackle in heavy flows is most exciting, and the smallest can feel quite big if it chooses to fight slow and deep. A few nice chunky Stour chub to 6.3 made for an interesting afternoon, and the signs were that it would soon be warm enough for a barbel.

I was persuaded to try the Loddon a day or so later, but that moody river seemed quite lifeless, and we failed to raise a barbel, either on maggots or small bits of paste over crumbled boilie. The barbel have been few and far between on that stretch this year, and I continue to try and cope with a bit of disappointment after every visit. The only excitement was a bright little chub, and a very healthy looking brown trout that shows the river is still apparently in good order in terms of water quality.

There are plans for the Barbel Society to help out with some habitat improvements on the river, and the proposed spawning gravel enhancements will suit the barbel as well as the trout and chub.



Stour chub cant resist the maggots!



Fat bellied six pound Stour chub



Healthy Loddon brown trout

The time of year has come to deliver all the trout eggs to the little hatcheries that our local Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust has funded, with the support of Tesco Stores. The weather continues to be atrocious, so I am not missing any fishing, although I always find the whole Trout in Schools process very interesting and rewarding. There are eight systems in schools and study centres, and one in Salisbury Library, which always attracts a great deal of attention from visitors. My first task, after having checked that all the tanks and pumps and filters are up and running, is to collect the eggs from our local friendly trout farm. There are millions of eggs and baby trout in various stages of development, so they do not miss a few thousand. I used to transport them in water, aerated by a battery driven pump, but apparently they are quite happy in the polystyrene trays they arrive at the farm in, and as long as they are kept cool and damp the eggs will survive happily for a couple of days.

The kids are absolutely fascinated by the hatching and development of the eggs, and apart from a learning experience in Biology, they are given the opportunity to appreciate the importance of rivers and the range of wildlife that the watery environment supports. As soon as the trout have reached the fry stage, they are released into the river to fend for themselves, and the tanks are then converted into mini rivers, and stocked with weed, invertebrates and little fish like bullheads, loach and minnows. Hugh Miles came and filmed the trout release a couple of years ago, and it may be that some footage will be used in one of the series of programmes in *Catching the Impossible*. Little fish are more important than big fish in so many ways, and I know that Hugh was determined to show all aspects of angling, which do include work on conservation and education.

By early next week all the eggs will have been collected and delivered, and then we have an anxious few weeks when they hatch, go through the alevin stage, and then become ferocious little brown trout fry. The key to success is to maintain regular monitoring, keeping a flow of cool, aerated water and cleaning up the casualties and any detritus scrupulously. The hatching is a strange process, with the dull pink eggs turning a bright clear orange, then the release of a frothy mixture of egg cases and enzymes as the alevins struggle free. The two headed or two tailed versions, quite normal mutations, are always a source of interest, but they never survive for long.



## A brush with my favourite species

27th January 2009

A day after perch with John Found meant that it would be a fun day in good company, and so it proved apart from the fact he was a bit mean with his sandwiches. The water was a bit cold and coloured, and we did not get a bite until late afternoon, when John had a fine perch of about two and a half, and challenged me to catch a bigger one. Half an hour later, as dusk approached, my float slid away boldly and I struck confidently into a big fish; it had to be a perch, as it kicked and thumped and rose to the surface and swirled impressively. So often that last, long awaited bite of the day produces the fish you have been hoping for, worth the travelling, worth the expense, and worth enduring the cold and the hours of doubt filled inactivity. It was clearly over four pounds, perhaps approaching five, but I did not weigh it because it was a bloody bream. It sucked longingly and greedily at the big lobworm that it really should not have been interested in, or even able to swallow, as I took out the hook. It had a look of dim guilt in its dull breamy eye as I slipped it back into the water. John leaned back in his chair and chuckled, his mouth full of liver sausage and mustard sandwich.

The next few days were not suitable for fishing, but the next nice day found me helping Trevor and Budgie with some Avon Roach Project work. A local club was allowing the use of a nice big stock pond for the purpose of growing on some of the little roach that were now due to be transferred from the tanks at the bottom of Trevor's garden. I got out my trusty scythe and cleared the edges of the pond while Trevor and Budge checked for bottom weed with a rake. We need to remove any existing fish before the roach are introduced, and the pond is due to be drained and netted shortly. In time, this project will be helping to kick start a recovery of Avon roach stocks, by regularly introducing Avon roach hatched from spawning boards, which gather eggs from Avon sidestreams and offline pools, and it is intended to grow some on to three years old before reintroduction. It was a worry to see cormorant, egret, heron, mink and clear sign of otters in the vicinity of the stock pond, but there are plans to fence and net it to deter the apparently gathering host of predators. A big black mink ran into a nearby pond, then emerged a few minutes later with a six inch roach in its jaws. Trevor glared at it murderously, and stomped over to the little run in the brambles from where it had emerged, in a futile attempt to do something. The predators will no doubt take their share, but at least the thousands of little roach that have been raised so far are being given a better chance of survival than would have occurred in the wild, and there will be a nett increase in numbers despite the ravages of the fish eating birds and mammals that seem to be everywhere these days. I did not mention the goosander I saw to Trevor; sometimes it is best to keep quiet.





John looking delighted with a perch



A guilty looking bream, if ever there was one



These two are innocent!

## Poor fishing and a mixed bag

20th January 2009

A tiny window of opportunity brought about by slightly warmer temperatures and slightly more enthusiasm to go out fishing resulted in a trip to the Kennet with barbel in mind for a change. The Kennet will fish in colder weather anyway, but I had almost forgotten what a barbel looked like, and it was time to try for a wintery whisker or two. The morning brought a surprise snap frost, however, and that would prove to be a good enough excuse for a rather hard days fishing. The river looked ideal, and the barbel should have been more obliging, but it was a case of a single bite at three in the afternoon, and it was a very pale and chilly looking fish of about four pounds that finally took my temptingly hair rigged and superglued bunch of red maggots. The chub were showing more interest than the barbel, nuzzling and knocking the feeder as soon as it hit bottom. I will take my chub gear next time and see just how big the chub on this stretch go.

I think I saw a glimpse of a water rail, a bird that seems to be more common and more bold on my local rivers. They are bit like an incredibly shy moorhen, without the coloured bits and with a longer beak, and nice to see something new on the river bank that does not seem intent on eating fish! I was sent a nice shot of a rail that is getting quite bold on the Dorset Stour, but they are usually just a glimpse and a rustle in the rushes.

Good news to hear that the EA have finally found the time to get on with the work at the BS fishery at Bransford on the Teme. We have a few members taking lots of before and after shots, and it may be that we can get the bulk of the big tree work done on much of the fishery this year. It will look a bit of a mess to begin with, and the stumps of the coppiced and pollarded willows and alders will appear stark and alarming, but the regrowth will be very rapid, and the extra light that will get to the river, especially the bankside marginal areas, will make a huge improvement to the ecology of the river. The streamer weed will hopefully return, and the low overhanging cover will make excellent barbel swims in a short time. We will also now be able to see more clearly where the deliberate introduction of instream woody debris can be placed, again to provide shelter for invertebrates and

fish without constituting a horrible snag or flood/erosion risk. Here is an example of how an idea and some planning and funding from the BS has generated a whole lot more expenditure from the EA, positive pump priming for habitat enhancement and fishery improvement.



Kennet barbel like red maggots



Shy water rail



Tree work at Bransford

## Hard work on the Frome

8th January 2009

An extended cold, dry spell of weather and it looked like conditions for grayling would be favourable, so I arranged to give Ray House his day on the Frome, and I wanted to try and get him to beat his pb for the species. Ray arrived in good time, despite the icy early morning weather and a three-hour plus journey from Milton Keynes. He was keen to try the Frome again, having fished it once before a few years ago, and I was even keener to see him get a good fish. The cold does not usually worry grayling too much, but something was putting them off, and we struggled for a bite for the first hour or so. Some grayling river stretches will produce dozens of small grayling in a day, but these bits of the upper Frome are famed for fish that are much less numerous, but appreciably bigger in compensation.

I was hoping for an average day, perhaps eight or ten fish with three or more over two, but by midday we had only one fish to show, and Ray lost a good grayling that I told him was a lost pb at least, a fish approaching three pounds. He also lost a big sea trout kelt that rocketed out of the water as soon as he hooked it and came off. Despite the slow sport, Ray was enjoying himself. He is a good angler and a really nice bloke, one of those people everybody likes who also never has a bad word for others, and he also genuinely appreciated the fishing for what it was, relishing a day on a new bit of river and just enjoying the whole experience.

The first grayling we had was a bit over a pound and a half I suppose, but badly marked by a cormorant, and I was beginning to think it would be our only fish when Ray latched into another slow, lumpy fish that gave us several worried and nervous minutes before it slid into the net. I told him it was a two seven, but it took the

scales to two and a half, and took Ray into a state of rapture as he admired his best ever grayling. It was a lovely clean, metallic blue-grey fish that had all the signs of youth. The otter and cormorant cannot get them all. Another nice fish was bumped off, but we packed a bit early after a hard days fishing, with Ray still delighted, I hope, with his result. I suggested another day later in the season, when the water is a bit warmer; even grayling do not like it this cold!



Cormorant quill float for grayling, called the "Revenge"



Ray pleased with 2.8 grayling



Typical cormorant damage on grayling

## A testing day on the Test

3rd January 2009

Took up an unmissable invitation from Dave Steuart to have a day on his stretch of the Test, and did not have to wait long before I was subjected to the inevitable combination of irascible advice and disparaging ridicule from my host. My float was too small, I was fishing too deep, I was casting in the wrong place and I was using the wrong bait, employing the wrong reel and rod as well. I explained that I was exploring the swim, trying out new ideas and did not really want to catch too many of his fish, but he remained unimpressed, especially when I pulled out of a fish and got my hook stuck up one of his trees. He wandered off, shaking his head and muttering, and returned with a long handled pruner with which I was instructed to retrieve the tackle, admonishing me again for my incompetence and warning me not to cause any more damage. When he finally left, no doubt chuckling to himself at the state of nervous exhaustion he had left me in, I settled down and managed a fine bag of grayling and an assortment of trout that were in tremendous condition despite being a bit out of season. The roach, dace and chub were not really having it that day apparently, but it was great fun nonetheless, as any day out with Dave is sure to be.

Apart from the teasing and joking and the just plain fun loving nature of the guy, he is an absolute fountain of knowledge about all things fishy, and has forgotten more about rivers than I would dare to know as yet. He has also caught an awful lot of fish in his time, and yet retains a remarkable modesty about his

achievements. The lucky auction bidders who have a day booked with him will have a tremendous experience, and the Society owes him a big thank you for hosting those days on his water.



Pretty little Test roach



Nice conditioned Test brownie



Healthy Test brownie

## Unexpected unseasonal tench

21st December 2008

A visit to a lake with perch in mind was a last chance to fish before Christmas, and it was actually a matter of concern to me that the water would be still be too cold for the perch to feed. The air temperature was much more agreeable than of late, but it would surely take a while for the water in this deep lake to catch up after the hard cold frosty weather of the previous week. A couple of two plus perch early on was most encouraging; it was really exciting to see the lifeless red top of the waggler suddenly jab, then slide slowly and confidently away as a perch engulfed the lobworm and swam off with it. Bold biters they are, and dogged, determined fighters despite the cold. They certainly felt cold, like stripey spikey blocks of ice as I unhooked them, admired them and released them quickly. Never did subscribe to the view that releasing perch or chub into the swim ruins sport for the day, and never found it has any effect other than to provide an excuse for not catching anything further.

I missed a lovely slideaway bite next cast, which left the lob unmarked, then connected with a very strong fish on the drop next cast. This must be a big perch, thinks I, taking a worm on the way down. Not to be, however, it was a big green tench of about six pounds, which had clearly decided to have a midwinter feed. Another five tench followed suit, proving to be a bit of a nuisance, but quite good fun really on the light float tackle, and showing that tench can feed quite reliably in the winter once they become acclimatised to the lower temperatures. A couple more nice perch were interspersed between the pesky unseasonal tench, which were all obviously keen on the lobworms for Christmas dinner. A few more missed bites were probably tench as well, and the last bite of the day was being cursed as yet another bloody nuisance tench until it popped up to the surface and turned into a big perch. At three and a half it was the best of the season, and a nice fat specimen to end the session with.



Nice fat 3.8 perch



Business end of big perch; why are peccs colourless, but ventrals blood red?



Pesky tench, see its little red eye!

## Nice trio of chub

13th December 2008

Although the cold clammy weather remains, the rain had subsided for long enough for the Stour to clear a little, and conditions looked suitable for a day or so after the wintery chub. The first session was fairly comfortable, with the wind at your back and the weak but warming sun on your face, the fishing is quite tolerable. The chub were not as hungry as the robins and ducks, however, and all I had to show on my first afternoon was a miserable looking bullhead that swallowed the hook, as they almost always do. The bite of a bullhead is almost imperceptible, and very easy to miss, and when I reeled him in I remembered a tiny tremble only moments beforehand. He was an ugly and unwelcome fish, and I always feel a bit sorry for the bullhead who emerges from under his stone on the coldest of days to swallow a maggot, only to be pulled out of the water and inspected ungratefully. A bullhead is always a bad omen, so I packed up and left early before the cold hard frost descended once again. To chill my fingers as well as my toes.

Next day was a tad warmer, and I was still confident that the delicate approach with feeder fished maggot on light tackle was favourite. The trembles on the quiver tip were just that bit too vigorous to be bullheads this time, and a very short hooklink and fine line to an 18 was enough to fool a spotless 5.13 in the first half hour. I became quite encouraged by this, and was pleased to see that the occasional dink and donk continued for the next few casts, which meant that there were still chub about. They feed a bit cautiously in the cold, but can never really resist a constant supply of maggot, and eventually one will make a mistake and take the one with a hook in it. They are very fearful on well fished stretches, however, and it astounds me how long they can keep bumping the feeder for without getting hooked, and sometimes an inch tail and a twenty holding a tiny sidehooked maggot is needed to fool them.

Another peas in a pod chub of 5.14 followed the first, and both were very clean young looking fish, that will be good sixes in no time. The third fish was of an older generation, a bit more scarred and lumpy, but at 6.9 I was not complaining about his appearance, and he gave a strong and dogged fight on the light tackle and in a heavy current. Nice to play fish in this way, a bit nervously and delicately, and always thinking about where they are going next. Chub have the habit of diving under the bank at the last minute, but a nice long rod and a bit of forethought can give you an advantage. Three chub for over eighteen pounds was once a catch of a lifetime, and we forget how much bigger they are nowadays. I remember feeling very pleased with a pb of 5.12 for many years, and now they are never weighed unless they look six!



Glum looking bullhead



Spotless 5.13 Stour chub



Robin makes off with a maggot



Slightly battered 6.9 Stour chub

## **Cold water fishing**

7th December 2008

Not been fishing much at all lately, but last time I went was the first time this year my toes got cold, and this first sign of winter was not very welcome really. Expensive wool socks and even more expensive thermal boots help

me in this regard, but as a chronic sufferer of cold tootsies, I just end up wiggling them furiously and hoping for a bite to take my mind off the dull annoying pain.

Perch, chub and grayling are all used to the cold by now, and the barbel are best left alone for a while. Roach are also a fair bet once the weather has been cold and settled for long enough, but a roach on the Hampshire Avon is now a rare beast on the main river, although there are signs of a limited recovery of stocks in one or two side streams. I failed magnificently to get a roach bite the other day, but a couple of big fish rolled under the far bank in a very roachy way. I marked the area down for future reference. The sunset was even more magnificent than my blank, and the drop in temperature as darkness fell was almost frightening. My cold toes were accompanied by even colder fingertips by the time I got back to the car, reinforcing the fact that winter had now arrived in style.

Perch have been more forthcoming than anything, and on cold clear days they have an agreeable habit of going on a brief feeding spree just before dark. The odd one pops up during the day, however, and one particularly greedy fish took my bait after being lost by a friend breaking on the strike an hour or so earlier fifty yards down the bank! I gave him his hook and his still wriggling worm back! The perch is a very handsome fish, especially when over three pounds, and I am getting increasingly keen on them. They thrive on neglect, in the same way as pike, and can often go unnoticed by anglers who set their stall out for barbel or chub. There is always the opportunity of searching out perch on bits of river where nobody really fishes for them, always more satisfying than targeting known fish from known stretches, so a bit of exploring is called for this winter.

The grayling are also a pretty reliable bet in the coldest of weather, and another advantage of grayling fishing is that you rarely stand still for long enough to get cold, and the best days are often accompanied by quite warm winter sunshine. Off for a day after grayling tomorrow, but will leave the frost to clear first!



Avon sunset, bloody cold



Three pound perch looking hungry



Two pounder in winter sunshine

29th November 2008

First session this week was a day on the Frome that I had been promising to Graham Elliott for some time, and he had finally dropped enough hints and nagged me into submission; only jesting G.! Graham is always good fun, and very relaxed about fishing, and it was me who ended up nagging him, rushing and cajoling him from pool to pool for the best part of the day, so keen was I to see him get a new pb grayling. He was very taken with the river, and clearly appreciated the surroundings and the joy of exploring a new bit of water, and kept reassuring me that catching the hoped for big grayling was secondary to his enjoyment of the day as just a chance to fish somewhere different. The weather was foul, mostly, and after a disappointing morning I found myself sheltering under a tree while Graham braved it out in a cold rainstorm. The first few pools had been strangely unproductive, and I was becoming concerned that a long journey for Graham could see him fail to get that first two pounder. He was working hard at a normally reliable pool, that had produced several fish for me the previous week, and I was about to suggest another move when his float dipped, and I spotted a pale grey flank twisting in the current as a big grayling realised its mistake. He was as delighted as I with a 2.7 as his first two plus grayling, and he beat it again later in the day with a fish a few ounces bigger, not to mention a rather large salmon that was another first for him. We ended up with a few nice fish, and more importantly, it was simply a nice fun day out in good company.

A couple of days later and I was promising another pb, this time to Simon Asbury, who pops down from the Birmingham area a few times each year to fish the Avon. I had long promised him a six-pound Avon chub, and conditions were looking quite favourable for once, with a cold but slightly coloured river and some settled weather for once. Avon chub can rarely resist the maggot feeder, and we started off just feeding the swim, introducing feed without a hookbait or even a hook, actually; just watching for the telltale taps and twitches on the tip that show that chub are interested. It was over an hour before a hook bait was included in the rig, but by then it was obvious that there were fish in the swim, attacking the feeder with increasing enthusiasm. Second cast and the tip flew round as a lumpy, greedy old chub hooked himself, and it was a few nerve wracking minutes before a solid, thick shouldered fish came over the net. Simon was well pleased with a new pb of six eight, and I was happy to have helped out. I was content to fish nearby and bag up on Avon gudgeon.





GE in action on the Frome



Simon and 6.8 Avon chub

GE with pb grayling



My pb Avon gudgeon, nice fish

## Cold enough for grayling

22nd November 2008

The weather had changed from cold wet and windy to merely cold, and the first grayling trip of the winter seemed to be appropriate. The weather forecast was typically up the creek, with nasty drizzly rain and an annoying, uncertain wind that at first made the act of offering a float to the river rather tricky. Things eventually settled down, though, and it was soon becoming a pleasure to explore the pools and glides of a fast flowing Frome with a light rod and a bucket of maggots. Being wrapped up against the cold made it less than comfortable to roam the meadows, climbing awkward stiles and fences, as well as working out the safest way through the boggy swampy bits. All discomfort was forgotten though, when the float dipped and the first dogged and determined grayling of the season made the line sing and the heart race as it chugged upstream against the flow. It was nice to be reminded of how hard they fight, not to mention of how beautiful they are. The steely grey flanks are offset so nicely by the iridescent blues, greens and coral of the fins.

There was a beautiful cow in the field behind, even more attractive with a bright green plastic tag in her nose. It actually suited her, much more so than the bits of metal that some young humans stick through holes in their faces these days in an attempt to increase their allure.

The last pool I fished looked as divine as that cream and liver young heifer with the nose ring, with all the ingredients needed to make it home to a shoal of big grayling. It had a nice boily drop off after some extensive shallows, a smooth deep glide and the tail of the pool was typical of some very productive swims I knew elsewhere on the river. Not a bite of any description, and one slightly chewed maggot, no doubt due to a minnow or a salmon parr. Sometimes the best looking swims do not fulfill their attractiveness, and the otter prints found all around could have been the reason why the pool was apparently completely fishless. Otters will have roamed the whole stretch however, and the chance of them eating out one pool in preference to

others seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the marks on many of the grayling I took that day showed they had had close shaves with cormorants, and the numbers of grayling were limited to one or two from each spot. Easy to blame predators for poor sport, of course, but on the other hand more and more predators means more and more prey are going to be eaten. We just need to be more certain about the numbers and trends involved than we are at the moment.



Two pound seven grayling, first two of the season



Nose ring makes her more attractive



Otter prints by the fishless pool!



Head shot of spotless two pounder

## **Stour barbel successfully stocked**

19th November 2008

A really interesting and satisfying day as the latest batch of marked barbel went into the Dorset Stour, 3000 healthy little Calverton bred fish, which follow the 3000 stocked last year. It was a bit nerve wracking waiting for them to arrive after a long journey from Nottingham, and when the lids came off the tanks it was obvious that they were in fine fettle, full of life and showing an apparent 100% retention of the elastomer tags that we had

carefully injected them with a couple of weeks ago. The plastic tags are expected to last for life, unlike the dye marks, which have been used in the past, which may only last a year or so. In fact, as part of a bit of extra research, we injected an additional 100 fish which will be kept at Calverton for a couple of years to see how good tag retention is in the short term.

Some of last years fish may have been spotted on the shallows this summer, and there are some ideas being discussed to do a bit of electro fishing next spring to see if any of the 6000 fish stocked so far are hanging around the stocking sites or likely areas nearby. As always, the thousand or so fish in a tank suddenly look very few, and very small and vulnerable when you see them being released into the real world, full of danger and other things that want to eat them. The further 3000 expected next year will be needed, I think, if the stocking is to be successful.

The accompanying habitat restoration work will also continue during and after the stocking programme, and I hope to get some clearer pictures of the gravel croy that the Society has contributed to recently, as soon as the river clears and drops a bit more. There are two more major bits of work on the river that the Society, local clubs and hopefully the EA will be funding together, and this spring should see some more instream structures and fry refuges built as soon as all the form filling and planning issues are dealt with.

The Society and local clubs have a fund of over five thousand pounds committed to this project, and the cash from this years online auction will enable similar work to be carried on elsewhere, I hope. Barbel of comparable size to those stocked today and provided by from commercial fish farms are currently advertised at around FOUR POUNDS each, so the likely nine thousand fish that we have been given by the Agency are an example of how an idea and some pump priming funding from us can reap real rewards.



Filming the arrival of the barbel



Typical green elastomer mark on the barbel



EA Fisheries officers looking pleased with the barbel stocking

17th November 2008

What with horrible weather, barbel marking trips to the Midlands, EA meetings and other meetings, not been much lately, although it seems from reports that I have not missed much. The Dorset Stour looked very inviting last weekend, and a couple of afternoons fishing a rising and nicely coloured river gave nil returns on the barbel front, although a pair of nice chub took a fancy to my barbel bait. There were some small chub about too, eight to twelve ounce fish, and quite capable of finding and swallowing a bait in a flow that needed three ounces to hold properly.

The bigger chub were high fives, and lovely silvery clean looking specimens they were. The chub and roach populations on the Stour appear to be thriving, but the barbel are still getting fewer and fewer and bigger and bigger. The extra stock now going into the middle river may in time establish and replenish the now sparse numbers in the once prolific lower stretches, but it could be that the dramatic dredgings that went on in the eighties are now having an effect on barbel recruitment. The doubles up to eighteen pounds we are seeing today could easily be twenty five years old or more, and the wholesale removal of spawning gravels that occurred twenty five years ago will not have helped to sustain stocks. The salmon fishing on the Stour was obliterated overnight, coinciding with the almost criminal dredging done in the name of flood alleviation all those years ago. The Barbel Society is helping to fund some repair work though, and only recently we paid for another 20 tonnes of gravel to go back in as part of the ongoing EA habitat enhancement work.

I even failed on the Kennet again, with an impromptu trip, which was supposed, to get the rod bent ending in an inexplicable blank in a swim I took five or six fish from last time I visited. They were clearly off the feed, though I did manage a personal best Kennet brown trout, which gave me the only bite of the day.

The crayfish trapper showed me a nice bucket of crays, and he advised that he had removed almost two tons of crays from his traps this year. The removal of crays by trapping does make fishing easier, although the latest news I hear is that trapping is only a temporary solution, and may in fact only produce larger numbers of small crayfish which can actually be more ecologically damaging in the long term! Removing them at least makes the river fishable, but it has to be true that we cannot hope to eradicate them, only try and manage them. Smaller crays sound more edible to chub and barbel to me!



How to barbel fish a flooded Stour



Nice bright Stour chub, soon be a six pounder



Personal best Kennet brownie



A gallon of crayfish

## **Another 3000 barbel for the Stour**

10th November 2008

Just back from three days in Nottingham, helping to mark another 3000 barbel for stocking into the Dorset Stour as part of a project initiated by the Barbel Society. With input of nearly £5000 from local clubs and the Society, the project involves habitat enhancement work on the river, and is linked to a stocking programme with up to 9000 small barbel from the EA Fish Farm at Calverton, near Nottingham.

Our idea, and a start up donation of cash from the Research and Conservation Fund, has meant that more than thirty thousand pounds worth of barbel, and probably ten thousand pounds worth of work on the river, have resulted. The cash from the R and C auction means that we can have an influence and effect that will hopefully be far reaching in terms of barbel stocks and conservation of their rivers. The EA were already doing some considerable enhancement work on the river, but we have boosted it with some extra instream work, and 6000

little barbel to date!

It was an impressive sight to see a thousand healthy little barbel in each tank, and after a brief spell under anaesthetic, they were carefully injected under the skin with some fluorescent plastic that is retained for life. They all recovered rapidly, and will be delivered to their new home in the next few days, weather permitting. They will be joining the 3000 fish that were stocked last year, and a further 3000 are expected next year. This is an example of a partnership between EA and clubs/organisations that can make things happen that would not be possible otherwise.

I was also impressed by the commitment and professionalism of the team at Calverton, and Nick Eyre and his team are justifiably proud of their operation and the millions of fish they produce for the Agency. I am up there again next week to help with marking some more fish for the Thames, so am starting to get sick of the sight of barbel!



1000 barbel in a tank; there is one chub in there!



Barbel with red tag



Typical Calverton barbel, 18 months old

## Beauchamp Open Day a great success

30th October 2008

After a BS Committee meeting on the Saturday, it was nice to clear my mind and get some fresh air on the riverbank, although it was still a BS affair that led me to the banks of the Severn at Beauchamp Court, one of the Society's prime fisheries. Mike Berridge and Mike Osbourne were clearly in charge, and after a similar successful day at Sutton on Trent, they were full of beans and impressing everyone with their energy and enthusiasm as they tramped up and down the stretch, helping and encouraging members and non members alike. These two ended up walking up and down the river several times, and their efforts on behalf of the participants of the day and the Society are to be applauded. I never got my cup of tea, though, so only nine out of ten to the Two Mikes on that occasion!

I had thought about fishing, but there were so many people there, and so much talking and meeting and greeting to do, that I never got round to it. The river looked to be in fine fettle, but the fishing was very slow, and nothing like last year, when that area of the Severn produced loads of doubles and some astounding multiple catches. The Severn barbel were as moody as everywhere else, it seemed, but my spirits were lifted nonetheless, just by engaging with as many of the anglers who had travelled to Beauchamp for the Open Day. Beauchamp is a lovely bit of river, and the advantage of a BS membership means you can fish quietly and safely, with secure parking and very few other anglers to compete with. I determined to give it another visit next time I am in the area.

Next riverine visit was to meet, and get a decent cup of tea this time, from my old mate Bob Buteux on the Royalty. We usually have a day after the grayling, trying to up Bob`s personal best each year, but circumstances meant he was fishing the Compound for a few days. I sat in the hut and enjoyed his stories and his excellent tea, and he was suitably impressed by my pics from the Zambezi trip. I showed him an aerial shot first, asking if he could recognise the river. "Well" he said wisely, "I don`t think it`s the Lea" The crocodiles finally gave it away to him. I left him perched on the weir, fishing bread in his inimitable style. He looked a bit precarious, but then he was fishing it before I was born, and I am sure he will have winkled out a chub before the end of the day.



Prospective members enjoying Beauchamp on the Severn



Mike Berridge and Mike Osbourne, prime organisers



Bob Buteux tempting chub, and fate, on the Royalty!

## Hard work on the Kennet

24th October 2008

Had a bit of a social day on the Kennet, but the fishing remains as patchy and unproductive as ever. The cooler weather is an excuse, as is the extra water, the choice of swim, and the chance that someone had fished the swim the previous day. or baited it with ten kilos of halibut pellets. This year has seen the full range of excuses for catches being poor utilised by everybody, but I have not yet started blaming the moon phase. There was good company during the day, and the fishing was always going to be a secondary reason for the trip out, but I

was pleased to be surprised by a nice eight pounder, winkled out by using the technique of quietly dozing; pretending to be asleep on order to lull the barbel into a sense of false security. The fish fought as strongly as any eleven pounder, deep and slow and stubborn, but it saved the day.

The slow barbel fishing was good excuse to go after perch, and it was nice to fish for something different a day or so later, and get used to hooking lobworms again. A big lobworm can give you quite a tussle, and they are not pleased to be offered as a perch bait after resting in sluggish hibernation in the bait fridge. They soon wake up though, and the perch seemed to be very appreciative, this early in the year, the perch fight with great spirit, and two pounders are quite capable of taking line fiercely. Best was a satisfactory 3.7, and fish of that size are really impressive, chunky, solid stripey specimens. They always try and spike me, and draw a bit of blood in protest at hiding a hook in the wriggly snack that tempted them. This one succeeded in taking nearly half an arm full before I could stem the bleeding.

The next day off was spent presenting another Tesco/Wessex Rivers Trust Award to a school in Salisbury, and the kids were delighted with us being able to fund the excavation and renovation of a big pond in the school grounds. The wildlife had already shown their appreciation too, and hopefully another bunch of youngsters had begun to appreciate the wonder of dragonflies, frog's toads and range of plants that were using their pond as a haven. More details on [wsrt.org.uk](http://wsrt.org.uk) for anybody interested in an award in the Wessex area.



Kennet eight pounder saves the day Business end of 3.7 perch

Another WSRT/TESCO Environment Award site

## Loddon barbel getting fat

17th October 2008

Had to work hard and wait nearly all day for it, but a nice result with a porky eleven six from the Loddon, when conditions said they should be throwing themselves at the bait from the off. Sometimes you can just sense that barbel are in the swim, and I was tempted to move more than once after a long and fruitless wait in a favourite



swim of mine that usually gives fairly instant results. Something said there were fish there; the occasional surface splash, the streams of bubbles, the almost imperceptible donk on the rod tip. Then the top lurches round when you least expect it and the whole atmosphere changes from dull, quiet despair to sudden excitement. This solid heavy shouldered fish was unmarked and spotless, and had not been caught for some time. I guess the barbel were just not really turned on, not that hungry, not that bothered, and I have watched them in the clear waters of the Avon for years, pecking idly over the bait for hours, or drifting about unconcerned and generally disinterested. They are not often turned up to eleven out of ten; more often it is two or three on the feeding scale! When you cannot see them, it is easy to assume they are just not there, but very often they are, but not in the mood to feed.

Unlike the cormorant. Lately they have been haunting me a bit, and when they flap in that greedy, ugly manner out of the water in front of you, you can not help but start calculating how many baby barbel, or indeed fairly mature barbel they have cleaned up, when populations of small fish are apparently on the downturn. I have seen them struggle to swallow pound plus roach, two pound barbel, and really big eels. A current EA paper on the catastrophic decline of eels, saying that less than 5% of historic populations can be measured in Europe, states that an estimated 10 to 20 thousand eels are taken by cormorants in the SW region each year. I think I will do a bit more research and see how many SW cormorants there are, how cormorant increases in number correlate with eel decreases, and what else they are judged to be eating. The pics of the pike eating cormorant are reproduced for your consideration.



Loddon eleven pounder looks resigned to capture



Now you see me.....



.....now you don't!

## Hard work on the Kennet

10th October 2008

I had promised Simon Asbury another day after Avon barbel, but with the river fishing so badly, we opted for a

have had fewer than a dozen fish off the river all year. I have never fished it so little, and apart from the poor fishing, the up to date knowledge of the going swims and the necessary info on how the river was fishing was not there for me, so a trip to a productive bit of the Kennet would make the long journey that Simon faced worthwhile.

The Kennet has also fished very patchily this year, along with many rivers, such as the Teme, Lower Severn, Warks. Avon and the Dorset Stour, so it was with some trepidation that we baited our swims and waited to see what transpired on the barbel front. There were four people fishing that day who had a barbel first cast, within minutes of casting in. Simon had his first Kennet double within the hour, but then the fishing was spectacularly uneventful. Nobody had a bite for the rest of the day, and even the last hour into dusk produced a resounding blank for everyone. Even the crayfish were disinterested, and they are invariably a nuisance when the barbel are a bit off.

Such inexplicable behaviour from the barbel has seemed to be a feature of the fishing this year, and although there have been good catches from some rivers, and a few big fish caught, the sport for this season shows no signs of perking up. I can stand blanking for big bream, which I have had a lot of practice at this year, and I can stand blanking on hard rivers like the Avon and Stour, but when I travel to the Loddon or Kennet it is usually to catch a few relatively easy fish and get the rod bent! Both rivers have been tricky for me so far, but the unpredictable nature of fishing, and the thinking and theorising in trying to explain your failures is part of why we go and sit on damp riverbanks in the first place, I suppose.

Simon was delighted with his Kennet double, and we parted with me promising to get him a big chub at least from the Avon this season, though an Avon barbel to order is becoming ever more unlikely!



Blanking on the Avon



Simon and his Kennet ten pounder



I miss fishing near these guys, they mean reliable sport is close by!

3rd October 2008

I met a German hydrologist on the plane to Africa who was studying the problems of water resources and human effects on the Zambezi, and it was interesting to see that the problems in Africa are not so different from those in Hampshire. Human beings are putting increasing demands on rivers that are already the victims of engineering by man to suit his greedy needs for water and food production. The Wessex Salmon and Rivers Trust have been involved in making awards to organisations trying to improve the watery environment, and last week I paid a visit to a site on the Wylde upstream of Salisbury to present one of our plaques to a Community nature reserve that has been working to enhance the habitat on the river. Using a grant of a few thousand from the WSRT, they have used natural materials to create gravel shallows and narrow the river in places, producing much more natural variations in flow and depth in a previously engineered stretch of river.

The stretch is used as a mixed fishery, and plenty of dace and grayling were enjoying their new habitat when I visited. This little chalk stream is a far cry from the vastness of the Zambezi, but the principles of river management will be much the same, only on a rather different scale! The fish are also an important resource, and the tiger fish and vundu of the African river are under threat from habitat destruction and over fishing in the same way as our equally vulnerable British species.

The Roach Club roach are coming on nicely, and a visit to the Avon Roach Project in Trevor's back garden was the usual uplifting experience. The little roach are no longer so little, having been hand fed for almost six months now, and we spent several hours discussing the next steps and plans for the coming years. Trev and Budgie have worked a minor miracle, and I left full of enthusiasm and once again astounded that the way they have produced tens of thousands of prime roach fry ready to be carefully released back into the river, hopefully to give a helping hand to the recovery of the Avon roach stocks. There are signs that the barbel have bred well over the past few years, with plenty of tiny barbel sighted this year. Let us hope they survive in reasonable numbers to adulthood, or the Avon Barbel Project will have to be instigated!

Visit the wsrt website for details of the environment awards; we gave nearly ten thousand pounds last year to schools and community projects in the Wessex area, ponds, bog areas and river enhancement schemes all benefited.



Roach fry getting bigger!



Trev and Budgies roach farm, amazing!



River repairs on the Wylfe, paid for by WSRT

## More Zambezi memories

29th September 2008

Sorting through all the pictures from the trip to Zambia is keeping the memories of the experience very much alive. An afternoon session on the Avon seemed altogether dull without the background noise of snorting hippos or trumpeting elephant! The trouble with tiger fish is that they are remarkably difficult to hook, and usually come off just after the initial take, but I still have pictures in my mind of some good doubles that were almost at the net after a long and furious fight, only to then throw the hook during a last minute tooth gnashing leap under the rod tip.

The guides were normally cool calm and collected, cheerful and helpful, and always keen to offer advice and beers from the coolbox. I can still see the anxiety in the face of one young guide; however, as he struggled to start the outboard while we drifted closer and closer to a big pod of hippo that were between us and shallow water in a bay close to the bank. Cutting off a hippo escape route is a recipe for disaster, and having seen them charge each other in anger, I was preparing to grab a lifejacket and abandon ship when the motor spluttered into life, and the boat occupants and hippos all breathed a mighty sigh of relief.

Jumping into the Zambezi would not be recommended in any event, as we were often assured that the number of crocodiles under the water was far more than the number that were regularly disturbed out on the bank. One unfortunate canoeist was grabbed out of his canoe by a big croc only a week earlier, and canoes out on the main river were not encouraged. We did manage to sneak up on a twelve foot plus specimen as he basked on a sandbank, and the speed with which he shot into the water when he noticed us was astounding, there would be no escape from those jaws, and no chance of out swimming him!



Zambezi tiger, twelve pounds plus



Tiger about to be released, watch those teeth



Twelve footer too close to the boat

## Back from Africa

27th September 2008

The Hampshire Avon looked rather tame after a week on the Lower Zambezi after the tigerfish and vundu. An amazing experience, and it is difficult to get the images of Africa out of my mind.

A typical tigerfish swim on the Zambezi is a drop off from shallow sandbars into deeper, swirly water, but these areas are also favoured by pods of hippo, that lounge around on the shallows with an escape route into the deeps at the first sigh of danger. The baitfish that the tigers feed on also like to hang around the hippo, presumably taking advantage of the hippo dung and other food items that a few hundred tons of wallowing hippo produce. The tigers are never far away from their food, so a common technique was to scare away the hippo by rewing the boat engines, then drift downstream of their lie, casting out strips of fresh baitfish on big single hooks and heavy wire traces. Tigerfish are not gentle takers, and hit the baits hard, often leaping skywards almost immediately they are hooked. Hookholds are precarious in those tough toothy jaws, and most fish were lost early on in the fight. The tiger is a strikingly beautiful fish, a bit like a giant grayling with horror film teeth, and the handling of any capture was left to the guides, who all had experience in landing and unhooking fish quickly and safely.

The average size on this stretch was quite high, I am told, and I had several double figure fish up to nearly fourteen pounds. I am certainly going again, and already saving up for another trip next year. The holiday was not just about fishing, and it was somewhat difficult to get to sleep on the first night, with leopard spotted a few yards from the rather flimsy tent, not to mention finding elephant, buffalo and hyena tracks within a few feet of the bed the next morning.



First sight of the Zambezi from a light aircraft



First big tiger of the week



Big heffalump eating water hyacinth in the margins

## Good fortune on the Avon

12th September 2008

The recent rains had made an already coloured river take on a shade of brown more commonly seen in November than September, and the level had risen almost a foot on some stretches. The waterlogged meadows were even more wet and muddy, and swims I was fishing in sandals last year were now only approachable in Wellingtons. I never normally dig out the wellies until November, but this year has been the soggiest I can remember. I feel sorry for the farmers who have not even cut grass for hay yet, let alone considered the chances of it drying out for baling.

I felt a bit wet and miserable as I squelched towards my chosen swim, cursing the grey clouds and squally showers that are making the fishing much less enjoyable than it should be at this time of year. The swim would be more fishable than most, on the inside of a bend with deepish water under the rod tip, and with the aid of a good heavy back lead I could avoid much of the drifting weed that the extra water had dislodged. It was more like winter fishing, baiting a swim close in, fishing with rod tips submerged, and hoping that fish would be in the area, rather than spotting them. I crouched grumpily under the brolly, and willed one of the pins to screech into life.

The bite from a barbel is nearly always a surprise, and the inert reel suddenly screaming into life is one of the most exciting ways of being woken from a grumpy doze. The fish tore off across the river, stopped, and then surged up under the far bank with the power and authority that marks a bigger than average barbel. The damp and dreary weather was forgotten as I stumbled soggily into the muddy margins and attempted to bring some control into the situation. The slow and dogged determination of this fish set my mind racing, and the first sight of the tail and flank as it turned and plodded off on another run into the weedbeds confirmed that it was a sizeable and scarily big barbel.

The best of the year at 14.2, it turned a miserable day of low mood and low expectations into a bit of a red letter day, and the clouds lifted along with my spirits. The long walk back to the car was a doddle.



Good set of whiskers on 14.2 and captor



Hunky Avon fourteen pounder



Winter tactics, paste wrapped boilie with crumble in PVA

## **An old friend on the Avon**

7th September 2008

A visit to an old stamping ground on the Avon produced a remarkable recapture in the form of a one eyed barbel that I had caught last year from half a mile downstream, but also in previous years at least twice more to my recollection, always in the same half mile stretch. This fish was now a shade under ten pounds, and the distinctive lack of a right eyeball makes him really recognisable, He weighed about nine and a half last year, and a little over nine four years ago, so the lack of vision is not preventing him from growing steadily and slowly. It proves that some barbel are stay at home types, who do not seem to roam far from a stretch of river that appears to be to their liking, while other recognisable fish can travel great distances for no clear reason. A general urge to move upstream to spawn, returning to established haunts has been studied and documented, but it seems that the roamers and stay at homes do exist amongst barbel populations.

Another fish of similar size came at dusk from the same swim, along with a really chunky chub of just under six that fought almost as well as the barbel, making me think a catch of three barbel in a day was on the cards, which would have been a notable catch from the middle Avon this year. The fishing remains very slow and patchy, from what I hear, and it is one of the reasons why I have fished the river so little this season. The conditions for spotting and stalking fish have not been there, and this takes most of the enjoyment out of fishing the summer river.

Next day I went to a reliable bit of the Kennet, and blanked there for a change. This trip was only half a day, after picking up some more bait from Glyn, but even so I expected to get four or five fish in the evening. The crayfish

were quite ravenous, and destroyed my hook baits in the three swims I tried, and one nasty specimen gave me the only proper bite of the day, almost drawing blood from my finger as I got him to pose for the camera. I hope and pray that these accused creatures never take hold in my local rivers. Some anglers seem to think they are actually desirable, thinking them responsible for increased growth rates in fish, which is nonsense in my view. Like most invasive species, they are in dire need of total extermination.



Big fat Avon chub, 5.14



Old one eyed barbel, 9.15



Big nasty Kennet crayfish

## Avon comes on form

30th August 2008

With a pair of good walking boots, a pair of good eyes and a pocket full of boilies, you can eventually find a fish or two on the Avon. The river has cleared a bit, and I finally found a pair of nice fish in a shallow run under the bank that never normally produces anything much. Along with a carp of about fifteen pounds, a little gang of chub and a hefty salmon, the barbel was quite big, the smaller looked about ten, the larger fish was between twelve and fourteen. Definitely worth fishing for, but quite a tricky situation, with cagey barbel in a shallow swim with carp and chub in competition for food, and salmon in competition for occupancy. As it turned out, the barbel just elbowed the salmon out of the way as soon as some crumbled boilies were introduced, but the chub and carp were soon grubbing about and likely to be a nuisance. The second cast produced a screaming bite, but the fish came off as soon as I picked up the rod. I prayed I had hooked a carp and not a barbel, and thankfully my next careful inspection of the swim showed two barbel in residence, and no sign of carp. The chub were to spoil things from then on, and every time I hooked one the barbel were spooked for an hour or more.

Next day I was back, and the barbel seemed even trickier, and less willing to feed, though the smaller fish finally took a paste wrapped boilie right under the bank alongside a thick weedbed. It was a deep fat fish, and weighed just on eleven pounds. This muscly, solid fish was clean and fresh, fin perfect and no hookmarks, good to see and a candidate for further growth. The bigger fish took even longer to make a mistake, and I had to wait until the next morning before he returned, and I was soon carefully lowering a single hook bait and stringer of half boilies



into the same spot under the weed. No loosefeed at all this time, I did not want to give him much choice! He screamed off downstream as soon as he was hooked, and as he boiled on the surface I was sure I had hooked the carp. I was cursing the greedy Avon carp when I glanced into the river beneath me and saw a carp of about fifteen in the swim. I must be attached to the barbel, I thought, and had never been so glad to see a river carp! The fish was a little hollow, long and streamlined, yet still went 13.12, which is a really big fish for the Avon, and a very agreeable capture indeed! Such a fish is not now classed as big by national standards, but we all forget that a fish of 13.12 once held the record for many years. Plenty big enough to make me feel much happier and more uplifted about the Avon barbel fishing than I have been of late.

There was a time when we stalked the river in search of shoals of perhaps a dozen or twenty fish, and expected to get four to six fish in a day, but rarely anything over nine pounds. Now we stalk even harder, searching for groups of two or three fish, and every third fish is a double. The population is changing, fewer and bigger fish, but there are signs that a new generation is on the way to replace the current dominant year classes. I heard recently of a match catch of 28 pounds which comprised 14 barbel, so there are some backup fish on the way to replace these big old fish when the inevitably pass away.



Lovely Avon eleven pounder in my new landing net



Long lean 13.12 on a 28 inch net



Avon 13.12, very welcome fish!

## A day on the Avon

24th August 2008

It was time to take the plunge and give John Buss his day on the Avon after a barbel. John had made the highest bid for the day out on the BS online auction last year, and we had been waiting for conditions to be most favourable. The Avon has been fishing terribly for barbel this year, with determined regulars taking only a handful of fish to date. I have hardly fished it, preferring to wait until it clears and the fish can be located by spotting, but even by the end of August the river remains a good foot above normal, slightly and annoyingly tinged with colour, and the barbel are hard to find and even harder to catch.

I could not put John off any longer, and we arrived at a noted swim and baited heavily with hemp and caster and left it for a couple of hours, hoping that fish would move in. I explained that a barbel would be a lot to hope for unless we could find some visible fish in shallower water that had not already been spotted and fished for. I took John to the swim where Richard Walker took his enormous 12.12 in 1963, and gave him a tour of what I think is the most picturesque stretch of the Middle Avon, but no fish could be seen, either on our tour or on our return to the baited swim. Not even a chub had put in an appearance, so we decided to trudge for a mile through the soggy meadows to another swim that I knew held a few barbel. You cannot catch a fish that isn't there. The walk is normally a nice flat comfortable stroll, but the wet and muddy fields made it a grueling and rather unpleasant plod.

We collapsed in the swim, and determined not to move again. We went through the basics of hemp and caster fishing, baiting techniques and rigs that were new to John, and he assured me that the experience was more about seeing the river and learning about unfamiliar tactics than catching a barbel. Just as well, because the barbel failed to show, but John was delighted to catch a few nice Avon chub on both caster and my special boilies, and the catch was topped by a personal best 6.10 for John, which saved the day in style. A long fish, it would make a good seven in the winter. We were amused between bites by a green caterpillar that walked at least ten circuits of my bait bucket rim before tiring and eventually we rescued him and put him in the rushes. John wanted to throw him to the chub, but we thought better of it.

John left a happy man, but the poor barbel form on the river continues to cause concern. I think it is just down to exceptional conditions; an extra foot of water generates ten times as many barbel swims, and with fewer barbel than ever in the river, they are more spread out and harder to find, as well as being unsettled by late spawning and cooler wetter weather. September must see a big boost to catches!



Caterpillar in training for Insect Olympics



Happy John with 6.10 Avon chub



Another nice chub for John, picturesque Avon as background

20th August 2008

A trip to the BS stretch of the Swale at Topcliffe with Phil Smith was finally arranged, and Phil was keen to get a double from yet another river. My target was just to fish the river for the first time, with any barbel a bonus, regardless of size. Local bailiff Warren had assured us that the river was in good order, and had been fishing quite well of late, with several doubles and some catches of up to ten fish in a session. The Swale is a moody river, however, and prone to suffer the effects of sudden flushes of spate water from well upstream, that can either produce good sport or knock things firmly on the head.

We travelled further up the M1 than I had ever been, and were warmly welcomed by Warren and advised to pick up some tins of spam from the local stores before we set off for the river. This was the going bait, we were advised. The Swale is a nice little river, with steep wooded banks for the most part and set in classic Yorkshire countryside, but the Himalayan Balsam has got a grip up here, and the heavy beds of HB that choked some considerable length of the banks were a bit of a disappointment. The Yorkie cows seemed to be very choosy, and the herd of Fresians that lived in the adjoining meadows had left the stuff untouched. My Avon Redpolls attack it with vigor, and are a very effective form of control when they can get near it.

The river was about a foot up, and looked very inviting. Phil bagged the best swim, and I took up station in a nice comfortable spot just downstream. We had both slipped and fallen on the muddy banks on the way down to the swims, but Phil was soon set up and cast out, with not a hair out of place. Warren was full of enthusiasm, really welcoming and helpful, and gave us plenty of advice and encouraged us with tales of recent catches. The barbel were not in the mood, however, and all six of the people fishing failed to get a Swale barbel, though I had a nice chub and some tentative enquiries that were probably just more chub.

I am determined to have another go, however, and Phil and I plan another visit as soon as the river drops and clears a bit, although Warren told us the river can fish really well in flood conditions. Thanks to Woz for all his help, and I am sure we can get amongst those Northern barbel next time.



## Filming on the Teme

19th August 2008

A trip to the BS stretch at Bransford was arranged in order to help out with a feature on the Society for the new online fishing website, which sounds like a really good idea. The monthly subscription will provide access to a whole range of fishing related programmes, and the chance of promoting the BS was not to be missed. Ron Lander, Steve Pope and John Found all turned up to face a raging Teme the colour of milk chocolate, rising slowly and steadily, and carrying an assortment of branches, trees and other debris.

Ron was asked how he fished in these conditions, and immediately replied " I go down to the Severn!"

Things did not look very favourable, but we had all come a long way and decided to press ahead.

The presenter of this series, Rae Borrás, is an excellent character for the role, and I have known him for many years, since he is deeply involved in the salmon fishing on the Hampshire Avon. He was not impressed with the colour of the Teme, but we persuaded him that there was a chance of some fish, and the weather held nicely, enabling some good scenic shots and interviews with us all to be completed. Rae kept us all amused in his inimitable way, and even though the fishing was hard, we all had a good time. Ron and Steve caught two barbel for the cameras, and Rae managed to get the best fish of the day, a barbel of around eight pounds, whilst idly dangling two lobworms in a half hearted way under his rod tip. I accused him of worming for salmon, and taking the fish by foul means, but this was mostly due to jealousy on my part, since I blanked in fine style, again.

The willow stakes we had hammered into the bank in April to hold back the erosion had sprouted vigorously, and I was fishing just downstream of them. The stakes were submerged, but the growth was still visible despite the river carrying three or four feet of floodwater. Catching three fish in such conditions shows how many there are there, and hopefully the work we are doing at Bransford with the EA later in the year will make the habitat even more attractive to the barbel and other wildlife.



Teme at Bransford, plus more  
balsam!

Chocolate Teme and submerged  
sprouting willows

Same swim in April

## **First Loddon double for Steve**

18th August 2008

Steve keeps moaning because I always elbow him out of the best swims, which is a gross injustice, and we always decide where to fish once I have got my rod rests in. We spun a coin on where to fish on this occasion to stop him moaning, which was a bit of a disaster, since he not only lost the toss but also a pound coin in the long grass, which he searched for fruitlessly for hours instead of fishing. In the end he did get the best swim, and ended up with his first Loddon double, a nice clean fish of ten pounds ten ounces, which made up in some way for him losing a pound. I fully expect him to turn up with a metal detector on the next visit.

The Loddon was a bit coloured after the usual rainstorm, but the day was clear and hot, and a big grey shape could be still be seen ghosting about in my swim, a big barbel that was obviously very spooky and not keen to feed at all. I blanked in fine style, but will go back for that fish. I think it was bigger than the one Steve had by a few pounds, so worth another visit, even if I have to lend him a pound to shut him up.

The Loddon is well provided for in terms of woody debris, and it is a difficult job deciding which instream trees are good habitat, which are a real risk in terms of flood defence, and which are nasty snags that the greedy or inexperienced angler will constantly lose fish in. Some overhanging and partly submerged trees make superb barbel swims, some are good hidey holes for fish but impossible to get fish out of once hooked. The EA are currently working on removal of fallen trees on both Kennet and Loddon, it seems, but the work so far has left plenty of cover for fish, at the same time dealing with big fallen trees that almost block the entire river. Apparently trees which overhang by more than 25% of the channel width are candidates for pruning, and need to be half a metre clear of the surface. Such criteria are OK for flood defence, but fisheries/biodiversity officers must surely have some input into tree removal policy. Trees are good habitat for all species of fish, and also birds and other wildlife, and managing them involves the usual balancing act between a range of opinions from flood defence, fisheries and conservation interests.



Nice woody debris on the Loddon



More Loddon tree cover



Ten pound Loddon fish for Steve

## **Ban the balsam brigade**

9th August 2008

A fantastic turnout from the Ringwood and District AA to attack the infestation of Himalayan Balsam on the Avon near Ringwood. Fifteen of their members turned up to pull up the beds of HB that we had not had time to remove on the first session this year, and it is a credit to the club and its organisers to see so many willing hands happy to spend some time getting muddy and stung by nettles for an evening, when they could have gone fishing instead. The chances of stopping the spread of HB on the Avon are still high, even though some heavy infestations on the feeder streams have had to be treated by chemical means, being too big a job for hand pulling. The first few plants are easily removed by hand, and we can keep it at bay if initial seedlings are eradicated quickly. Education of anglers is crucial in this regard, because a watchful angler can recognise and remove a few plants by hand that would otherwise spread and intensify until chemical or mechanical means becomes the only option.

I found two plants at Throop last week, and marched into the brambles to pull them up. We all need to do the same, or face a bankside invasion of the stuff and incalculable damage to the ecosystem. A recent visit to the Teme and the Swale showed me how awful the HB takeover can be, and the effects on bankside erosion are hard to measure.

The Purple Loosestrife on the other hand is a welcome native species that seems to be having a bumper crop this year. It obviously likes cool damp weather, unlike the barbel! The Loosestrife is also very evident on roadside verges as well as riverbanks, and is much preferable to the ghastly balsam.



Purple Loosestrife in profusion



Balsam on the Swale



Willing worker with specimen balsam plant!

## Lacklustre Loddon, Kennet saves the day

5th August 2008

A boiling hot day on the Loddon, and still a surprise that the sport was slow, since the river was carrying extra water after a recent downpour. The flow was clear and urgent, and conditions looked good to me, but the fish clearly had other ideas, and I had to work hard for a single fish from a swim that was good for three or four as a rule. The rivers are still fishing badly all over the country, I am told, and I was worried to hear that the Lower Severn and Teme are not producing what they should either. Plenty of theories abound as to why the fishing is so poor overall, but more warm settled weather will see them all switch on eventually, I am sure.

Next day on the Kennet and the barbel were going well, resulting in a nice bag of ten fish including a few nines and a ten pounder. The river is generally quite prolific compared to the Avon and Stour, and nice to see a good range of sizes. I must assume that the two and three pounders are a different year class to the eights and nines, and the river is assured of a self sustaining barbel population for many years to come.

Rivers like the Stour and Avon are at a crucial stage, with a few big fish and not much sign of recruitment to replace them when they die off. I think the Thames, Ouse and Lower Severn are at a similar cycle, with fish getting bigger and bigger, but fewer and fewer, and the next year classes of barbel yet to put in an appearance. The Upper Severn swarms with smaller barbel, I am told, so they should filter down and keep the population up in the lower reaches.

I was astounded to learn the secret of Phil Smith's luxurious coiffure the other day; if you look in Sainsbury's toiletry department his range of shampoos and conditioners is there for all to benefit from.

Phil tells me it is another Phil Smith, but the evidence is there for all to see. I am going to take a trip to the Swale with Phil shortly, so will be able to pass on some more tips on hair care then, I am sure.



Nice little three pound Kennet barbel



One of the range of Phil Smith haircare products; be gorgeous!



Fat Kennet double

## Small success on the Avon, otter experience on the Stour

28th July 2008

Finally had some limited success on the Avon, after finding a small shoal of barbel in a fast run under the bank. The barbel were not big, but were willing to feed on crumbled boilies of my new recipe, devised between myself and Glyn the Baitmaker. They scooted about and grubbed around nicely in response to a dropper of crumble and a few loose fed half boilies. The flavour was obviously to their liking, and a couple grabbed a hook bait with some enthusiasm. One of the fish was a mere four pounder, and in sparkling condition, the other was a chunky seven pounder, and seemed similarly well recovered from any spawning rigours. The river is still not fishing well for barbel, however, and results are very patchy. An exceptional year in terms of high flows and unsettled weather, but the fish must settle down soon!

The next day on the Stour was quite uneventful, with the river clearing but still lacking the clarity that makes it worth trying to spot fish. Fishing blind on the Stour is as risky as it is on the Avon; the golden rule in the summer is to find your fish before bothering to start fishing, but murky water means you can only use your knowledge of likely swims and fish them in the hope there are a few barbel present. The evening wore by with not even a chub, then a little surprise in the shape of a big dog otter made me sit up. He popped his head up and out over the bank a few inches from my feet, took one look at me, snorted in disgust and splashed away in a flick of his tail and left a trail of bubbles as he shot off upstream. I must have been sitting at a spot where he wanted to come ashore.

The closest I have ever been to a wild otter, and an experience that left me with mixed feelings. It may be the reason there were no fish feeding in my swim, but on the other hand I have caught barbel within minutes of an otter cavorting through my swim on the Avon. He was the first otter I had seen on that stretch, and the barbel have never been as scarce in recent years. I have to hope it is just coincidence; there are loads of roach, chub, eels and perch showing, increasing in numbers as the barbel decline. Too early to blame the



otters, I think.



Baby Avon barbel, fish of the future



Nice Avon swim



Surprised looking seven pounder

## **Bream success, but barbel still cagey**

20th July 2008

Another visit to a huge reservoir in search of big bream, and finally a bit of success in the shape of a couple of double figure specimens. A nice change from the routine of lowering baits in under the rod top, this stillwater fishing involves casting out 50yards or more, and spodding out loosefeed instead of bait dropping. The bites from these bream are a bit half hearted; it sounds as if the battery has just failed on the buzzer and the indicator drops to the floor. You pick up the rod and feel something on the end, which you reel in carefully, never quite sure if it is a fish or not, then a huge lump of a bream lollops about defiantly under the rod top for a minute or two. They are impressive creatures though, and lifting the net on a twelve plus fish is a bit of an experience for me as far as bream are concerned. Despite the slime, and the lack of any real fighting qualities, the effort is worth it when the fish are sizeable, and a new aspect to your fishing should always be welcome. I shall maintain the effort, and have another few trips after the bream this summer, especially when the barbel fishing is slow, which is certainly how it remains this season.

Another blank on the Avon, and even the chub are not doing me any favours this year. The signs on both Avon and Stour are that the chub are recruiting well, with plenty of small fish from a few inches to three pounds, as well as the bigger specimens. There is now a realistic chance of eight pound plus fish from both rivers, and sevens are now not mentioned with any surprise at all. How things change; not that long ago I was seriously doubting whether the Avon would produce a six pounder, now I no longer bother to photograph sixes unless they are pretty fish.

A nice ten seven barbel from the Loddon kept my barbel needs satisfied for a while, a really clean chunky fish with no hookmarks and perfect fins. It was a hard day for one fish though, and the oncoming warm settled

weather may start to turn the barbel on properly. The bulk of the fish are still drifting about on the shallows, with spawning still on their minds I am sure, and I saw a group of barbel yesterday that were sitting out in very shallow water and looking a bit confused. They will regroup and switch on eventually, and I cannot wait until the rivers are clear enough to spot them and proper barbel fishing starts.



Twelve plus bream, not pretty but an impressive fish



Pretty little Avon chub, no shortage of these!



Perfect Loddon ten seven

## Exploring on the Loddon

15th July 2008

Probably a bit unwise to go in search of new swims on the Loddon when the rivers are fishing so badly at the moment, but I could not resist having a look at a few new stretches. The swims on this little river all looked so inviting, and the achievement of catching a fish from a swim that just looks right is so much more satisfying than being told exactly which swim and where to cast, to catch a fish with a name, so I was rather bravely exploring without any real prior knowledge from locals. No surprise when a good part of the day spent in a brilliant looking swim produced no bites of any description; not even a chub. Much of the river appears to be fishless apart from barbel, but this time of year can be very frustrating, with unsettled conditions producing unsettled fish, I suppose.

We ended up going to a stretch I was familiar with for the afternoon and evening, and even there it was a couple of hours before anything happened. Two or three fish in a day is acceptable to me on this bit of water, and three sprightly fish eventually got their heads down on my carefully droppered bed of particles, dragging the rod round boldly and storming off downstream. They seem to like the thick cabbage beds on the Loddon, and burrow into them furiously when hooked. The tail of a nine pounder can look quite impressive when it is all you can see waving out of a weedbed that the fighting barbel is busy demolishing. All three fish looked like doubles in the water, and two nearly made it.

The next fruitless visit to another new stretch produced one bream, but the sight of four kites wheeling over a newly cut hay field more than made up for the lack of fish. At times they hovered just above the trees, and I could make out the glint in their eyes as they searched the field after the recent grass cutting. I suppose there are mice and voles that get minced as the hay is cut, and the kites are used to going in and mopping up the casualties. Lovely elegant birds, that are apparently spreading every year, and there is more than enough road kill and rabbit to keep them going. Their proper name is Red Tailed Kite, I think, and those reddy ginger colours are easy to make out at close range.



Looks great, no fish though



Nearly ten pounds, Loddon barbel



Red Tailed Kite in typical pose

## Dealing with weed problems

9th July 2008

We have had two very successful days pulling up Himalayan balsam on the Avon near Ringwood, and the turnout from the local clubs was fantastic, especially considering the weather. Some significant infestations of the dreaded HB were firmly dealt with, and despite the stings and scratches from nettles and bramble, the piles of uprooted balsam were testament to the hours of hard work put in by the volunteers on the two evenings. We need to go back and have another go at one site shortly, but we may have stopped the stuff in its tracks on the main river. The volunteers now know what it looks like, and can deal with any plants they see in future as well as spread the word to their fellow anglers. Anglers are absolutely crucial allies in the drive to control this weed, as well as the Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogwort, which are the three big targets for invasive control at the moment.

The exceptional water levels have meant that some stretches of river that have not been weedcut for perhaps twenty years are to be cut this coming week, mostly because the water is threatening to flood houses and highways. The two wet winters and springs have meant that the river is flowing at 140% of long term average, which means it is carrying 40% more water than normal at a time when weed growth has also been unusually vigorous. The cutting is a compromise between the demands of farmers, homeowners, conservationists and

fishermen, and the weedcutting consultation meetings I have attended over the last few years have shown me how much the EA tries to take all concerns on board before any cutting takes place. It remains a considered and minimal cut in my view, and certainly a much better situation than occurred twenty years ago.

Angry anglers must also realise that a large amount of weedcutting is regularly practised on the Upper Avon, Test and Itchen for angling benefit, on the trout fishing stretches, and this has been common established and accepted fishery management for centuries. The effect on fishing, flow and inverts is seen as beneficial. The wholesale bank-to-bank weedcutting of the sixties and seventies does not occur now, and the ever reducing level of cutting probably does less damage than we think, though it looks a bit horrendous when the boats are in action.

The new island on the river that was constructed by the EA last autumn has survived the floods, and is currently still underwater due to the high levels, and gathering some goods rafts of cut weed. It is already proving to be a haven for chub, and will no doubt become an improved habitat for dace, chub, and barbel as well as salmon.



Happy helper pulling balsam, thanks Sue!



Submerged Avon island collecting weed, still good habitat



Pleasant but fruitless evening on the Avon, no bites

## **Bream, barbel and balsam**

5th July 2008

Went bream fishing on a big reservoir the other day, to make a change from barbel fishing, which remains very slow almost everywhere I go. A nice catch of four nine pounders from the Kennet cheered me up a bit, but the general picture is very patchy, especially on the Avon and Stour. The bream were supposed to be fairly easy to catch, and the chance of both a double figure and pb slimey were supposed to be very good. It cost me a fortune in spods and feeders and rigs and bait, and I blanked in glorious style. My swim produced a half hearted line bite, and appeared to contain one tufted duck and a nutty pike that constantly attacked my feeder on the retrieve.

My pal had a swim full of bream, rolling around his marker float like trout in a stew, and he had a load of fish, which he eventually suggested I share by moving in to his swim.

The bream instantly moved off, and we never had a bite for the rest of the day.

The next evening I tried again for an Avon barbel, and immediately caught two large bream, both over eight and the biggest a shade under nine! Avon bream are not usually welcomed by me, but I have to say they were very clean, golden bronze fish, that made me stop winding in twice during the fight. They were both females, and looked as if they had not yet spawned. The male Avon bream are often ugly black fish, all covered in warts and tubercles, but these fish were almost nice to look at, and also lacking in the thick slime that their stillwater cousins have. A chub of a little under five rounded off the evening, but still no barbel.

Next two days will be spent on pulling up the infestations of Himalayan Balsam that are starting to take hold on the river. With luck, and with a good education programme for anglers, we can keep this stuff at bay on the river, but it does need us to keep our eyes open and take the trouble to pull it up whenever we see it. I always attack it when I see it on the Kennet and Loddon, but they are really lost causes, along with the Frome and some of the southwest rivers. Not giving up on the Avon, though, and am pleased with the support from local fishing clubs to date.



Kennet nine pounder, seems fat and healthy



Nearly nine pounds of Avon bream



That bream again! Nice looking fish!

## **Birthday doubles on the Gordon Bennett**

29th June 2008

A couple of visits to the Kennet, and my confidence in barbel fishing is restored. For a small river, the barbel population remains remarkable, and the news of an eighteen pound plus fish this week shows that the river is capable of producing huge individual fish as well as good numbers. The eighteen pounder, like several unseasonably large fish reported so far, indicates that many barbel have not yet spawned, and a near

seventeen from the Dorset Stour adds more weight to that judgment. Barbel are spawning on the Avon as I write, so that may account for the very patchy sport that is being experienced nationally, and it remains very slow indeed on the Avon and Stour.

The Kennet came up trumps for me though, and bags of four or five fish in a day, including a couple of ten pounders, reminded me of just how hard they can fight at close quarters. They may not compete with Canadian commons for speed, but the stamina of a fit ten pounder, in deepish water under the rod top made my arm ache. These fish may well have spawned and recovered, they seemed very fit and quite fat in the belly, but may have been gorging on the hemp and crumbled boilie that I was bait dropping so generously for their benefit. The Kennet still suffers from very turbid water, and it is a shame that the fish can rarely be spotted. The ranunculus still seems to grow well on most stretches, but rarely reaches the profusion that typifies Avon weed growth. I will be glad when the Avon and Stour clear properly, and the fish can be sought out by spotting, rather than mostly fruitlessly fishing blindly.

Weedgrowth on the Avon has been exceptional this year, and linked with very high levels and flows, has resulted in huge problems for farmers and, we are told, the interests of breeding wading birds. The low lying fields have certainly been ankle deep in water a lot of the time. The Avon weedcutting has had to be more severe than normal, which is a cause for some concern, but it must be viewed in the light of a period of much less cutting, and having attended weedcutting meetings on behalf of the Society and local clubs, I must say that the EA have been very responsive to angling interests over recent years. Some years there is little or no weedcutting, and the amount of cutting is reducing all the time. It is now carried out in a minimal and much more controlled way, and I would not welcome the job of trying to satisfy the demands of farmers, conservation bodies and anglers, all with conflicting demands!

One stretch I know is not going to be cut at all from now on, as a direct result of consultation and reasonable negotiation between myself and the EA, and there have been changes in cutting practice which have achieved drops in levels that are slow and effective, thereby not stranding fry and inverts, again at the suggestion of anglers. This has involved a single, sinuous narrow cut, which lowers levels and retains the bulk of the weed growth. It works best in low flow conditions, however, and every year is different. In the future, the level of weedcutting will get less and less, I am sure, but in the meantime we can work with the authorities to minimise any potential damage to ecosystems.



Kennet ten pounder, birthday double



Another Kennet double, spawned or not?



Waiting for a bite on the Avon

## Poor results on Avon, but Roach Project success

25th June 2008

A couple of afternoon sessions on the Avon and only a very few small chub to show for it. The odd barbel has shown, but most people continue to fail to contact barbel in any numbers. A few have dropped onto big shoals of chub, which indicates they are still in tightly packed groups post spawning, and very localised.

The Avon will take a week or so more to settle down, and clear properly, and the flows are very good for the time of year, recently topping long term average. Salmon results have been very disappointing, and especially strange considering the good flows, which usually bring them into the river steadily, instead of hanging about in the estuary. I managed a couple of small chub, the sort that can hook themselves and then sit on the bottom without giving you any more indication than an initial fast knock on the rod tip, often not noticed if the rod tip is submerged to avoid drifting weed. The weedcutting always brings some problems, and I do not envy the EA trying to satisfy farming, nature conservation and angling interests, and dealing with a whole series of complaints and conflicting demands. They did agree to suspend cutting on a stretch that provides good barbel and chub swims early season, and the positive response to angling interests is to be applauded.

A quick visit to Budgie and Trevor to see how the Roach Club roach rearing project is progressing was a delight; the roach are now feeding furiously on the shrimp and daphnia that Trev is farming in his back garden, and losses have been minimal. There are tens of thousands of healthy little fish that are being given a chance of survival and will ultimately be returned to the river to try and give the roach in the middle reaches a helping hand to repopulate. Recent EA fish population monitoring confirms that roach are noticeable by their absence, even though chub and to a lesser extent, barbel are maintaining numbers.

The little roach love the live food that are being bred in Trevor's conservatory, and will soon need to be fed on fish farm supplement as well. The EA are very supportive of this scheme, even to the extent of providing a promise of some more tanks to increase the roach rearing capacity of Trev's back garden.

The enthusiasm and commitment of both Trevor and Budgie is astounding, they deserve every success and

credit for what has been achieved so far; must get them to try rearing some barbel as well!  
They are both BS members, and just the sort of contributors that angling needs. The Avon roach need them too!



Boilie guzzling baby Avon chub



Brine shrimps by the million bred to feed baby



Thousands of greedy little roach, destined for return to the river

## First barbel on the Loddon

19th June 2008

First trip of the season was to the friendly little Loddon, and combined with a visit to Glyn the Baitmaker to pick up some fresh boilies and paste. A new recipe was called for, not because his last mix was not effective, but to keep up an interest and confidence from a base and flavour that you know is both high quality and unique. I had seen Avon barbel move a couple of hundred yards to home in on a bed of crumbled boilie made by Glyn, and rip up the bottom on the baited area, and am always confident that his stuff both attracts and catches fish.

I used the new boilie on the river that afternoon, and was most appreciative of a barbel on it during the first session of the season. Such instant success is to be expected from good bait, and shows that the heavy prebaiting that some people employ and recommend is not really necessary a lot of the time.

It was only one fish, though, and typical of results so far this season for most eager and over-expectant barbel anglers. A few fish, and some very big ones, will be caught, but it seems to me that the barbel are particularly unsettled and scattered this year, and we invariably forget that early season barbelling can be very hit and miss. Fish are almost always on the move to or from spawning, and take a few weeks to settle down and start feeding in earnest. The barbel I had was very fit, in perfect condition, and may not yet have spawned. The reports of very big fish I have heard so far would suggest that the big females are yet to spawn, and no surprise when you consider the very changeable, cool and unsettled weather we have had this spring, along with above average flows on many rivers.

It was strange to be playing a fish on what seemed like delicate and light tackle after getting aching arms with



beefy carp rods, big reels and heavy braid on the St Lawrence, but the bite was as far from delicate, a typical wrench round and a nice way to start the season.



Reels ready to scream into action



Perfect eight pound Loddon barbel to start the season



Fit Loddon barbel

## A gross of Canadian carp

15th June 2008

The second week of the holiday saw numbers of carp increasing somewhat, and although we took a relaxed attitude, only arriving on the river at about nine after a huge Canadian cooked breakfast, and leaving for dinner at about half six, we had bags of up to twenty to thirty fish each in a day. The average size was down, I am told, but a big bag of fish usually included a thirty or two and plenty of twenties.

The carp were now moving into the bays and preparing for spawning, and since the bays appeared to be the size of Hampshire, on average, the numbers of carp involved was mind blowing.

The area we were fishing was a flooded area upstream of a massive hydroelectric dam, that links Canada with America, and the bays often contained small submerged villages or roads, and the huge glacial rocks added to the snag potential. Heavy braid was a must to avoid being cut off by either the rocks or beds of zebra mussels, but losses in snags were very few. My more experienced colleagues told me that the fish with hookmarks I was catching were once a rarity, but a few had obviously been caught before. British anglers are now outnumbering the locals most days, and the place, despite the huge scale, is getting ever popular. There are literally millions of carp in the river, however, and they are seen as a food source to some. There were Chinese and Eastern Europeans happily putting big carp in the boots, sorry, trunks of their vehicles on the last day I fished, much to the bemusement of the Canadians, who were just as happily fishing for tiny bass on useless little four foot rods bought for a few dollars from Wal-Mart. The Canadians were welcoming and friendly people on the whole, and we forged some good friendships on the trip, experiencing some awesome barbecue food. The size of their portions matches the size of their carp.

The final sight of the trip was of carp spawning in their thousands in one large shallow bay, but the spectacle was marred by the sight of some bow hunters, who think that it is sporting to stalk the spawning fish from specially designed boats, and then nobly and bravely shoot the biggest with crossbow bolts attached to lines. The fish are generally discarded once they have thrashed themselves to exhaustion and hauled in, and I do find this practice more difficult to tolerate than the taking of the occasional carp for food. The biggest females, often fish of forty pounds plus, are the preferred victims, and the lack of bigger fish over the last few years may be in some way a result of such selective culling.

I ended up with 144 carp over the two weeks, and a whole host of experiences that are making another visit next year very likely indeed.



26lbs of male Canadian common, ready to spawn



Another huge Canadian common



Brave bowhunters looking for spawning carp to shoot

## Fishing a new river, two mile wide

1st June 2008

Always keen to include some experiences on new rivers, I am currently contemplating how to deal with a river that seems to be a couple of miles wide, and flows very gently for the most part, but can be about a hundred feet deep. There is no close season, and the fish that I am after are not normally welcomed by me as river fish. The local fishermen show little interest in them either, since they are not considered to be good sport or good eating.

The carp of the St Lawrence are famed for their abundance and their fighting qualities, and the first few days of my holiday in Canada has proved that they do fight astoundingly hard, but are not too abundant at the moment. The reason is blamed on a cold spring, and the big shoals of carp are still in the main river, and have not yet made their way into the shallow warm bays ready for spawning. We fished some of the main river swims on the first day or so, and although we had fish to over thirty and some nice twenties, the numbers of fish were apparently disappointing. Four or five such fish in a day was more than enough for me, though, and the

experience of thirty pounds of sleek Canadian carp tearing line off the clutch and heading for America across the other side of the river was something I could like getting used to!

The carp are not very educated, and will take anything yellow on heavy tackle fished over a bed of maize, and they give terrific bites; just like barbel, the bite is half the fun. They really do fight like tigers, and the bigger fish in particular have unbelievable stamina. Seen lots of wildlife so far too, including beavers, raccoons, chipmunks, Essex carp anglers, turtles, white-tailed deer, ospreys and big black squirrels.



Carping setup, with America on the horizon, I think.



Thirty one pounds of Canadian common carp



Greedy racoon

## Still no sign of salmon

25th May 2008

Now that the spinning is allowed, I am a bit more confident of a Hampshire Avon salmon this season, although the change from the fly-only rule has not resulted in the expected increase in catches. Salmon are a mysterious, unpredictable fish, and when they are both mysterious and few and far between, the chances of putting a lure past ones nose as well as provoking a response are not high.

I can only fish for trout or salmon during the close season, and do so more as an excuse to get out on the river bank more than anything else, so my rod effort is not terribly high. I tend to keep stopping and looking at the plants and animals instead of working hard at keeping a lure in the water. There are those who are bringing back the old Devon minnow technique, which is deadly for fishing the deepest, fastest water on the river, but my enthusiasm is limited for the time being to the Mepps and its variations.

Sometimes I feel as if I am covering the water quite efficiently, and feel much more confident than when using a fly. If I get one fish this year I will be happy, but there is always more to going out fishing than catching fish. A little perch and an even smaller pike took an out of season fancy to the Mepps, but that is all. So far today I have seen

several deer, a peregrine falcon, a hobby I think, and a scuttering brood of baby goosanders. The swans have a small brood of three, which is more than enough.

The Orange Balsam is sprouting as vigorously as last year, when I wrongly identified it as Himalayan and pulled it all up. It is still an invasive species, of North American origin, so no problem there really. It is soon overpowered by the native plants, and only a few plants make it to flowering, and produce startlingly bright tangerine orange flowers. It is a much smaller and delicate plant than the dreaded HB, so does not seem to present so much of a threat.

Water levels on the Avon seem to be very satisfactory, with official figures showing flows at close to the long-term average. It is nevertheless intriguing to see the old water meadow structures high and dry, and hard to imagine how the river would have looked when levels meant that these substantial sluices and channels were flowing. Many are several feet above current levels, and it is good news to hear that some are being reinstated for the benefit of both wetland birds and coarse fish fry.



Nice old sluices, now high and dry



These look attractive to me, but not the salmon!



Greedy little out of season perch

## Conference makes a nice break

20th May 2008

Just got back from what was probably the best ever Annual Conference and Barbel Show ever organised by the Society. Brilliantly organised by Mark Fox, and a team of stalwart BS helpers, it raised my spirits no end, and proved just what a force for good the Society can be. The minor administrative problems and tiffs behind the scenes are shown up for what they are; silly distractions from the main business of the BS, which is the business of encouraging and engaging in fun, friendship and fishing, a point so eloquently made by our Vice President, Peter Wheat in his closing address.

The talks were all very professional and well attended and received, and the interest, goodwill and friendship among the members was plain to see. I was moved to tears at the end, because I was sitting right next to Marylyn Brown when Peter Wheat was announcing the recipients of the Gordon Scott Award for services to the Society, and when she realised he was talking about her and her husband Dave, her reaction was an absolute delight, but made me sniff a bit and pretend to rub my eyes! They are such lovely people, and genuinely selfless hard workers. The Award was never more well deserved.

This afternoon was spent in quiet contemplation, practising with my scythe and keeping the pathways clear on the river, watching the plants growing with that bright green purposefulness so typical of the English spring. The nettles, soft rush and comfrey, dock and coarse grasses are all shooting upwards at an almost visible rate. The pollarded willows were certainly springing into life. A row of such trees have been planted as simple stakes in order to slow down some bank erosion, and now teeter on the water's edge, where once I had driven a big tractor mower two widths between the stakes and the water. Lowland rivers do behave in this way, snaking across the meadows and gobbling up the ground on the outside of bends, while new ground slowly forms on the inside of the opposite bank. Opposite the willows, a lone alder stands ten feet from the water, and hard dry ground has replaced the rooty, underbank swim where I had caught a big pike a few years ago. Only the fixed markers of such trees demonstrate how the river moves over the floodplain with time, so often now accelerated by unseasonal floods and sustained high water from climatic change.



Pollard willows coming to life



Resting between scything sessions, but keeps the paths open



Hampshire Avon in springtime

## **Stour habitat enhancements planned**

9th May 2008

Met with representatives from local clubs and the EA Fisheries team to discuss possible habitat enhancement works on the Dorset Stour today. The works are linked in with some proposed further stocking of Calverton barbel, but the benefits will hopefully provide better recruitment and fry survival for all species of fish. We looked

at some ORSU work that the EA have already carried out, and at the possibility of some instream work to provide gravelly areas for spawning. The use of large stone croys or groynes is an almost permanent and very cost effective way of creating more diverse flow and scouring compacted gravels.

The dredging of the Stour in the name of flood relief in the seventies and eighties destroyed the river as a salmon fishery, and is also thought to be responsible for the poor fish stocks of coarse fish between Blandford and Wimborne. There are signs of good recovery above and below this section, but even in the historically well-populated barbel zone around Throop, there are signs that recruitment of barbel is poor.

The work that the EA have done to date on the badly damaged middle Stour is commendable, and the use of stone croys and linked ORSU's seems to be producing the goods. Some lovely barbel swims, with brisk flows and gravelly pools and shallows have been created from a straight dull uniform bit of dredged river. We want our name on a few of these pools!

The cost of reinstating the millions of tons of gravel the Water Authority dragged out is hard to envisage, but the continued work of the Agency, backed with help and ideas from the clubs and the Society, will mean that we can help the river to mend much more quickly than it will naturally. Top marks to the local clubs as well; they have been begged and cajoled and harassed by me to stump up some cash, and we now have over five thousand pounds to spend on some works that would otherwise not have happened. With luck, we could see the diggers on the bank this autumn, so I will be eager to do some before and after shots.

ORSU means Off River Support Unit, basically a big ditch, oxbow, backwater or cow drink that has been excavated to provide fry refuge in high winter flows in particular.



Stone croy linked to downstream ORSU, or fry bay



Diverse flow and gravel scouring makes a brilliant barbel swim!



Two opposing croys make another gravelly pool

## Roach and barbel spawning success

2nd May 2008

The EA have been doing some electro-fishing to monitor the coarse fish stocks in the Avon, and first news is that they found some good numbers of large barbel in the usual, expected reaches. It seems to me that the regular barbel anglers could have provided that information, as angler catches are a valid and invariably reliable way of determining fish stocks. There are some concerns that regularly shocking big fish can cause damage, both internal muscle/bone damage and damage to ova in spawning females, but on the other hand I am informed that the Calverton broodstock are obtained off the redds by electro fishing, and the same big female fish are caught year on year. These fish provide plenty of viable eggs, and many fertilised eggs are returned to the river as a result, along with the donor females. We must hope that the risk to the fish is worth it for the information it provides on stocks and age, growth and year class structure.

Good news is that numbers of small barbel, in the pound plus bracket, were discovered as well, and it will be most interesting to see the total catch data in due course. The Avon and Stour barbel are continuing to get fewer and fewer, although bigger and bigger, and the generations that will replace them are awaited with some eagerness.

The roach responded to the warmer temperatures by indulging in some feverish procreation, and Trev and Budgie were delighted to see that the spawning boards had worked fantastically well in some spots. There were some that were ignored. Not surprising when you consider how few roach there are in the river, but in places where roach were gathering, they chose the boards that Budgie had designed in preference to the weeds they normally used! There are now several thousand eggs beginning to transform into little roachlings in the hatchery tanks, and the sight of all those eggs plastered over the netting on the boards has made all the work those two guys have done over the winter more than worthwhile. They spent hours and hours thinking and planning and constructing the boards, and though it may be a few years before the fruits of their labours are realised, the whole exercise is entirely laudable, and a bit humbling. The tiny fish can be seen twitching inside the egg cases, and a massive shoal of pinheads are now starting to collect as they hatch in response to the warmer weather.



Baby roach develop inside egg case



More roach eggs, placed in hatchery



Thousands of roach eggs on the spawning boards

## **A weekend on the Teme**

28th April 2008

It was a good idea of someone, Phil Betteley I think, to rename Work Parties as Fishery Enhancement Projects, and it is certainly the case that some work parties I have seen in the past on various fisheries have been more like fishery destruction projects, well-intentioned attempts to do good that have just destroyed habitat in an effort to mindlessly tidy up and try and make fishing easier. With careful thought and planning, clear objectives and good organisation, some excellent work can be carried out by willing and able members, which improve both the habitat and fishing access.

Mike Oz had a clear idea of what was needed on the Teme at Bransford, and organised the work with calm and confident efficiency. Some swims were made very accessible, and a few were created without any danger or disturbance to resident wildlife. We agreed that it was very late in the year to do any proper tree work, but a few isolated willow saplings were safely trimmed and we experimented with some spiling work to try and rescue an area of badly eroded bank. It will probably be too late for the willow stakes to take this year, but we may get away with some slight success in holding back the erosion. Next year more productive work can be done in plenty of time; the willow stakes really want planting late autumn/very early spring to give them the best chance, and technically I think need all sorts of official permissions and consents; our small works were a bit experimental, so we should get away with it!

The main works at Bransford are planned for the autumn, and some big willows are expecting a serious pollarding. This "sky lighting" will encourage low bankside growth and instream weed, all of benefit to fish and other wildlife. They look very bleak to begin with, but the way willows sprout and blossom into new life is something that always amazes me. Before and after pics are also very impressive.

The members who turned up were a great bunch of workers, and much was achieved with a good deal of banter and fun to liven up proceedings. Mike provided some very welcome tea, and Adrian provided the main entertainment by falling down holes regularly.





Teme at Bransford



Willow stakes may help with erosion of this scourhole



Adrian falling down a hole

## Salmon and roach both need our help

21st April 2008

I went out salmon fishing for the first time this year, and after a few casts I was soon beginning to master the big fly rod and heavy line that can feel so strange after a twelve month layoff. I tend to fish where no one else does, in order to keep my poor casting technique a secret, and do not really expect to catch much. A couple of salmon in a year is the best I have ever done, and it reflects my lack of skill as much as the lack of salmon. Since the salmon catches on the Avon crashed in the mid Eighties, they have never really recovered, and seem unlikely to without some help, although the reasons for the decline may be largely global, and there is much discussion and discord about how best to help them; reducing commercial netting, habitat enhancement and hatchery schemes are all possibilities, but not all viewed in the same way by the anglers, netsmen and fishery scientists!

My third reasonably successful cast resulted in a violent take, that made my heart leap, but no leaping salmon came to light, just a snappy little pike that was swiftly returned none the worse for wear. The number of coarse fish taken on fly, spinner or prawn are remarkably few, and no more than the salmon or kelts taken outside of their season on coarse anglers baits, but pike, chub, bream and the very occasional barbel fall to the salmon anglers every year. All are returned carefully nowadays; it is a long time since the local clubs had rules stating that all pike and chub must be killed.

The day before I had helped Trev and Budgie with the installation of some of their roach spawning boards in the river, sidestreams and an offline pond that is well populated with Avon roach. The plan is try and help the perilously low roach stocks by growing on fry in tanks, using spawn gathered on the boards, and returning them to the river after a couple of years. A self-sustaining population is the ideal scenario, but the collapse of the Avon roach in much of the river means that some attempt to give Mother Nature a helping hand is worth a try. The EA are very supportive of the scheme, and we are all eagerly awaiting signs of spawning near the boards. The salmon have a more complex lifestyle, and hatchery schemes are a source of much more debate!



Avon Roach Project spawning board in the river



Artificial fontinalis on spawning boards, roach love it!



Avon weirpool in April

## **Blackwater blues, and a glimmer of hope**

14th April 2008

I was pleased to represent the Society at a meeting organised by local clubs in the Essex area last week, and was amazed at how far away Essex is. Another first visit to an area, and I am starting to feel like an Alan Whicker or a Michael Palin, visiting strange new places full of strange folk, although three or four hours in an Astra estate is hardly jet-setting. We met up with our host Roy at a nice spot on the River Crouch, which I took at first sight to be the Blackwater, and since the meeting was about discussing the chances of barbel stockings on the river, I was a bit worried at first. The Crouch was small and uninspiring, especially when the stretch was clearly at the tidal end of the river. We were soon ferried up to the middle reaches of the Blackwater, however, which seemed to me to be entirely suitable for barbel, and it has apparently received some small stockings in the past from the then NRA. A few fish have thrived and made it up to double figures, but the numbers stocked were insufficient to trigger a sustainable breeding population.

I agree with the current EA policy of not stocking barbel into rivers in which they are non-native and not already present, and I am sure that BS policy would follow suit. However, we live in a world where few rivers are anything like natural, and where resources including fish stocks need to be carefully managed and exploited at times to fulfil reasonable demands. In my view, the recreational and socio-economic benefits of generating a barbel population in the Blackwater outweigh any possible detriment to existing stocks of fish, and the river and wildlife and local anglers will all benefit when it becomes a more valuable angling resource. The Blackwater is threatened with increasing abstraction, and developing it into a more popular and valuable fishery will work towards giving it more protection, I feel. The EA do have a duty to maintain, improve and develop fisheries, and barbel in the Blackwater is a chance for them to do so with no risk to other species. Or interests, or of threatening biodiversity. I have seen no real evidence that coarse fish of other species are prone to adverse

competition by barbel; the chub roach and bream of lowland rivers seem to thrive even better amongst barbel. Current EA guidelines on stocking are quite complex, but not written in black and white terms, and they are sensible enough to see that each river is special and must be judged on a case by case basis.

I will ask the BS to give this campaign every support, as long as the local anglers and clubs are keen on the idea, which they certainly seemed to be at the meeting later in the evening. A good time was had by all; Ade Kiddell gave an interesting talk on general barbel fishing, all those who turned up, about 100 I reckon, were well catered for, the question session at the end was pertinent and lively, and I won a pair of socks in the raffle.



Blackwater below abstraction point



Blackwater just above abstraction point, close to the sea



Middle reaches, full of flow and features, similar to Bristol Avon. Plenty of gravel and woody debris too!

## It is cold and grim up north

7th April 2008

A trip to the BS Yorkshire region to try and entertain them with a talk about soft southern barbel gave me a chance to look at some rivers I have not seen before, let alone fished. The tales of cold grey grim northern folk are of course nonsense, but I was a bit trepidatious as I ventured nearer to the Arctic Circle than I have ever been before. I found out where the M1 ends, which is perilously close to the north pole as far as I am concerned, and was welcomed by Warren Haywood and taken for a walk down the Wharfe, a remarkably attractive river. Warren waxed lyrical about the river, and also the nearby Swale, which he says is his favourite of the two, and after hearing of his catches and sharing in his enthusiasm for the rivers, I determined to return in season and catch some of those hard northern barbel.

The Wharfe is a sizeable river where we walked, and full of features and flowing nicely, although it seemed to me that like nearly all our rivers, it had been heavily engineered in the past in the name of flood relief, but had

managed to mend itself over the years. It seemed that the barbel are more numerous, and at least as big as my local fish, and I was impressed by the open and genuinely relaxed and sensible attitude that Warren had to his fishing, Northern folk seemed very open and generous so far, and the crowd at the meeting that evening backed up that first impression. The Society should be very proud of the organisers and supporters in that region, and although the weather was cold and grim, their welcome was warm and friendly.

The BS fishery on the Swale is going to get a visit or two from me next year, so those northern barbel had better watch out.



Wharfe looking downstream, nice barbel swim!



Nice corner pool on the Wharfe