

Pete Reading River Diary Season 2010/2011

End of season mixed bags

March 2011

As always, a return to our grim grey winter climate after a while in sunnier parts fills me with a measure of depression, and it takes some time to raise any enthusiasm for fishing in the real world. First of all, I needed to have a grayling fix, and a trip to the quiet and winding Dorset Frome cheered me up a bit.

The river was pushing through at normal winter level, and I became quite enthusiastic as I wandered across the meadows after a nice sensible late morning start; it pays to let the frost ease off a bit, and the sun to get up before you begin to trot a float. The response to the float was not very encouraging, with only one fish of just under two as reward for an hour or more of hard work. A nice steely grayling though, and it thumped about for ages before it came to the top and started leaping and shaking its head like a little tarpon.

In the end I had eight nice grayling in the afternoon, all over a pound and including a couple of twos, saw only one other angler, and felt refreshed and reinvigorated. The fight from a two pound grayling on two pound line can be just as scary as a forty pound mahseer on forty pound line and an uptide rod.

The Stour chub were a target for the last few days of the season, and in relaxed mood I spent a couple of afternoon sessions with the maggot feeder, a reliable method for daytime fishing in clear water. No need to wait for dusk or to fish in the dark, and it is a delight to watch the quiver tip and analyse the knocks and twitches as chub home in and give those almost inevitable forewarnings of a proper bite. Outwitting chub on light line and small hooks is great fun, and the fight from big fish on light tackle is most rewarding, as long as you get them in, of course! In the winter, it is invariably just a matter of time, when big old chub can be guided in and tired out on very fine tackle. A couple of six pounders, along with a few lesser fish contributed more to lifting my mood, and a

tough perch of well over two gave me a real run around on the light gear. Perch can fight tremendously hard when they want to, and this chunky river specimen was a real bonus. I had a couple of pike too, but suspect that they took some self-hooked minnows, that were a real pest at times. You can feed the minnows off, or tolerate them until the chub move in, in the same way as crayfish have to be endured for a while when barbell on the Kennet. When the big fish move in, the pests disappear.



Colourful Frome grayling, two five



Two pound plus Stour perch



Grip and grin 6.3 Stour chub

More mahseer magic

February 2011

It was certainly warmer in Bangalore than it has been in the UK of late; it was touch and go whether the runways would be clear of snow prior to our departure, yet on arrival we were greeted with temperatures in the thirties and a low, clear river under a hot, bright sky. The Cauvery River was a stunning sight as our ratty little bus rounded the last few hairy hairpin bends, but it was a good three feet lower than last year, and even the rapids lacked the power and urgency that the mahseer seem to love. The fish were hanging about in the deeper water at the moment we were told, and it was not long before some good fish were hooked on big hard boiled ragi balls. There was terrific sport to be had with the smaller mahseer, from two or three pounds to high doubles, and the latter fish can be a handful on the lighter gear. One of our group had a twenty pounder on a centrepin and fifteen pound line, a remarkable feat really, since fish of that size can take a lot of line and usually hit the rocks given half a chance.

It pays to fish for the smaller fish for a while, and enjoy some sport before sitting on the bigger baits and heavy tackle needed to deal with the real lumps. Forties and a few fifties came out during our visit, crowned by a sixty two pounder, but the fishing should not only about going for the monsters, and a philosophical approach is needed to cope with the experience. It can be gruelling and uncomfortable, with unforgiving hot rocks to sit on, and a diet of chicken curry and Kingfisher beer may not suit everybody.

All discomfort is forgotten when a mahseer grabs your bait and tries to pull you off your rocky perch and into the water, and they fight like tigers. A more handsome fish would be hard to find, and the scenery is quite stunning. There are no tigers, but crocodiles, wild boar, assorted monkeys and deer are commonly seen, along with a wealth of birdlife. We heard elephants, and heard tales of the sloth bear, and we found leopard prints in camp more than once. There are catfish and barbel/carp-type fish that are often pounced on by the guides as fresh supper, but fight as hard as mahseer on the light rods.

One more year should see it out of my system, and then it is time to save up for another trip to Africa!



Hugh happy with a nice silver mahseer



Hugh lets some boat traffic through



Big silver mahseer



Hugh battling a low double on light gear

Miserable weather and mixed fortunes

January 2011

The cold and the snow have been here long enough for the rivers and fish to settle down, and a clear cold river and repetitive frosts meant that chub were likely to be the most sensible quarry for an afternoon on the Avon. A few hours in the weak sunshine was tolerable when moving around with a float and four chub on float fished flake was a reasonably satisfying result. They feel so big on light tackle, especially when they hang stubbornly in the flow and just give an occasional slow headshake. They all felt like six pounders, but were all between four and five, a low average size for the Avon these days, it seems.

As the light faded and it started to get cold in the fingertips, great black flocks of cormorant started to gather in the trees downstream, and I lost count after seventy in one tree. There were well over a hundred, driven off the local gravel pits by the impenetrable ice that covers even the biggest stillwaters at the moment, and their effect on the silver fish stocks of the river can only be imagined. The last chub was probably a six or seven pounder, it felt bigger than all the others, but it came unstuck after getting into some weedbeds under the bank.

I went back to the same swim a couple of days later, expecting to get a few more fish, and never had a bite. There were even more cormorants about, so I blamed them, and went home in a mood.

A week or so later, and a warm flush gave a chance of a Kennet barbel, and it was nice to get the barbel gear out again and bait drop a few maggots. The water was still cold, and the baiting was kept to a minimum, with two droppers of hemp and four of maggots enough to begin with. I left the swim for an hour before casting in. They were in the mood, though, and first cast I had the rod pulled round slowly before I had time to get it into the rest. I thought I must have foul hooked it, but it was fairly hooked well back in the mouth; a solid and sluggish nine pounder that had obviously woken up from the cold snap and felt hungry. I ended up with five fish, and the final barbel was a lovely clean twelve pounder that fought long and hard under the rod top after rushing powerfully off downstream on its first run, and reminded me of just how determined barbel can be.

I went back a day or so later, in what seemed like even better conditions, and struggled for just one bite at last knockings. I could not blame the cormorants, so I blamed the crayfish instead.



Perchy ponderings

20th November 2010

Before I went on holiday last month, I took good old John Found for a day on the Avon, while the river was still crystal clear and the weather was warm enough for him to stand a fair chance of a barbel. While we watched a shoal of six or seven barbel gaining more and more confidence on the bed of bait that he had deposited in the recommended swim, I spotted a big fat perch of about two and a half hanging around under the bank, no doubt attracted by all the bait and fishy activity. I marked him down for future reference, and we discussed how the populations of fish of different species can change over time, whether naturally or not. It is difficult, of course, to decide what is natural and what is not these days, with all the changes that humans wreak on the environment, but we agreed it was a good thing that the perch are making a big recovery nationwide. In both stillwater and riverine environments, perch are to be seen almost everywhere, and reaching an average size that follows the patterns we have seen for all other coarse fish species. They must also eat a lot of small fish, but we seem to forgive them that, in return for the additional sport they provide. Predators are a necessary part of the food web, but still selectively tolerated when we make assumptions that they do or do not threaten our favourite species!

The barbel were kind to John, and he had four that day, two ten pounders and a couple of sixes, and with the biggest fish still in the swim. I found three more shoals of barbel that afternoon as I spotted around, perhaps a dozen in one shoal, and a good number of smaller fish. A nice catch by John from a river that some say has been ruined by otters and cormorants; and yet it may be that predation by perch is significant as may be that of the bird and the mammal? There are millions of bullheads in the Avon too which are fierce little ambush predators that take an unknown toll of fish eggs and newly hatched fry! The cormorant is possibly the real threat, in that it is not a native predator, but in truth the decline of roach and dace in the river may only partly be down to them. The chub that are currently thriving were once required to be killed on this bit of river, when the keeper decided they were eating all the salmon eggs. Chub are fond of fry of all species at times! I can also remember having protracted discussions with subsequent keepers who insisted on the killing of all pike, and finally managed a compromise which protected the double figure fish at least. Now we leave the pike alone, but I recently met a match angler who still thinks they eat their own weight of food in a day and need culling.

I recently visited a perch pond, and was rewarded with a bag of five lovely fat fish like peas in a pod, all between two ten and three three. Fish of the same generation, all within ounces of each other, and like all populations of the same size and age, they will probably die out at the same time, and undoubtedly some predator will get the blame instead of Mother Nature!



Lovely little river predator



Head of a predator



Three pound three perch taken at dusk

First try for chub

12th November 2010

I have been told by people who have fished abroad a lot, that on return the fishing at home can lose its magic and attraction, and it is true that I have found it difficult to raise my usual enthusiasm for fishing at the moment. The dull and nondescript fish of our tired, tiddly rivers seem so uninspiring after coming into contact with the fierce, feral creatures that inhabit the mighty Zambezi. As I sit glumly reminiscing in the Avon valley, I keep expecting an elephant to wander through the willows, or a hippo to emerge in my swim, look blankly at me, wiggle its ears and submerge in a snorting huff.

But, after a really difficult period of readjustment, you come to terms with reality, and after a while to acclimatise, and get those African experiences pushed further back into my memory, I had decided to take advantage of some clement weather and settled river conditions to try for the Avon chub.

The river is still low and clear, with the weed starting to die off, but the faster swims are full of strong and vigorous ranunculus, and fine tackle tactics are still a bit risky. I settled for heavy chub/light barbel gear, to give a chance of landing either or both, and baited heavily with hemp and casters, fishing over the top with a big feeder and three casters on as small a hook as I dared on fine but strong braid hooklink. Three five pound chub and a solid six pounder show just what the calibre of Avon chub is at the moment. The six pounder chugged off under a weedbed and really had me thinking it was a barbel, and all the fish were clean solid and spotless samples of what the river has to offer.

They will need more subtle tactics later in the year, and I look forward to some more encounters with a healthy and growing population of chub that are doing rather well in the middle river at the moment. Not only are there good numbers of big chub, the year classes of smaller chub are in evidence, as well as encouragingly high numbers of small barbel.

My observations of barbel numbers in the middle river are confirming that the current population is stable, with many easily recognised big fish in good condition, and signs of bigger shoals of smaller fish. Avon barbel are nowhere near as numerous as in the past, but have never been as high in average size. Evidence from scale readings points towards a fast growing but much older population of fish than we might think. The chub are in ascendance at the moment, the barbel are peaking, perhaps, but in the Avon at least, the latest signs are of positive recruitment.



Fat five and a half pounder; they love casters!



Avon chub swim, not an elephant or hippo in sight



6.5 autumn Avon chub

Tussles with the vundu of the Zambezi

15th October 2010

Not too cheerful at the moment, having to face the grim cold of the British autumn after a couple of weeks drifting down the Zambezi in Africa and tolerating temperatures approaching forty degrees. The tigerfish were a bit slow this year, and after a few days working hard for three or four tigers a day, we decided to have a day or two after the vundu. Vundu are big beastly African catfish, but with muscly well-finned bodies that give them a more fishy appearance than the eel-like wels of Europe. They fight harder too, and I would say that they have the speed, power and stamina to match any other freshwater fish, even mahseer.

The bite from a vundu is quite unmistakable. A few clicks on the reel, then the rod is almost torn from your hand as you disengage the freespool and something irresistibly powerful shoots off downriver against a fully tightened clutch, heading for the roots of the huge fallen trees that litter the river. I lost two big vundu that decided to go round an island before we could get the boat moving fast enough. After the first couple of runs, a period of pumping back line under full pressure is needed to keep the fish off the bottom and away from snags. The guide will then skillfully lift the tired vundu from the water, and pat it respectfully on the great broad head, as it puffs and blows like a steam engine when finally beached.

We had several forty pound plus fish, including an estimated sixty pounder that bottomed the scales at fifty five with half the tail still on the ground. Fishing for these amazing African cats involved a lot of swim searching, and we found some new swims unknown to the guides, which sometimes produced an instant take on the huge cubes of soap new used as bait. Soap is terrific bait for vundu, and it avoids the attentions of the tigerfish and other smaller species that will attack a piece of fish as soon as it hits bottom.

Apart from the usual elephants, hippo, buffalo, baboons, lion, enormous crocs and vast array of birdlife, I encountered an electric barbel, that gave me a serious shock as soon as I touched it. We caught tigerfish, vundu, barbel both common and electric, as well as tilapia, and hard fighting baitfish called chesa and nkupe that are terrific sport in their own right.

An amazing holiday, with fabulously rich wildlife, astounding scenery and fishing that makes me desperate to book again for next year.



47lb vundu



Dave with an estimated sixty pound plus vundu



Sixteen foot croc in our favourite



Electric barbel, a fish wich uses the current to its advantage

Avon fundraiser

20th September 2010

The second annual Avon Fundraiser jointly organised by the Barbel Society and the Avon Roach Project was another resounding success. Over 50 eager participants braved the soft early autumn sunshine on the banks of the Hampshire Avon at Somerley, and wonderful days fishing was had by all. Some of them targeted the elusive barbel, some chased the chunky Avon chub, most were not really bothered about what they caught, and remained simply content to absorb the Avon ambience and exchange pleasantries with their fishy colleagues. A barbel and several roach were taken; a good sign, but it was decided that the match was won with an only slightly above average Avon chub of 5lb 14oz. Some dace, trout, grayling, and inevitable minnows in abundance were reported enthusiastically as the competitors gathered for the sumptuous evening meal at the excellent Tyrrells Ford Hotel. The history of Sir Walter Tyrrell is worth investigating, as is the nearby bridge where his head was said to have been stuck on a spike.

No time here for such diversions, however, and the evening auction was soon in full swing, with auctioneer Roy Norbury acting as a superb extractor of funds with a bit of help from me. The Cooper bream in a bow fronted case went for five hundred notes, the bottle of Redmire water donated by Chris Yates was apparently worth seventy quid, and the guided fishing days, assorted tackle and other contributions brought in a total of nearly five and a half thousand pounds.

A wonderful result, and a wonderful experience, when the essence of angling was demonstrated by a mix of generosity and camaraderie that lifts the spirit. The funds raised will be split between the Barbel Society and the Avon Roach Project, and there are plans to excavate more stews to bring on more roach for the river, as well as carry out Avon habitat works to benefit the barbel, and indeed all species of fish.

Time to book your places for next year!



Trevor presents the trophy to



Cooper bream, a fantastic donation



Talking up Chris Yates redmire

Big old Avon barbel

4th September 2010

The weather is starting to become more autumnal, and clear blue sky and light winds cannot be relied upon any more to help in the search for the elusive Avon barbel. The last two shoals I found were not worth finding anyway, because as soon as they realised I was fishing for them, they scuttled off and hid in the weed. There is certainly much to learn from fishing for fish you can see, and then applying it to fish you cannot see. When spotting is not possible, you have to fish blind and try to imagine what the fish are doing. It is entirely possible to blank in a swim where barbel are drifting over your hook baits all day long, and had you not seen them, you could be forgiven for thinking the fish were not there at all.

Wet, windy weather can be the time to fish the deep inky black holes, or far bank channels where fish are hard to see in any circumstances, and you can safely fish because you think fish ought to be there.

Today I sat in a swim that had produced some good barbel for me in the past, but is very hard to see into at the best of times. I could imagine them, lurking under the thick weed, or under the far bank bushes, leaving cover to peck at a few specks of bait that I was constantly trickling in. The wind whistled upstream, cold and harsh for the time of year, and spots of rain irritated me as I cursed for not bringing an umbrella.

I kept trickling in bait, and casting every hour or so with a nice paste wrapped boilie and PVA bag of crumble.

Fishing way across the river, with rod tip buried to avoid the drifting weed, bites are signalled by the reel screeching rather than rod tip, and retrieving after the first cast produced a foul hooked minnow, second cast a lip hooked gudgeon that must have sat there putting off the barbel for most of the previous hour. Third cast, and a nine pound barbel, fat and chunky and full of fight cheered me up no end.

I imagined that the barbel had gradually become more brave, emerging for ever longer periods from cover to grub about for the bits of bait that the minnows and gudgeon had left to filter into the gravel.

I have watched them hang back for hours, then suddenly switch on, overcome their fears, and act like different fish for some reason. Imagination became reality fourth cast, and after almost an hour, the rod was almost pulled in as a more powerful fish shot up under the weed and upriver. It came grudgingly back downstream, then settled in the deep water under my feet and hugged the bottom resolutely for several long minutes. It suddenly gave up, surfaced and flopped into the net, and as it lay gasping upside down in the meshes I could see it was an exceptional fish.

Clearly an old soldier, with some tatty fins and a lumpy body, it was once a very sizeable fish. Even though apparently in its dotage, it went a most gratifying thirteen ten, and nice to imagine it has a few years left yet.



Chunky nine pounder



Nice swim to fish blind



Big old Avon thirteen ten

Barbel young and old

27th August 2010

A day on the Kennet is always an intriguing event, which in summer involves a lot more thought and consideration about swim selection than it does on the Hampshire Avon. On the Avon, spotting and searching for fish by sight is crucial, because there are lots of lovely looking swims that scream barbel but are full of chub and bream and bits. The colouration in the middle Kennet precludes any sort of sight fishing as a rule, so watercraft and prior knowledge may be needed. Most Kennet swims look nice to me, and a lot more of them contain fish, but even so the proof of the pudding is in the fishing and after two or three hours without a bite it is generally wise to move.

I spent a fishless couple of hours in a glorious looking swim, fast flowing under a bush with some thick weed nearby, but not a bite apart from a crayfish stripping the hook bait. A sure sign that no barbel were about, so down to another swim where the weed is even thicker, and with some form this season already. I baited up and waited, determined not to cast in for an hour. The crayfish trapper dropped by and extracted a trap full of the pesky things from under my rod top. The trap contained a dozen or so, and I was pleased to see them taken away and added to his bucket of slithering snapping crustacea.

First cast and a heavily built eleven pounder responded with enthusiasm, ripping the rod round fiercely seconds after casting in. An old fish, I would guess, pale gold, with some gnarled fins and replacement scales and an uneven body shape. Three smaller fish came at steady intervals in the afternoon, and they were apparently young fish, fin perfect, brightly coloured and lean but solid specimens. These fish are of different generations, and as on many rivers, the bigger fish are possibly much older than we imagine, and not immortal. They will die out at the same time, I suppose, and the next lot will come through eventually, as nature intended. There is a lot of evidence that fish populations are dominated by one or two year classes for many years and variations in population are quite natural. Interestingly, some of the scales from Avon barbel that we are having read and analysed by the EA are showing that Avon fish are much older than one would expect. Even six pounders are

twelve years old, with one specimen at fifteen. Comparisons between rivers would be even more interesting, especially the truly native rivers and those that blossomed with stocked fish in the last thirty years.



Gnarled eleven pounder



Sparkling young barbel



Spotless Kennet four pounder

Avon barbel for Ron

18th August 2010

Ron Webb was generous enough to pay for a day on the Hampshire Avon with me, which was one of the lots in the annual Research and Conservation auction. It always makes me a bit worried that we will not catch a barbel on the day, and this year I was particularly apprehensive because the fish are proving quite difficult to tempt. There are plenty of barbel to be seen, certainly as many as last year, if not more, and in the last week I have found shoals of five or six barbel in several swims, with a very encouraging number of smaller fish from a pound to four pounds.

I chose a swim that contained at least ten good chub and four barbel, and we set out to show Ron the techniques involved with caster and hemp fishing. Plenty of bait is the first requirement, with a gallon of hemp and five pints of casters a safe amount of feed. We checked out the swim, and decided where to concentrate the feed, with a backup area in mind of the fish would not move to the initial baited area. We put in a pint of caster and two of hemp to start with, and left it for an hour to mature, returning to top it up with ten more droppers before casting in.

The chub loved it, and we caught six of them before a barbel made a mistake, then two more chub, but the rest of the barbel would not even switch on properly to what is normally a killing method. Ron was delighted with a barbel on the day, and so was I; it is by no means a guaranteed outcome on the Avon these days. He was pleased with his chub too, though hard to tell that from the pictures!

It was a nice day's fishing with a very nice guy, and now I need to go and catch some more barbel for myself;

been spending too much time attacking Himalayan Balsam lately.

Those barbel were quite intriguing, drifting about and munching at the baited area occasionally, but they would not have a hook bait. It reinforced the fact that they are not as easy to catch, as a species, as some pundits have been fond of saying lately. They are as difficult to catch, or as easy to catch as any other species when they are in the mood. Chub are probably easier to catch, in general terms, than barbel, though that statement will surely infuriate some of my mates in the Chub Study Group! Roach, carp, trout and salmon can be almost suicidal when they are well on the feed, and damn nigh impossible when they are not, and barbel are no different.



Ron overjoyed with his barbel



Ron looking ecstatic with a five pound Avon chub

Avon fundraiser on the way

10th August 2010

Have just spent several hours scything down some nasty little outbreaks of Himalayan Balsam on the Avon, which is a river that could be saved from this menace if we keep an eye out for it and deal with the relatively small infestations quickly. Some wasps attacked me as I attacked their nest at the same time as a group of balsam plants under a tree, so I beat a hasty retreat and called it a day. The balsam is only one invasive that is threatening the rivers, but it can be removed easily and will not return unless the clump has seeded the previous year. Even so, it can be beaten, and anglers are ideally placed to monitor and remove it whenever it rears its ugly head. The recent trip to the Wye reminded me how hopeless the task will become if balsam is allowed to take hold, but I am sure it can be kept off the Avon and Stour if we all work together.

Chalk streams like the Avon are fortunate in being heavily spring fed from chalk aquifers deep underground, and maintain remarkably good flows throughout drought conditions, but some rivers elsewhere in the country are suffering badly due to low rainfall. EA have had to do fish rescues on some tributaries of the Stour recently, and I hear that the upper Teme has had similar problems. Low flows linked with high temperatures and high nutrient

levels are a risky combination, and the fish are not playing either. The Avon barbel are there in numbers in the usual swims, but very reluctant to feed properly. I am seeing shoals of up to eight fish, and a good number of two to three pounders, but even they are just pecking idly at the gravel and I am anxious to see the head down tails up avid feeding that almost guarantees a bite. They just drift around listlessly and refuse to get their heads down. Still, they are getting a rest and plenty of grub!

The next Avon fundraiser for the Barbel Society and Roach Club will be taking place on the 18th September, and a few places are available. The event comprises a days fishing on the Somerley Estate near Ringwood, followed by an evening meal and auction at a local hotel. The lots this year are amazing; a Redmire weekend, a bottle of Redmire water donated by Chris Yates, reels, rods, tackle and bait, books, paintings and several guided fishing days on exclusive waters. The fifty quid fee pays for the meal, auction and two days fishing on the river if you want it, and the chance to fish with some great company on a lovely bit of river. The funds are to be used to support the Avon Roach Project, and other habitat work on the river. The restoration of the river to a more naturalised state is going to cost a great deal, but small projects can make a difference, and it all adds up. We are hoping, for example, to reinstate or remove an old salmon croy which is eroding away badly, and dig out more fry bays and backwaters, as well as raise a few hundred thousand roach to boost ailing stocks. If interested, contact Budgie at budgie@homecall.co.uk as soon as you can. Visit the Avon Roach Project site too; well worth a visit!



Aerial view of croy needing repair; somewhat eroded behind!



Balsam spoils the view, and erodes the banks too!



Natural Avon weedgrowth

A day on the Wye

31st July 2010

I finally kept a promise to myself to fish the Wye for barbel, after hearing for several years how well it has been fishing, and after a reasonably motorway long drive I was soon getting lost in the country lanes somewhere around Hereford or Ross, am still not sure. There is a lot more river open to day ticket fishing now, and the Wye

and Usk Foundation provide access to some excellent barbel fishing now that the salmon returns are diminishing.

The river is wide and rocky and full of character, and also reasonably full of barbel. The first thing I noticed was the Himalayan Balsam infestation, however, and the Wye should be a warning to those who fish rivers not yet taken over by this vile stuff. The banks are completely covered in balsam beds perhaps thirty feet back from the river in places, and the river is a lost cause as far as control is concerned.

The second thing that unnerved me was the canoe traffic, and it did not warm me to the prospect of increased boat traffic on any of our rivers. A few short periods of peaceful relaxation, in a pleasant riverine environment was constantly interrupted by noisy, often inconsiderate groups of twerps in canoes, who rampaged past with a great deal of unnecessary splashing and crashing about, bashing into the banksides and each other and being generally annoying. Boat traffic must be endured on some rivers, but boats, like the cursed balsam, are not good for the environment anywhere as far as I am concerned.

The barbel made up for it though, and after twenty one barbel between four and eight pounds, in just eight hours fishing I was well impressed with the Wye barbel fishing. They are lean clean, lively fish, and in some swims you could see them scooting about and flashing amongst the rocks, or lying doggo, side by side, in the fast shallow water. They loved a bed of pellet and hemp, and I could fish the swims easily with a centrepin and a cage feeder full of pelley mix. They responded to baiting with the dropper too, with savage bites just after the feed had gone in. Excellent fishing, and well worth another visit or two, with plenty of river to get lost in and plenty of barbel enjoying a population boom.



Fighting the first Wye barbel



First Wye barbel



Constable would not want to paint this, but you could hear them half a mile away



Coming to a river near you, unless you pull it up!

Avon day out

29th July 2010

Barbel Society member Ian Negus paid for a day out on the Hampshire Avon in last years Research and Conservation auction, and was eager to see how hemp and caster tactics can be used on the river. Catching a barbel for a guest on the Avon is never an easy task, though the last three auction days have produced at least one barbel for the members who have forked out a tidy sum for a guided session on the river.

Ian is a really nice guy, and was delighted to land a ten pounder after we had chosen and baited a swim that I had been keeping up my sleeve for him, and I do not know which one of us was the more relieved. There were two more barbel in the swim, but they were not even in the mood for casters, which made me think they had been recently caught.

The Avon barbel population seems to be fairly stable, and numbers are holding up as far as I can see, with fish to be spotted in all the usual swims, but shoals of two or three fish is the norm these days, with every third fish a double. There are increasing numbers of fish in the two to four pound range visible, and lots of evidence of successful recruitment. I have seen plenty of groups of small barbel about six inches long, as well as an older year class that are approaching a pound in weight. I was told the other day about some big shoals of tiny barbel; this years crop, and the low warm river will favour their survival. The long hot dry summer of 1976 may have had its bad points, but there is a lot of evidence that coarse fish fry benefited tremendously from low flows and high water temperatures, giving us strong year classes of fish of all species ten to twenty years later.

The Avon summer barbel fishing nowadays involves spotting and stalking fish in the expectation of one or two good fish in a day, with a good number of blanks, but is fascinating and enjoyable fishing nonetheless. The chance of a double is very high, and this sort of fishing is still attractive to a regular clientele. I am not sure

that the hemp and caster approach is as effective as the more usual boilie/pellet and PVA bag technique when fishing for a shoal that often comprises just two fish, but like any method it will work in some swims and not others.

Ian went home very happy, I am sure, and it was a nice day out for both of us, and while we were waiting for the second barbel we sat and chatted and put the whole world to rights anyway!



These two ate more caster and hemp than the barbel



Ian happy with his ten eight Avon barbel



Muscly little Avon three pounder

Back to Avon stalking

26th July 2010

Stalking and watching barbel is an activity that many barbel anglers these days do not experience enough, and it is easy to forget how few the opportunities there are to do this on our rivers. You can learn a great deal about their behaviour, and also get a lot of pleasure out of observing them. Sometimes you can quite forget to actually fish for them, and that may be no bad thing.

I watched a pair of fish in fast shallow water the other day, just sporting, almost flying in the current in the way that a kestrel or buzzard rides the wind, and it demonstrated how perfectly adapted they are to strong currents. They may have been still a bit hormonal after spawning, or perhaps just enjoying themselves, but they showed no inclination to move, even after I threw boilies at them, and were still there three days later. It was so nice watching them that I almost failed to notice a bigger fish that was munching on a bed of bait I had dropped in under my feet, and this substantial, heavily built fish just had to be fished for seriously. In typical Avon fashion, it teased and tempted me for hours, feeding only sporadically every so often, and then disdainfully leaving the swim for long periods while I struggled to work out my plan of attack. Do I rest the swim and bait sparingly and accurately, or bait heavily to feed off the chub and stimulate the fish and trigger a burst of fatal feeding activity?

The first plan worked best; there were not many chub in the swim and one less after a most welcome bonus fish of 6.12 grabbed my bit of boilie. This chub will be a good seven in the winter, and I marked his card for later in the year. The barbel eventually made a mistake, and screamed off downstream in a most satisfactory manner before going doggo and hanging solidly in the current, just like the biggest ones do. He felt so solid that I imagined he was snagged, but he was just hanging in the current, and when he turned on his side slightly he impressed me a bit with his depth of flank. A really deep and chunky fish of 13.2, one of the biggest for the river at summer weight, and a fish that put that amazing spring in my step on the long triumphant walk back across the meadows.

Next day was a relaxing fun day out on the Thames with Jon Berry, who offered the day as a lot in the Research and Conservation auction last year. Quite different to a day on the Avon, we sat and chatted and waited expectantly but fruitlessly for a barbel from an eighteen foot deep weirpool. Sitting in a boat in a noisy weirpool was certainly different, but even though the barbel did not play ball, it was a great day's fishing, even though Jon lost a good fish in a snag last cast.



6.12 Avon chub



13 pounder ready to swim off after recovery



Tricky Loddon barbel

18th July 2010

There is a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction to be had in spotting and stalking barbel, and the little river Loddon is a real challenge at times. The barbel do not show themselves much once the season is in full flow, possibly because of angling pressure, and the river is targeted by night anglers, which is unfortunate in my view, but I seem to be in the minority. If ever there were barbel that ought to be spotted and caught fairly easily and enjoyably in daylight, and left in peace for the darkness hours, it the fish of these small streams. They are even easier at night though, and tend to get hammered by the greedy and desperate, and become very spooky and paranoid after a while.

I found a group of fish that were barely more than dark shapes amongst thick weed, with an occasional glimpse of the tip of a tail fin, but they would not venture into anything resembling open water. They had probably been caught recently, and behaved in a really secretive and suspicious way. No amount of baiting could persuade them to feed in fishable gaps in the weed, so it was a case of a very short hooklink, big bomb and PVA bag dropped into the weed where I judged there to be a clean bottom beneath.

There were three fish, small, medium and large; and large was probably a twelve plus, but the medium fish made a mistake within twenty minutes of casting into the thick of the weed, and burrowed furiously about for a good while before being landed. Great clumps of lily pads and weed fronds drifted off downstream as evidence of his struggles, but it appeared to make no difference to the dense weedbed where he had been hiding.

Thankfully the Loddon retains plenty of cover and inaccessible areas where fish can hide up, and the value of sanctuary in terms of habitat should be extended to fishing hours as well in my view, but not easy to convince people these days that 24/7 fishing, 365 days, is not their inalienable right.



Typical cosy Loddon swim

Loddon minnow pounder and barbel
weed bomb

Classic Loddon tree cover, coarse
woody debris!

Fighting the alien invaders

14th July 2010

It was encouraging to have a good turn out to the annual balsam pulling events on the Hampshire Avon at Ringwood, when the outbreaks on the main river and side streams can be dealt with quite effectively. The Himalayan Balsam is rearing its ugly head on a few spots on the main carrier, but is still limited enough to be eradicated by hand pulling. The streams from the New Forest are so choked in places as to require chemical treatment, which is also happening, where appropriate, and the Environment Agency, Natural England and local Wildlife Trusts are now starting to deal with the problem in a more coordinated way. It does not help that the Avon is the Hampshire /Dorset boundary for much of the lower river, and the two sets of authorities are in need of further coordination if we are to beat this menace on the southern rivers. It is starting to pop up on the Dorset Stour, and my local rivers Trust is supplying notice boards and information to angling clubs to educate their members.

The seeds can remain viable for two years, but the patches of balsam are getting smaller each year, and more and more anglers are alerted to the plant. The odd single plant can be spotted and pulled up with ease and constant vigilance and action is the only course of action. The alternative is to allow the stuff to take over our river banks and do untold environmental damage to an already stressed ecosystem. Giant Hogweed, Japanese Knotweed, American Skunk Cabbage and New Zealand Stonecrop are also on the hit list, but Himalayan Balsam is the one non-native invasive alien that we as anglers should be able to deal with most easily. I saw a pair of non-native aliens on the river that should be more decorative than environmentally damaging, as long as they do not start breeding, I suppose! The black swans seem happy enough to swim alongside their white cousins, with only the odd angry exchange, but we should remember that mute swans are not truly native, any more than rabbits and grey squirrels.

Fishing has been fairly hard, with the odd hard-won barbel or chub, but I did catch a record minnow, the biggest I have ever seen at three and one quarter inches long and almost an ounce, but modesty prevents me from making a claim.



Avon invaders from down under



Record minnow



Blooming bloody balsam

Kennet calling

4th July 2010

The ubiquitous chub seem to be eating all my bait on the Avon, and scaring off the barbel in their greed. Barbel on the Avon are in small groups of two or three fish, or quite often loners, and catching a chub or two generally has the effect of rattling them seriously, especially if they have been pricked or caught before. A day on the rather more productive Kennet was called for, with a change of scenery and tactics.

A few pints of caster and a few more pints of hemp are needed on order to bag up as a rule, although the expense is not something I can maintain for every trip.

Instead of spotting fish and feeding them up with pellet or boilie bits, the murky waters of the Kennet respond to the baiting up and waiting game, where reliable swims are primed with twenty or more droppers of caster/hemp mix, and left to mature for an hour or more before casting in. Barbel cannot be seen, and knowledge of their regular haunts is vital. They will move fair distances to a bed of bait, and it is important to leave the baited area alone for at least an hour. The barbel gain confidence over this period, and imprint themselves on the feed, and a fish first cast is the sign that they have moved in. The Kennet barbel are just as unsettled as any others at this time of year, and may not have regrouped after spawning yet. So it proved, because after a fish within half an hour of casting in, the more important second fish soon after failed to show, which was a bad sign. Another hour and a half and a move was called for, and a second banker swim also failed to show any return after three more hours of baiting and fishing.

Third time lucky, and three fish to 11.15 saved the day in the last chance swim that is pretty reliable, but not my first choice on this stretch because it gets a lot of attention, and it is always more satisfying to fish some new or less pressured spots. The Kennet barbel were all fat and fit, and ranged from four pounds upwards. It seems that a good population range is still there, and although the big one was an obvious old soldier, it fought like crazy and was a chunky, healthy looking fish, that would have gone twelve in a strong wind!



Kennet bait bucket



Nearly twelve pounds of older generation Kennet barbel



Young Kennet four pounder

Big early season barbel

1st July 2010

The chub are continuing to feature well in catches, with a great number of them over five pounds, and a good proportion of sixes. The Avon will produce some amazing chub fishing in the next few years, and I am looking forward to some good chubbing this autumn and winter. The average size is increasing rapidly, and most of the fish I have had this year have been over five, with a couple of sixes and several fish within an ounce or two of that weight. There are lots of little chub about too, fish of six to ten ounces that are really numerous and bode well for the future. I have seen several barbel of similar size, beautiful miniatures of up to a pound that are hovering in small shoals in the shallowest of water. Let us hope that they keep surviving in large enough numbers to replace the older generations that are bound to die off soon.

I came across one of the older generation in the form of lovely thirteen and a half pounder that took a liking to some pellet and paste that I was flicking into likely looking spots on my travels. It emerged from under the weed, a great broad backed beast of a barbel that made me catch my breath as it cruised nonchalantly into the swim and munched casually on the loosefeed for a minute or two, before drifting off sedately, turning in the current to show off a deep flank and enormous tail. Fish of that size are not often spotted, and I took my chance and fed it well for a good while before casting in. It returned to the swim regularly, perhaps once an hour, but never really got its head down on the feed. Catching a couple of chub put it off, but I was back next day, and eventually the big barbel returned and dragged the rod over decisively out of the blue, whilst I was dreaming half asleep in the sunshine. The fight was not impressive, very slow and dogged and no long powerful runs, but the fish was a beauty, fin perfect and quite young-looking. It will put on a couple of pounds at least, and could touch sixteen pounds in the peak of condition later in the season. Big enough for me now, though, and a very heavy fish for the river at this time of year.

I am always walking the river in search of fish or likely spots, and find it hard to get near the river in places where cattle are treading the bank down in order to reach tasty rushes, or to have a drink. This process of poaching, as it is called, can have a serious effect on smaller streams, but there is an argument for fencing on bits of the Avon, where banks are collapsing or mud baths are being produced that will wash out in high water and release unwanted solids to produce silt and sediment on gravels. Natural England will be unimpressed by my problems with barbel spotting, or even access for fishing, but unnecessary bank erosion, that widens the channel and reduces flow, and extra sediments that could affect gravel spawners, are a valid concern.



Another six pound chub



Thirteen eight Avon barbel in perfect nick



Pretty British Whites, but river bank poachers!

First barbel on the Avon

20th June 2010

It is usual not to catch the first barbel of the year before July, and it is only the exceptionally low and clear water that is allowing fish to be spotted earlier than usual. Many barbel are still very scattered and unsettled, and some are hanging about in very fast shallow water, and should be left well alone in my view. The chub too are still a bit spawny, and I counted a shoal of 31 chub at Ibsley that were having a furious second spawning gathering, brought on by a spell of warmer weather this weekend. Most chub are in quite good condition, however, and eager to feed ravenously in their usual haunts, but barbel are hard to find in the right place or in the right mood. I spotted a fish that came to investigate a sprinkling of hemp pellet and crumbled boilie that I had bait dropped under the bank in one of my favourite early season swims. He was very brightly coloured, and dashed in with enthusiasm to root about on the free feed, flashing his orange fins and yellowy flanks as he grubbed around. The ubiquitous chub arrived shortly after, and catching a couple of them put the barbel on edge, and he promptly disappeared for several hours. My eyes strained to catch a glimpse of him or any others that might be around, while the sun beat down mercilessly. Bright sun makes for easy spotting, but the intensity can put fish off, as well as warming the water significantly. The temperature is now well over the 19 degrees Celsius that means that salmon fishing is suspended on the responsible fisheries, in order not to put fish at

risk. A matter of a couple of minutes out of the water can mean certain death for a tired salmon; they are very fragile at high temperatures and the accompanying low dissolved oxygen levels.

Barbel need extra care too, and recovery in the net when landed and a lengthy recovery before release are essential at the moment. My barbel eventually came back as the sun paled and went red, and shot off strongly downstream for a good ten yards before I could stop him. He had looked bigger in the water perhaps eight or nine, but he was long and lean and went a bit over seven and a half. A very prettily coloured fish, and a typical golden Avon barbel, with a nice set of exceptionally long barbels; a nice specimen to start the season.



Six pound Avon chub, well recovered from spawning



First Avon barbel, fine set of whiskers!

Starting on the Avon

16th June 2010

There is something special about that first day of the season these days; not the mad enthusiasm of my youth, when eager and carefully planned preparations, and wild expectations of catching from the off were the order of the day, but a calm and relaxed confirmation that the river is back on stream after a respectful break. The order of the first day is now a late breakfast, a last minute gathering together of tackle, and an amble down to a favourite swim after the heat has died down. Best to let the mad rush of early birds settle first. All I wanted was to make a few casts and perhaps a fish or two, and no matter about the species. The heat was actually increasing, with a hot sun bearing down on some tired anglers who had been on the bank from the off, and were losing interest and drifting off home, or just dozing.

I wandered to a handy and previously reliable swim just on the inside of a bend, parted the rushes, peered expectantly in, and trickled in some bits of crumbled boilie and paste in a clear run in the streamer weed under the bank to see what happened. The sun was getting hotter on my back, but helpful in the process of spotting fish. The river is unusually low and clear for the time of year, and it looked as if seeing a barbel before July was

on the cards. Some dark inquisitive shapes soon appeared, clearly mopping up the bait, but they were all chub. Then, a leaner, faster and apparently greedier fish nosed in. A barbel, maybe five pounds, but a barbel sighted on the first day was a real result. It is not uncommon to fail to catch a barbel on the Avon until July; they are hard to find until the water clears, and are usually scattered and unsettled so soon after spawning. I fed in some more bait, arranged a comfortable seating arrangement, sorted out the tackle, and went for a walk. No rush; let them have a feed and be content with a few bites and maybe even an opening day barbel.

The chub got there first, and after a few hours it was apparent that the barbel had been a loner, and catching chub after chub had put him off. He never came back as far as I could tell, but the chub kept coming. They are pretty greedy at this time of year, and seemed to be well recovered from spawning. After six chub, with four over five pounds, up to an honest 5.15, I had done enough and left well before dusk but with a plan to come back and see if the barbel would do the same, and perhaps bring some of his pals.



First fish of the season 5.10 chub



Second fish, 5.15



Parting the rushes

La belle Vienne

May 2010

The lovely River Vienne in south east France was worth another visit, and a week in the tranquillity of the French countryside, with very few people about, let alone other anglers was a delightful experience. The food was wonderful too; the little café, Chez Martine, in Ansac does a three course meal, including wine, for eleven euros. Still getting over a surfeit of cheese, wine and a range of viandes that did my diet no good at all.

The river is a pacey, rocky bottomed affair, with plenty of rapids and smooth glides, and almost unfished. Even the stretches in the town parks at Confolens and St Junienne are mostly free of other fishermen. The barbel are not big, with a five pounder a notable fish, but the average three pounder tears off across the river like a carp, and most have not been caught before. The carp, on the other hand, will scream across to the other bank in seconds, and take some getting in on our light barbel gear. The barbel are breeding very well on the Vienne,

with several year classes represented it seems. The little ones are good fun too, giving a fierce bite that belies their small size. There are silure, Wels catfish, as well, but fortunately we did not come across any. They are highly prized by the locals, and are apparently delicious.

It may be that the barbel are bigger in the lower reaches of the river, but they are certainly thriving and growing in the area we fished, and in a few years could reach the five kilo mark. They certainly like the pellet and feeder approach, and there is a world of exploring to do on the river.



Barbeau de la Vienne



John looking pleased with one of his better fish



Lovely old mill on the Vienne

Rio Ebro adventures

April 2010

The carp of the Ebro are great pale golden commons, with yellowy fins and big lumpy frames. They do not fight as hard as their Canadian cousins, but are just as impressive and almost as numerous, it seems. This year we had a good number of thirty pounders, and some middle twenties which seemed to give the best account of themselves, but the hoped for forty failed to materialise. A fifty was taken by an English carper in the next swim to us on our last day. Even so, the carp fishing on the Ebro is not difficult or taxing, and can be great fun if not taken too seriously. The whole point is to relax in the sun, enjoy the food, and catch some fairly unsophisticated fish. The noted fishing spots can get a little busy when the river levels are high, and the experience of fishing alongside our EU partners can be a bit of a culture shock.

The carp are viewed as a food source or as crude trophies by some, who kill and eat them, or take their heads as evidence of their prowess, leaving the carcasses on the bank to rot. The spawning carp in the margins were an easy target for a well aimed rock, and leapt upon and carried off to be gutted and presumably boiled or barbecued as a fishy treat. I heard tales of large catfish, well over a hundred pounds, filleted and loaded into vans by the river bank, and all quite legal in certain areas. There is no close season, and there are removal

limits of six carp per day, and no limit on catfish in certain regions. Where we fished, the catfish removal limit is two per day, but carp are quaintly described as being "capture and loose", which I think means catch and release. Conservation will have to come to these fisheries as people increase in number and fish populations decline accordingly.

Our day ticket was a lovely example of the sort of poor translation text that we used to expect with electrical goods from the Far East. Carp; " Fishing in the modality of capture and loose the whole year, with the exception of allowing to maintain in the fish ponds the specimens fished in the contests during the duration of the proof. Prohibited the filleted of the fish captured in all of the enclosure area." Catfish; " 2 for fisherman/ day, minimal height 100 cms" We think minimal height means minimum length.

For two days we fished for roach, and had good bags of fish that were a bit lean and rangy after spawning, up to low twos, but nice fish that would be better targeted later in the year. There are lots of roach, and they go to over three pounds quite regularly, we are told. My first bite on the roach gear was a twenty five pound common, but I had enough line on the spool to tire him in the end. I also accidentally caught my first catfish, a most unwelcome creature, and it did not endear me to the species in any way.



30lb Ebro carp



Two pound three ounce Ebro roach



An ugly kitten