

## **Pete Reading River Diary Season 2011/2012**

### **Avon Chub Boom**

March 2012

The Avon chub are doing very well at the moment, with fish in large numbers and getting to respectable sizes too. I remember fishing the river for four years in the Eighties, with a pb of four pounds twelve ounces at the end of it.

Now we do not weigh them until they look six, and I would say the average is well over five pounds on some stretches. There are some spanking young fish in the three to four pound range, and in the summer the eight to twelve ounce fish are a pest, when they hook themselves on heavy barbel rigs without giving you a bite, then just sit guiltily on the bottom and wait to be reeled in.

All year classes are well represented, and even the bigger, older fish are clean and healthy-looking, though they could be weighing a bit light this year, judging by the number I seem to get that weigh five fourteen or five fifteen!

They are great fun on light float tackle, or feeder fishing with, with a single maggot on a tiny hook often needed to fool the wiser old chub. Best fish so far this winter is a great lump of seven pounds six, a fish with a huge frame that could top eight pounds in top condition, and a very nice end to the season. There is something quite scary about feeling the weight and power of a chub like that on a three pound hooklink, but thankfully they come in fairly peacefully if you are gentle with them, and there is no thick weed or snags around.



7.6 Hampshire Avon chub



This one took a boilie



Typical Avon six pounder

## Grayling Days

February 2012

The grayling is a lovely fish to go for in the winter, and are responsive even on the coldest of days. They dislike coloured water as rule, but the low water conditions this year seem to have suited them, and those crisp clear frosty mornings will often bring good grayling sport in the afternoon.

Fine tackle and float fishing goes down well with grayling, and a few hours roving the river keeps you warm and occupied. The deeper pools will also respond to blockfeeder tactics, and an instant bite can come from a swim that has not responded to the float, if a little feeder of maggots is plopped in.

I took a couple of BS members who had paid for a day out in the recent R and C auction, and both were delighted to bag a two pound plus grayling, and I was pleased that they really appreciated the river and the surroundings as well.

On the first occasion, we blanked in a normally productive pool, and did well in a less reliable spot. The next visit, a few weeks later, and the two swims worked in reverse. The grayling shoals were obviously on the move, perhaps shifted on by sulky salmon, or big sea trout, as both species who can be very aggressive. An otter was also about; his tracks and spraint were pretty clear to see.

The grayling populations seem to be stable on this stretch, however, and it has produced some hefty pike as well, like chalk streams often do.



Steve pleased with his two pound plus grayling



Barry with one two ounces bigger



Otter spraint, smells like violets

## Mahseer Moments

January 2012

The British winter is best avoided, and no better way than to go somewhere nice and hot where fish are fighting to grab your bait and pull you in the river.

The River Cauvery had not changed much, although the mahseer seemed even more numerous. The inevitable chicken curry dinners, with eggs chips and beans for lunch, were as delicious as ever, and two weeks on Kingfisher beer was tolerable.

The bigger fish were a bit thin on the ground, and our group had a few in the 30 to 50lb class, but over 700 mahseer between ten of us in the fortnight. The double figure fish showed in greater numbers, and I had my first double-figure mahseer on a centrepin, which resulted in some nice friction burns.

There are good numbers of cormorant on the Cauvery, to go with the crocodiles and fish eagles, and we even saw a group of Indian otters, which took great delight in teasing the crocs. The guides tell us that the otters regularly wind up the big Muggers by mobbing them as they are basking, even biting their tails. The crocs are too slow to catch them, and just huff and puff and submerge in a reptilian rage. The Indians call the otters Waterdogs.

I also caught a pb freshwater turtle, which gave a long slow bite and took some winding in. He was foul-hooked in the right flipper, but was eventually beached and returned unharmed, but very grumpy. Hard to get an idea of scale from the pictures, but he was three foot long and two foot wide and probably a sixty pounder. The guide would not go near him, reluctant to lose a finger to the snapping jaws.



River Cauvery



Three foot long grumpy turtle



These go well on a `pin!



Mahseer release



Mahdu catching bait

## Another successful Avon Fundraiser

5th October 2011

A fantastic day was had by all at the 3rd Annual Avon Fundraiser, organised in conjunction with The Avon Roach Project. Between us, and with the help of over fifty generous supporters, we raised almost five thousand four hundred pounds, to be shared equally between the Roach Club project and the Barbel Society.

The stews for the young roach to grow on in are increasing in number, and the costs of constructing and maintaining them is considerable. The costs associated with rearing and feeding the thousands of baby roach are considerable too, but with the help of anglers both locally and nationally, Trevor and Budgie are putting back some precious stock that will help to kick-start the Avon roach populations back up to self-sustaining levels.

The Barbel Society funds are held in the Research and Conservation Fund, and are earmarked for habitat works on the Avon. We recently completed our first project, with the removal of some old redundant iron piling from the



river near Ringwood. The bank had eroded behind the piles, and they were deflecting the current towards the bank and causing more erosion, as well as making the swim very difficult to fish.

It was decided that such unnatural structures were best removed, and the BS paid for a machine to pull them out and dispose of them. Some other lumps of metalwork were pulled out of the river bed at the same time, and the smoother flow that now follows the natural bankline should minimise any further erosion.

Looks a good barbel swim again; last time I fished it, several years ago, before the bank washed out, I had a nice thirteen pounder.



Lot of pulling going on here!



At last, the piles are out!



Any old iron

## **Return to the Royalty**

30th September 2011

Not fished the Royalty for many years, for a whole host of reasons, but when two old pals I had lost touch with for many years invited me for a reminisce and a bit of a fish in the Top Compound, which now comprises all of the Great Weir, I could not refuse.

Not being a great fan of weirpools, I sat and fished the tail end close to some weedbeds and where there seemed to be a more even flow, and did not expect much to happen. It was a bright day, and much time was spent sitting and chatting with Martin and Terry, who I first encountered in 1969 on the banks of Throop, and there was a lot to catch up with. In those days we fished cheese, meat or maggots, and the latter only in the Seventies when we found out how effective they were, and we could afford them at thirty two shillings a gallon. They both fished maggots in the old style, bait dropping and regularly casting in a big block feeder into the fast water upstream of me. They were pestered with dace and the odd nice perch, but nothing happened to my ubiquitous cheap and cheerful pellet and PVA rig until mid afternoon.

I cannot afford maggots these days either.

We were watching a goosander hunting the minnows under the weir-sill when the pin gave a quick screech and a hooked fish dived into the weed under my feet. At first I thought it was a chub, but it turned out to be a nice little four pound barbel, clean and fresh as a daisy. Evidence that the Avon barbel are showing more signs of a comeback, as fish like fish are seemingly more common this year.

Terry and Martin accused me of taking advantage of their feed, and I was happy to admit my guilt, but they did choose the two best swims before I got there. Just at dusk, when were packing for a pint in the Royalty Inn, the reel went again, and a very powerful ten pounder rounded the day off nicely. Again, it was a very well-conditioned, healthy fish, no hook marks and fin perfect. Must try the Royalty again soon.



Pretty Royalty four pounder



Little barbel ready to swim off



Royalty double at dusk

## **Barbel boom on the way?**

13th September 2011

Unlike many people of my age, I am becoming more optimistic about the future of our fishing lately. It certainly beats being gloomy and despondent and getting depressed. The number of smaller barbel on the Avon are encouraging me about the state of the river, barbel-wise, and I seem to be coming across substantial shoals of fish in the four to seven pound range, all clean, sparkling, spotless fish that remind me of the situation in the Eighties, when such shoals were common, though a double-figure fish was almost unheard of.

I have had eight different fish lately from one swim, all from four to eight pounds, yet have never seen more than five fish in the swim at the same time; they just keep appearing. All are fin perfect, with the coral and lemon yellow on the fins that younger barbel of the Avon often exhibit. Chub are ever present, and a good deal of trouble from dace, with healthy-looking shoals in evidence in many areas. I had a catch of chub the other day, four fish in a few hours all between five and a half and six three, again all clean and healthy, and I saw eleven fish in the swim at one time.

The Avon is going to be chub heaven this winter.

Went to the launch of Phil Smith's new book at the weekend, a nice event, and a nice book, with a fascinating record of his exploits in search of big fish. Amongst the many attending was a keen barbel angler who brought along his prized bronze barbel, a superb specimen cast in solid alloy, and quite the best example I have seen.



6lb Avon barbel ready for release



Fresh five pounder, supposed to be caught!



Troy Savage and his bronze barbel

## First try for grayling

1st September 2011

I am never keen to fish for grayling in the summer, much preferring the wintery experience, when little else will feed, and when fish are in better condition and in less need for care in recovery and safe return. It is OK to have a visit to check on the river though, and take an opportunity to assess grayling populations, as well as make a mental note of the small depressions and summer pools that can hold fish in winter conditions. Knowing the river of the summer can bring benefits when fishing blind in the coloured water and fiercer flows of the wetter and colder months.

It is classed as early autumn now anyway, and cooler weather and recent rains had coloured the river, making spotting fish impossible, but the weedbeds and open pools were still evident, and grayling and dace do like the open water as a rule. Several bright and sparkling grayling of just under two pounds made for good sport, with the occasional small trout and salmon parr stabbing the float under as brazenly as the greedy grayling.

A long lean fish, quickly weighed at 2.10 was best of the day, and beautifully coloured as ever, with the steely grey flanks contrasting with the blues, greens and corals of those elegant fins. Just like barbel, they need retention in the net for as long as it takes to get their breath, turn upright and start fighting to escape before letting them go. Big fish like this are pretty old too, and usually have only a season or two to go before they die, with a seven or eight year old an old age pensioner.



Sad to see that the river in this area has been lost to the horrible Himalayan balsam, showing that the lush vegetation of the chalk streams is soon overpowered and destroyed by this evil weed. Some areas where cattle could not reach had turned over to 100% balsam, with nettles, reeds, rushes and even bramble inevitably replaced by the stuff. We keep working to keep it off the main Avon, and it is possible, with a bit of determined work and vigilance to eradicate it and keep it in check.



Big grayling swims off after recovery



100% balsam on the Frome; a disaster



Lovely colourful 2.10

## Unfinished business

25th August 2011

I did a bit of filming for day with Hugh Miles, in an effort to put together a short sequence to illustrate the Barbel Society Handling Code. We were fortunate in that the weather was kind, and produced the sort of light that Hugh was delighted with, and we were also fortunate in that a barbel managed to get itself captured and dealt with in the careful manner that many inexperienced anglers are eager to learn about.

The fish was about six and a half pounds, and though not as impressive for the camera as a bigger fish would have been, Hugh and I thought that it was quite appropriate to use it as the star of the film. The small fish need as much care as the bigger ones in many ways, even though big fish tend to take a bit longer to come round.

Specifics on handling barbel are not as important as the general principles; just keep them out of the water as little as possible, and let them recover in a landing net for as long as possible, never letting them go until they are fighting to escape.

There was a big fish in the swim, amongst a pesky shoal of chub and three smaller barbel, and the capture of the small barbel and the ubiquitous chub rattled the remaining barbel enough to require a revisit a day or so later. Hugh had enough footage to put something together, so I returned to have a go for the big one.

The second visit found the barbel still in residence, and even the big fish was gobbling up casters and hemp



with enthusiasm, and though the swim was quite shallow, the fish tolerated a dropper on their heads, returning within seconds to feed. Fortune smiled again, and the biggest barbel came first, screaming off downstream, bow-waving in the shallow water and threatening to reach the cover of fallen trees under my own bank. There is nothing like watching big barbel, then playing big barbel in the clear waters of the Avon, with every second of the fight in clear view. At 13.10, it was a bigger fish than I thought, but it was incredibly short, deep and fat, one of the really chunky variety that look smaller in the water. One of the smaller barbel, a young clean fish of about six pounds, and a six pound chub came in quick succession, and with a couple more five pound plus fish to finish, business is now most satisfactorily completed in that swim.



Deep fat 13.10 Avon barbel



Pesky six pound Avon chub

## **Auction day guests success**

18th August 2011

A couple of days this week were spent in more Research and Conservation auction days out, taking successful bidders out for a day on the Avon to try and catch a few fish. Both Simon and Adrian were really nice guys, very pleasant company, and I am most grateful to them for being so generous in paying for a days fishing, all in aid of the RandC funds. Always a bit nerve-wracking trying to catch a barbel to order for them on the Avon, but they had six barbel and twenty sizeable chub between them in their two separate days, and I was as happy as them, and glad to share in their success.

Once the first barbel is in the net, I can relax a bit, and just concentrate on having a good chat, and both fell in love with the river, and vowed to come back. There are still quite good numbers of barbel about, and some unsurpassed chub sport; they both had personal best chub, up to 6.6, and the barbel were all in the 6 to 8 pound range.

Found the remains of a big signal crayfish whilst out spotting a few days beforehand, undoubtedly munched and left on the bank by an otter, and I did see a curious bitch otter swim though my swim a short while before I

had a twelve pound barbel. They will help to keep the crays under control, and these vile crustaceans have been in the Avon for over twenty years. I have seen several over that timescale. Thankfully, they have never thrived, and the river is seemingly not to their liking, but otters adore them, and they can crunch up as many as they like.



Simon and pb Avon chub



Adrian and pb Avon barbel



Hampshire Avon crayfish, remains of an otter breakfast

## Stour works completed

12th August 2011

The Barbel Society has just contributed towards an EA-led project to improve the habitat in the Dorset Stour, and 2K from the Stour Barbel Project funding has been used to provide materials for croys which form part of a reconstruction of a washed-out weir at Throop. The EA used hundreds of tonnes of stone to reshape the weir, and re-profiled the gravels above and below, creating habitat for many species, but especially potential spawning shallows for barbel. The BS has worked in partnership with both the EA and local clubs to try and repair the damage caused by the brutal dredging of the river in the Eighties. I provided them with 30 year-old pictures of the dragline piling up gravel from Barbel Bend, a fantastic barbel area at that time, where we used to wade across the river on the fast gravel shallows, The same spot is now fifteen feet deep and full of Canadian pondweed. The extensive dredging removed gravels throughout the river, and at least eight of these cobbled stone weirs were put in to try and retain water levels after this almost criminal exercise. Salmon fishing was almost immediately destroyed, with Stour salmon virtually extinct these days. Barbel have taken longer to decline, but loss of spawning gravels has undoubtedly been a massive contribution to their decline in the Stour.

With some careful support stocking, and associated habitat improvement to help the river repair more quickly, we could see the barbel recovering soon. The local EA Officer with responsibility for the Stour is working tremendously hard to put together more projects to restore the river, and the BS will try and help as much as we can without limited resources. The stone croys above and below the reconstructed weir will help to create current diversity, scouring the new gravel riffles, and also provide habitat for fry just downstream.



Repair of weir underway



New croy below weir, BS funded



Reprofiled weir, narrowing river and scouring gravels

## Spice of life

30th July 2011

It is so easy to settle into a routine, a mechanical way of barbel fishing that stops you thinking and inevitably gets rather repetitive and boring. The standard summer tactic for me has been to find fish by spotting, then trickle in crumbled boilies, and eventually fish with a paste wrap and a PVA bag of crumble around the hook bait, all fished on a big lead and backlead if possible, then sit and wait until the centrepin signals a bite. Very effective it is too, and a nice way to spend a summer day, but a change is as good as a rest.

I love to experiment, to aim for some variety in my fishing, and also like to take a risk or two by fishing swims where barbel are hard to spot, and where I have worked out, in theory, where they ought to be. Difficult swims add to the challenge, and also tend to limit the competition from other anglers, again, in theory! Surreptitiously dragging a small hole in thick weed, can bring results, and actually fishing and baiting such holes can bring fish in eventually. These weed-living barbel are inevitably on patrol, travelling great distances, and if you are lucky, and persistently revisit, you can come up trumps and create a swim that may produce for you exclusively for a while.

That first bite, the excitement as something burrows powerfully off into seemingly solid weed makes up for all the waiting, all those fruitless hours searching for a glimpse of a tail or fin. Often it is a carp, or strong chub, but a barbel sought out in this way is a satisfying result. A couple of tens, an eleven and a nice dark chocolatey twelve twelve have come from one such weedhole, and I never saw a fish until the reel signalled the bite. Interesting to see that one of the tens had an extra barbel on one side, so three on his right side and two on the left. It may be that past mouth damage had resulted in an extra regrowth, or it was just a simple mutation, a natural variation, as extra barbels as side -shoots are very common on barbel.



Another technique that adds a bit of variety is the maggot approach; in the right swim, a constant trickle of droppered maggot will send the fish into a most agreeable feeding frenzy. The routine of baiting, waiting, then regular feeding, casting, feeding and casting again, then waiting for the screaming bite in response makes a change from the old boilie under the bank approach. A very responsive thirteen pounder was the latest fish to fall for the irresistible trail of white maggots, a bunch of four, superglued and hair-rigged on a small hook always look irresistible to me!



Nice eleven pounder from the weed



Ten pounder with five barbels!



Fat 13.7 taken on maggot

## Double delight

23rd July 2011

I remember when catching a double figure barbel was an annual event if you were lucky, and top barbel anglers based their reputations on perhaps four or five doubles in their entire barbel-fishing career. How times have changed, and it is easy to fail to appreciate how good our barbel fishing is now, even though some of the prophets of doom say all the specimen barbel are dead and it is hardly worth going any more.

I took Glen out for a day recently, one of the Research and Conservation auction lots, and we soon spotted a couple of barbel responding enthusiastically to some pellets trickled in under a bush. We fed and watched them for a while, left them and went for a walk, fed them again, then dropped in a nice little PVA bag of micro-pellet and a couple of small pellets on the hair, heavy bomb and short hooklink, and one of them engulfed the bait within seconds. A little over ten pounds, and he was as delighted as I was.

He left early, and I went downstream and fed up a run between some thick streamer weed that I had droppered a bit of bait into earlier in the morning. Nice to see a couple of decent barbel move in on the hemp and wheat mix I was using, and with a bunch of casters on the hook, and continued feeding with hemp, wheat and casters, another pair of ten pounders came to the net by the time dusk fell, and a solid little four pounder rounded off the day. They were feeding very keenly, wagging their tails furiously as they nuzzled into the gravel, and it was one of



those days when they were clearly getting their heads down. To get three doubles, and two smaller fish, in a day is not exceptional at all nowadays, and even on rivers where the real monsters have died off, there is reason for optimism.

The Avon has produced a couple of fifteens, a few fourteens and thirteens so far, and bags of up to eight fish in a day. There are lots of small fish in evidence too, so perhaps we should not complain too much!



Ten seven loves casters



Glen happy with his ten pounder

## Breamy diversions

19th July 2011

Barbel on the Avon are being quite difficult, but in any event it always pays to experience a bit of variety in your fishing, and the chance to go for some big stillwater bream is always welcome at this time of year. They love a cloudy and breezy day, when spotting for Avon barbel would have been tricky and frustrating. You do need to see barbel in the swim, and weather conditions looked like suiting the bream more than the barbel. Spodding out bait, setting up a rod pod, and casting to a marker at 70 yards or more is good fun, and makes a change from plopping a bait under the rod top.

I dispense with the marker float these days; I mostly cast wildly off target anyway, but can judge distance fairly well and spread the feed around to service a pretty big bream shoal. Markers can be a bit of an affectation, more standard practice than real necessity, and fish will home in on a patch of feed from a feeder very quickly. My biggest fish took the indicator out of my fingers as I was clipping it on! The routines are important, and scanning the surface for rolling bream, and recasting and rebaiting regularly can be quite satisfying if fish are coming to the net. Even though I had bite alarms, I never switch them on unless I am in danger of drifting off to sleep, and the bream were on the feed today and kept me awake for most of the day. The clunk of the indicator dropping and quiet buzz of the bait runner are quite audible enough, plus I do have eyes.

I had to move mid morning, after being fishless for several hours, but spotted rolling fish to my left, and was soon playing a great lump of a fish within ten minutes of moving, rebaiting and casting in. Just over eleven pounds, and followed by nine other doubles up to thirteen two and some more feisty nine pounders. Well slimed-up by the end of the day, but refreshing to do something different, and different smells, certainly. Bream slime has a distinctive odour, not as faint as that of barbel, or as rich as that of roach, and it does not improve with age.



Nice golden eleven pounder



I love red maggots!



Fat and chunky thirteen pounder

## Teme success stories

12th July 2011

I attended the first part of the Barbel School event organised by the Society on Dave Mason`s lovely stretch of the Teme, and was delighted to see such a successful outcome. Dave and Rob Swindells arranged it very professionally, and those who attended were as impressed as I was. Some had v never caught a barbel before, some were more experienced, but we all learnt something from the presentations, and the whole atmosphere and spirit of the day was what the Barbel Society is all about; friendliness, sharing and contributing. The helpers were fantastic too. Well done and thanks to Dave Mason, Rob Swindells and all the assistants on the day, a recipe for even more success in the future.

Dave is justifiably proud of the work he has done on his bit of river, and we saw the same sort of tree management as we have done at Bransford, where tall willows are improved by pollarding or coppicing, allowing more light into the river and margins, as well as stabilising the bank and extending the life of the trees.

I dropped into Bransford on the way home, and had a bag of seven chub and two barbel in a four hour session, with the barbel in fighting fit condition, though still a bit lean, but hungry. They do love the pellets there, and a sprinkle of loosefeed and a PVA bag of crushed pellet round the hook will almost guarantee a screaming bite in the popular swims. There is room for exploration and seeking out of new swims there too, and I found a most

attractive glide under the bank that I must try out next time I visit this delightful and productive fishery. There have been two doubles out that I know of so far, and some consistent sport for both the barbel and chub, and yet you are still likely to be the only angler on the water on most visits.



Dave and Rob at the Barbel School



Willow pollards growing strongly



Lovely golden Bransford barbel

## Fun on the Kennet

3rd July 2011

I had promised to have a day with Gerry Higham on the Kennet, and we always have a good time chatting endlessly, and fishing in a most relaxed and informal way. I also promised him a good sized barbel, but they were not having it in the first swim, normally a reliable spot, where the fish can succumb to the particle approach and often queue up to be caught. After a good few hours, we had only one fish to show for our efforts, and not a big one either. The fact that it was a remarkably small fish was very welcome and encouraging, though, since it is a sign of healthy recruitment. This fish was barely over two pounds, clean and fresh and spotless, and it pulled incredibly hard to begin with. Gerry was well impressed with its youthful vigour, but was becoming increasingly unimpressed with my choice of swim and list of excuses.

I left him for a doze, and went in search of a Plan B.

A few pellets flicked under a bush soon had a barbel or two smoke screening in the silt, sending up clouds of brown sediment as they grubbed about for the freebies. I suggested to Gerry that we rebait the original swim, and then move to the bush to try a different method to the caster and hemp technique. We moved to the new swim with a minimum of tackle, and I made up a rig with a small pellet on a very short hooklength, a PVA bag of crushed pellet, and a heavy lead and backlead. It was plopped under the bushes, and we sat back and waited. The approach had an instant effect, and a barbel took within two minutes, nearly dragging Gerry in the river as it stormed off under the bush. Rod held low, and strong tackle, and a whole lot of advice from me, and the fish was eventually beaten, and landed, much to Gerry's delight.



Another fish of about the same size, eight pounds or so, made the same mistake a few hours later, but the casters and hemp did not work on that day, and I can only think the fish were just not in the first swim. They move around a lot at this time of year, and next time there may be a dozen or more in residence. Barbel are pretty vagile at the best of times, and this word, vagile, that describes their roaming, semi-migratory habits is a useful one to add to your vocabulary, and list of excuses for not catching.



Gerry and his barbel



Fresh little Kennet barbel

## **Birthday barbel gets the ball rolling**

28th June 2011

The chub are still feeding well, but learning to be more cautious as the season progresses, and although the chub population seems very buoyant at the moment, with some big catches reported, we sometimes forget how often recaptures occur. A very hard-fighting chub grabbed my paste-wrapped boilie and burrowed powerfully into the weed at dusk, almost making me think it was a barbel. It turned out to be a chub that I was able to predict the weight of very accurately; I knew it was a 5.15 because I caught it a hundred yards upstream last week. It was a funny looking fish, a bit humpy and of quite ancient appearance, but a notably two-tone fish, with a distinct colour change at the dorsal fin. Two-tone fish are quite common, and I have had bream, barbel, dace and pike with this strange abnormality, possibly due to a break in the nervous system somewhere which presumably locks the colour-changing chromophores that enable them to lighten or darken their overall pigmentation, for one half of their body.

A birthday barbel, a fish of about four pounds was much appreciated, and followed a day or two later with a couple of doubles, a big ten and a lovely twelve nine that pulled very hard and reminded me of how dogged and powerful barbel can be. Casters and maggots are still a fantastic barbel bait, and in conjunction with lashings of lovely aromatic hemp, the fish just could not resist the particle approach. A lean and rangy nine pounder finished the session, and with signs that the recent sudden hot spell has made the barbel go for a second spawning, results have taken a nose dive again. Maybe time to try for a crucian carp or two.





Twelve pounder



Hair rigged casters do the trick!



Two tone 5.15 again!

## **No barbel yet, but welcome by-catch**

20th June 2011

The odd barbel is showing on the Avon, but the usual prospect of sometimes waiting until July for a fish is not unexpected. The river is only just clearing, when actually spotting fish can increase your chances no end. The weed is proliferating nicely, and with the river dropping and getting clearer, things are looking good. Dropping a bait into the usual swims has produced the usual chub to inaugurate the season, and as ever they are of a good size, and seem well mended after an early spawning. They may have another go if the weather warms up, however, as may the barbel, and it is not unusual for either species to spawn more than once if conditions trigger it. I have had three five fifteen chub in the last two afternoons, and a six nine that would go seven easily in a week or two, and such fish are a welcome by-catch, although often I will scale down and fish intentionally with both chub and barbel in mind. Most Avon chub seem to be five and a half plus these days, but there are some spanking little fish of about a pound coming through.

Even the bream are acceptable when bites are few, and the last one was weighed at over eight pounds and fought remarkably well. Avon bream are clean, bright and bronze, and in a fast flow will take line and thump about doggedly. They do make the net and weigh-sling pong a bit, but it is wise to respect all the fish we catch and not dismiss chub or bream as a sort of sub-species just because they are not the target for that day.

Several thirteen pound plus barbel have been reported from the Middle Avon, and such fish are good fifteen pounders in the winter. Lots of small barbel, a pound and below are also showing, with two to three pound fish being spotted too. The recent scale reading research on Avon fish funded by the Barbel Society, using scales taken last year, points towards a good spawning year about ten years ago, and excellent growth rates too. The thirteen and fourteen pounders were eighteen to twenty years old, and we hope to gain even more information from scale readings and further analysis in the coming year and from other rivers too.



Big fat eight pound Avon bream



Six nine Avon chub



Five fifteen, an honest Avon chub,  
well recovered from spawning

## Watching the Barbel

3rd June 2011

The chance to spot barbel in the Close Season is unusual in most years, but low flows and clear water, linked with early spawning, gave the opportunity to see barbel settling down after spawning and starting to behave in a more settled way. The group I had seen chasing each other about eagerly, and indulging in vigorous reproductive activity had moved to steadier water, and along with a bunch of chub, were soon seen to be actively rooting about and feeding close to the actual reeds, no doubt doing what comes naturally and tidying up their own eggs. I fed them some old boilies and pellet, and they responded with some enthusiasm. I decided, however, that they would be left well alone for the opening of the season,; there was something not quite right about feeding them up and watching them innocently munching on the freebies, then thinking about taking advantage with the baited hook. Then again, that is what we do throughout the season, and a group of chub worked up to a frenzy on maggot loosefeed can be like lambs to the slaughter, as can a shoal of barbel at times, when you bait a swim and feed them up, and build a sense of false security before sticking a hook a few in them.

I left these barbel alone, though, and thankfully a rise in levels, and coloured water after a cool flush of rain will scatter them, and there is also the June 16th syndrome, when fish suddenly seem to realise the date and get all suspicious and coy almost overnight.

My first trip will be a simple inauguration ceremony, a breaking of the water, with no need to catch from the off.



Double figure Avon barbel emerges



Having a munch



Off under the weed again

## Working on the Banks

20th May 2011

The salmon fishing on the Avon is hard work these days. I retain a ticket, but never really fish it very often, since the fish are so thin on the ground these days that the surest way to success is to put an awful lot of time in. Fly fishing in the early part of the season is quite good fun, for a few hours, and there is some satisfaction in getting a salmon fly rod to work properly and fish a run or a pool with confidence. It is hard work in itself, and most exciting if a fish takes, I am told. The odd trout and pike is all I could raise this year. May try again now the spinning is allowed, and there have been a few fish taken lately on the river, up to high twenties, but the commonest size in the last few years, at this time of the season, seem to be mid doubles. Lovely fish if you can get one though, and good to see that the catch and release policy is gaining ground on UK rivers.

More hard work is needed in keeping the stiles and bridges up to scratch on the river, and has had great fun in rebuilding some quite attractive and functional structures on the river. There is great satisfaction in doing the inaugural walk or clamber over a reinstated stile or bridge, and I am still bemused to hear comments from anglers later in the year who will mutter that the stiles are too high/too low/too narrow/too wide/in the wrong place, etc. Sometimes they are right, but those are the stiles I did not build, of course. All good fun and you will never please them all! Some are genuinely appreciative, however.

Latest bit of close season bank work is involved with helping out the Roach Project heroes, Budgie and Trevor, who encouraged me to become part of the workforce reinstating some old stews for their precious little roach to live in prior to final release. Terrific fun, providing much needed exercise and the opportunity to employ my considerable civil engineering skills. After a good deal of digging and hammering, drilling and sledging, wheel barrowing, more digging, and an awful lot of leaning on a spade and thinking, enormous progress has been made by the team. Much of the work will be unseen, hidden by the final touches of concrete and top dressing, but, as I so often say, there is many a field of corn that hides a crooked furrow.



The annual Barbel Show is now looming, and I think the line up of speakers is top class; it looks like being a really entertaining day. The trade hall will provide the chance of some bargains too and there is of course, the opportunity to chat endlessly with friends old and new. Tickets will now be available on the door.



Old stew being uncovered



Making progress



Barbel and chub spawning nearby

## Close season river visits

20th April 2011

Walking the rivers in the Close Season is always a refreshing and interesting exercise and a good source of much needed exercise anyway. The Dorset Stour is very low and not very clear, due to low rainfall, high temperatures and an early spring algal bloom, but I checked out some of the stretches we have stocked with barbel recently to see if I could spot any of the fish that were introduced by the Barbel Society and EA in the last three years. No signs of any barbel, but a lot to expect really. 9000 barbel can be easily lost in a few miles of river, and a few years are needed before the survivors reach maturity and show themselves. The stone crows the EA put in are maturing nicely, and the fry bays were swarming with millions of tiny fish, hopefully giving them shelter and a helping hand to survive in a river still repairing itself after the horrendous dredgings of thirty years ago. Last year I saw barbel of three to four pounds that could well have been from the first stocking, but hard to tell for sure.

The Hampshire Avon was clearer, and barbel were spawning enthusiastically on the 19th April, with a good number of medium sized fish chasing a big, darker female, then shuddering violently in a frenzied gang bang, sending up clouds of silt as the gravel was disturbed and, presumably, all the precious eggs and milt simultaneously released. Good signs, and a long summer growth period is assured for fry produced so early. The barbel are only a bit more native than the black swans, I suppose, which were aggressively protecting a nest a bit further upstream. These Australian invaders are very territorial, and are extremely intolerant of the herds of mute swans that plague this bit of river. Some invasive species may have a benefit, because there is no shortage of the mutes, and their effect on weed is as destructive as any mechanical weedcutting can be, in



smaller rivers.

Latest visit was to the Barbel Society fishery on the Warwickshire Avon at Wick, and I was impressed to find what a secluded and secure fishery it is, and a lot more varied than I expected, There are bends and fallen trees, good beds of rush and some attractive deeper holes. I was shown a swim that produced nine barbel in a day last season, another that gave a bag of two doubles and a nine in a junior match, and the swim that produced the fifteen pounder was a bit more vaguely described. A lovely fishery and it will get a visit or two from me early next season!



Stour stone croy becoming naturalised



Australian invaders nesting



Warks Avon at Wick, full of character and barbel too!

## **Teme at Bransford looking healthy**

April 2011

The River Teme at Bransford is a cracking piece of water, with stony shallows, deep pools and smooth runs that typify the variety of habitat that this river can offer. As part of an ongoing programme of works to improve the habitat even further, the Barbel Society has just finished the latest phase of work, which involved thinning out some willows that were planted some years ago by the EA to stabilise the eroding bank, and to plant some more willow to stabilise the bank further, and provide more low level cover for fish and other wildlife. I was delighted to see that the willow stakes we had planted a couple of years ago were now bushy trees that had turned a bare and soft muddy bank into a stable grassy area, stopping bank collapse and erosion in their tracks. The pollarded and coppiced willows had similarly burst into life, creating stable and much longer-lived trees at low level, allowing light onto the river and encouraging even more low level growth. All this improved growth is infinitely better habitat than fifty foot willows towering over bare and overshadowed banks, which erode rapidly due to lack of plant roots to hold it all together. Marginal plants, small willows at water level, and instream weed and algae all benefit from more light, and increase the productivity of the river for all species. These big old trees inevitably fall over or crack off, and pull the bank away as they topple in, causing all sorts of problems.

Although there has been some damage to our rivers caused by ill considered tree removal by flood defence in the past, the proper management of bankside trees is essential in order to provide the varied habitat essential for fish and other wildlife to prosper.

We have planted some more stakes and bigger pollard willow along the bank, and coppiced an old ash tree that was threatening to fall in. Some of the old pollards, trimmed twenty or thirty years ago are evident if you look out for them, both ash and willow, and are testament to the good tree management that used to go on before intensive agriculture arrived. Some more instream cover in the form of live "hanging willows" have also been dropped in to provide wood in the water, overhead cover for fish and habitat for invertebrates and birds. Our plans are approved by English Nature, and in fact the fishery is used by them and the Sever Rivers Trust to demonstrate good practice.

I am going to give Bransford a few visits early next season, and as ever expect to get quite a few barbel. The chub are doing very well too, with plenty of fish, with some approaching six pounds now on the cards. The fishery is secluded and secure, with two car parks close to the river, and plenty of room to explore, as well as several very productive "hotspot" swims. Grateful thanks are due to Pete Marshall, our Fishery Manager at Bransford, and to Martin and Dickie, the "twins", who came and helped with the work. Some nice steps at the Railway Bridge are their handiwork.

Well done gentlemen!



Collapsing and eroding bank, two years earlier



Willow pollard springs to life



Willows doing their work