

Pete Reading River Diary Season 2012/2013

Nice mixed bag to finish

March 2013

Despite another little ice-age trying to wreck the last few days of the season, I was determined to fish on the last day, so took some red maggots out to an Avon swim that I knew held a few chub.

The plan was to sit in the sun and plop a maggot feeder out into the flow, and let the fish do the work. I had chosen a nice sheltered swim where the spring sunshine could warm my bones, out of the continuing fish-bite-the-least, evil east wind.

They were slow to start, probably as uncomfortable as me with the nasty morning frost, but as the day wore on the chub became braver, and I ended up with six fish, all four pounds-plus and with a couple of mid-fives. Usually chub knock and worry the feeder as a prelude to a bite, but they were clearly a bit reticent, and all the bites were solid pulls out of the blue, as the fish presumably worked their way up to it, picking off maggots on the way, rather than moving straight on to the feeder as they normally do.

I moved to a nearby barbelly spot, and had four chubby little barbel as well, all clean young fish between three and five pounds, and a good sign for the future. Barbel will feed well in quite cold weather in the last week or so of the season, and it was nice to finish off with a good catch of fish, and they fought well on the chub gear, although I beefed up to a 14 hook on four pound hooklink for them.

Anglers love to spread gloom and doom, even when their fishing is no worse than it has ever been, or better in some respects. The chub fishing on the Hampshire Avon is probably better than it has ever been, both in terms

of numbers, average size and supporting year-classes, although it does vary between stretches. Some areas are in a real boom, others have smaller average sizes or less fish, but the picture is generally very encouraging for the future.

The numbers of Middle Avon barbel are stable in my view, even increasing on some stretches, with lots of signs of small fish coming through and good recruitment. Dace are showing signs of improvement, but roach are in real scarcity still, and it needs a bit of investigation and support to boost their numbers.



Fat Avon five pounder



Last barbel of the season, healthy young four pounder

Chance of a grayling

February 2013

All the Southern chalk streams have suffered from the freaky wet weather, and have been flooded over the water meadows for weeks. Once the aquifers are full, these rivers retain levels for a long time after any rainfall, and take ages to drop. Grayling fishing on these rivers has been a non-event until very recently, but even now it is very hard work plodding through deep mud and puddles that threaten to top the wellingtons.

It was nice to see a grayling again, and feel that persistent heavy thump as a bigger than average fish hangs stubbornly in the current. The smaller ones often feel big at first, and the twelve ounce jobs are solid and unmoving when contact is made on the strike.

Standing still in one spot is dangerous, as you slowly sink into the soggy squelchy mud, and you can easily overbalance and fall over if you try to move too quickly when dropping downstream to land a fish. The fish made up for the discomfort, however, and three two pound-plus fish and a sprinkling of lesser fish was a satisfactory result.

A day on the Wylfe proved to be good fun, with plenty of small grayling and trout, but Martin had a lovely two pounder, over two and a half I think, and a lot of little fish too.

In the meadows, the dried-out carcass of a cock salmon caused some interest. The teeth on a big salmon, this one was probably a twenty pounder, are quite impressive. They are fierce predators, and will cause severe damage to each other when vying for mates or dominance prior to spawning.

I have seen a double-figure salmon grab another of similar size across the body and give it a good shake, no doubt inflicting severe lacerations, and the scars on some spent salmon are often caused by attacks from their brethren, I am sure.



Two pound seven grayling



Huge teeth on cock salmon



Small grayling are pretty fish



Martin pleased with his pb grayling

Brief warm spell for barbel

January 2013

spell allows for some fishing in those spots where I can fish on reasonably dry ground. Even then, you need to wade out a yard or two to cast in, but I no longer have the enthusiasm to sit or stand in water all day long.

These brief windows of opportunity can be productive in the early stages, and then sport can die off, almost as if the fish switch on suddenly, and feed up very quickly, then remain sated for the rest of the warm spell. I had a big nine within minutes of casting in, then nothing for the rest of the session, but it was good to fish again, and nice to see a fat healthy Avon barbel in good winter condition.

A day or so later, and again a quick response, this time from a couple of smaller fish, one about five, the other possibly seven, but youngish fish that bode well for the future.

The warmer weather had brought the birdlife out too, and I was fortunate to see a hen harrier fly lazily past, striking terror and confusion amongst the gulls that were gathered in the flooded meadows. The lapwings were similarly alarmed, making a lot of noise and scattering in panic as the big grey predator flew over them. One unlucky lapwing was hit by a sparrowhawk a minute later, and struggled gamely in mid-air to escape from the talons of the hawk. It eventually broke free, and shot across the river in front of me and then landed and hid in a bramble bush.

The sparrowhawk flew off unconcerned, pretending nothing had happened, in the same way cats do when prey escape.



Healthy January barbel



Another young Avon barbel



Flooded Avon valley

Big roach of the Ebro

December 2012

possibility if the roach could not be found.

On my last visits we had come across some big shoals of roach, with a good average size, and a few two-plus fish, but evidence of fish of three or even four pounds was clear from the past catches of others. This was a trip in search of roach in numbers and of an ultimate size unheard of in the UK.

The early morning on the first day was clear and cold and a bit frosty, as Spain suffered with the rest of Europe from a nasty unseasonal northerly airstream. The surface of the river was being broken by roach rolling for as far as the eye could see, however, and it was obvious that there were vast shoals of fish out there, with fish of all sizes putting on a show. Fish of a few ounces dimpled everywhere, but amongst them were the splashy rolls and porpoising from very big roach.

These were quite uneducated fish, but the cold had put them off a bit, and sport was initially slow, with a dozen or so fish each on the first day, but the best an impressive Spanish roach of 2lb 15oz.

Fishing at 50 yards in 40 feet of water took some getting used to, and I persisted with pellets for too long, as the others took fish after fish on sweetcorn.

A switch to corn and it was fish after fish for all of us in the following couple of days, with a high average size, and a sprinkling of two pounders, but no sign of the real biggies.

Despite zander, catfish and cormorants preying on these roach, their numbers seemed quite sustainable, and there are clearly millions of them in the river, and all clean, sparkly, fresh-looking fish, with an amazing growth rate. I took some scale samples, and when read back home it was confirmed that the fish in the 1lb 8oz to 1lb 14oz range were six year olds, and fish of 8-12 ounces were three years old. This is twice the growth rate of fish in the UK, but with warmer average temperatures, a faster growth rate is to be expected.

The weather warmed a bit in the last two days, and it was a case of a fish a cast as roach hit the bait on the drop; I was using a quivertip rod and remember my last ten fish were taken without even putting the rod in the rest.

A couple of big fish were lost in the rocks at our feet, and one of my fish was taken by a catfish on the way in; I had to point the rod, clamp the reel and wait for a break as it steamed off with awesome speed and power with my unfortunate roach in its jaws.

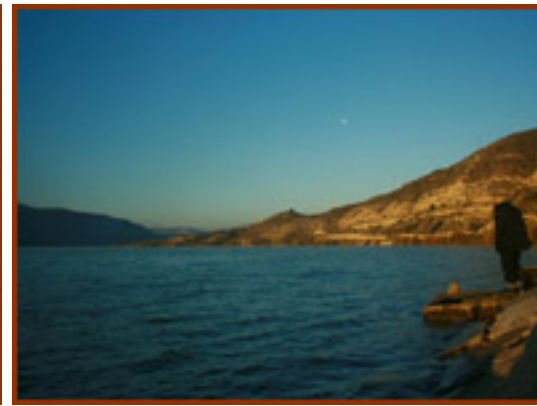
Slime up the line confirmed it was a cat and not a zander that had chomped the fish. Must go back again, and hopefully in more clement weather!



Lovely sparkling Ebro two pounder



Ebro looking downstream, a vast deep river full of roach



Ebro looking upstream, vast and deep and full of carp, zander and catfish.

More barbel research

23rd October 2012

I have been keen to catch barbel in order to provide scales for the stable isotope analysis project that the BS is funding in partnership with Queen Mary University and Bournemouth University, and trips to the Kennet and Lea are producing a few fish for the study. The project will use scales from Kennet, Lea, Hampshire Avon and Teme, in order to compare rivers with a high crayfish population with those where the pesky things are absent or scarce.

The scales we collected last season are of use, but recent scales are going to be most useful, and all add to the data set. The scientists have been collecting samples of weed, invertebrates and crayfish from the stretches in question, and it was interesting to see how many tiny crayfish they collected from the marginal growth. These baby crays must be eaten by all fish, they are especially delectable when soft-shelled I would expect. Their effect on growth rates is not established, nor is that of anglers bait, but this research will be really informative, and may question some myths.

One Lea barbel had some nasty sores where fins joined the body, and despite this seemed very healthy; it certainly fought like stink! Probably a bacterial infection, but a reminder that it is wise to dry your unhooking mat and weigh-sling between trips. Some anglers I know have been in the habit of keeping a weigh-sling permanently damp in a plastic bag, but this is very unwise, and promotes the spread of infection. Dry your weigh-slings as much as you can, along with nets and mats!

A Kennet eleven pounder the next day fought like stink too. I thought it was a pike for a while, as it zoomed about and thrashed on the surface in a most un-barbel like manner. Every fish is an individual, and this solid

specimen looked young and healthy, and was very welcome when it took my sample of a new paste recipe I have been trying.



Collecting samples for barbel diet study



Nasty sores; dry those nets!



Greedy gutty Kennet double



Feisty Lea cray

Another successful Avon fundraiser

15th October 2012

The third annual Avon Fundraiser was a brilliant event, with over five thousand pounds raised to support the work of the Barbel Society and the Avon Roach Project on the Hampshire Avon.

The river was flooded and full of brown water and drifting weed, and made fishing very difficult indeed for the sixty-odd competitors. Martin Salter was the winner, with a seven pound barbel his reward for persevering on his first visit to the lovely Somerley Estate, and the Estate and Christchurch Angling Club are to be thanked for generously providing the venue. This is the stretch where Hugh Miles made the Handling Code film, as well as

some classic scenes from Catching the Impossible.

All the funds are earmarked for habitat works on the river, and to support the work of Trevor and Budgie in raising roach to replenish the ailing stocks on the river. The BS has already spent a thousand or so on removing redundant and damaging iron piles from the river, and we have consent to excavate a fry bay next spring which will benefit fry of all species, not just barbel and roach.

More such sites are being investigated, and the generosity of the donors of auction lots and the bidders at the auction after the meal makes it all possible.

Other wildlife and plants benefit from such wet swampy areas too, so Natural England have been very supportive of our ideas. The local EA fisheries staff have been extremely helpful too.



Bays for fry like this are vital on the Avon



Iron piles removed, and tree pollarded, this bit of river now flows naturally



Site of new fry bay on the Avon

Barbel Day

30th September 2012

The Barbel Day near Huntingdon was a great success, and it was encouraging to see scientists and anglers in equal numbers in a packed room and listening to some fascinating research outcomes. Karen Twine stole the show with her ground-breaking work on Ouse barbel, and described how her twenty tracked barbel moved around the stretch for two years. They were not massacred by otters, and only one was lost track of, maybe just swimming off or simply fitted with a dodgy transmitter. Karen outlined some interesting research on gravel quality and habitat requirements of baby barbel. It was reinforced by a later presentation, which supported the view that very young barbel live in shallow slack water, in weedy cover. Retaining and creating such habitat seems wise.

I presented a summary of the work of the Barbel Society research and conservation section, and this has moved in recent years from simply just habitat work, to research into barbel growth, ages, and diet. More details in the next Newsletter, but a summary of BS RandC projects can be found on the home page.

Talks on gravel cleaning, crayfish predation on fish eggs, and growth rates of barbel in UK rivers made for a most interesting day, and there is a lot to be said for seeking out facts and data and sharing logical thought before forming opinions about the factors that may be affecting our riverine fish populations.

One outcome from the diet research indicates that barbel and chub have very different diets, and so do not compete for natural food as much as we might think, so thriving populations of both are possible in a fishery, as is in fact the case in many rivers.

I met Karen again when I went to visit the Arborfield stream, which the BS helped to fund with 4K of RandC money. We helped to pay for the reinstatement of this sidestream, and the EA were there to monitor fish populations. A resounding success, as young fish of all species, including barbel, were taking up residence in this new habitat. Karen is taking up post as Fisheries Officer for the Loddon catchment, and has a keen interest in the barbel populations to go with her considerable experience.



Baby Loddon barbel in Arborfield stream



EA team electrofishing the stream



Arborfield stream now well established

Pixham Ferry revisited

15th September 2012

Dickie Howell and I went up to Worcester to visit the new Barbel Society fishery at Pixham Ferry, and it was nice to revisit after not having fished it myself for some years. The old swims were still there in essence, although the Society will have to do some work improving the access to the river at low water on the upper part of the fishery.

I remember taking a fair few doubles off Pixham in the past, as well as some good bags of fish in the few occasions when I fished there. Swims like the Green Door, Wasps Nest, Cables and the Lightning Tree are still there, and there is scope to create a load of new swims too.

We opted for a short walk, fishing within fifty yards of the car park, and Dickie was rewarded second cast with a fat twelve pounder, not a bad fish for his first visit, We had five fish between us in a short afternoon, packing up at dusk, and the signs are there for a very popular and productive fishery for the Society.

The swans were as bold as I remember, walking up to you and begging or stealing bait from your bucket, and the boat traffic is a bit different to the peace and quiet of the Hampshire Avon, but the place has a sort of mysterious appeal of its own, and I will make a few more visits before the season is out.

Great fun to hook a big Severn barbel in that deep murky water and wonder just how big it is as it zooms across the river!

The Society takes on the water from 1st October, and permits are limited, so you will need to act quickly to assure a place.



Dickie ensconced at Pixham



Lower swims at Pixham



Dickie with a hefty Pixham twelve



Mere seven pounder from sunny Pixham

Scottish Roach

1st September 2012

I was persuaded to head North of the Border in order to try for some rare and very large Scottish roach, a trip that made a welcome change from barbel fishing and a chance to land a stillwater three-pounder. The lake is a shallow and weedy, peaty brown affair, surrounded by trees and with very limited access at present. Swims were very limited, and although nearly fifty acres in size, the areas clear of dense Canadian pondweed were few. There are some huge roach in residence though, and hopes were high for a good number of fish over two, and probably over three.

It was a generally pleasant experience, with sightings of Red Squirrels and a good range of birdlife, along with an evening visit by a trio of otters, which were noted as occasional passers-by. They were no doubt roaming from their normal coastline habitat, as the lake is only a few miles from the sea. The small fish were a bit of a pain, and plenty enough for the otters, and we had to use small boilies in order to be selective for the bigger roach, which decided to feed for very short spells at dawn and dusk.

We had one fish of exactly three pounds, but several within an ounce of that magic weight, and most of the twos were over two and a half. Slow fishing, but when a monster roach is on the cards, it is worth the wait!



Lake with Scottish castle in background



Big McRoach, close to three



View across the lake, otters out of shot

Avon doubles abound

15th August 2012

Even in the difficult conditions, there are good catches of chub and barbel reported from the Avon, with a good helping of double figure barbel for those that want to approach the river. The high water has certainly spread the fish out, but part of the challenge is in working out where they are!

I had a nice healthy twelve pounder the other day, followed by an even healthier ten pounder the day after. I was eager to catch a double for a guest who had yet to catch a barbel over ten pounds, so hopes were reasonably high. Gerry is a valuable supporter of the Barbel Society, and his Manchester United day is always a favourite on the auction events.

Gerry is always great fun on a day out, and the pouring rain did not dampen our spirits, even after several fishless hours caster fishing in a swim I has assured him was going to guarantee a fish. We caught a couple of ubiquitous chub, and some dace that were starting to be a nuisance, and that did not bode well for a barbel. Barbel in the swim usually keep the small fish at bay, so things were beginning to look grim as the late afternoon drifted by and early evening approached.

The rain had stopped at least, and as we took down the brollies I suggested in an authoritative way that a pellet or boilie fished over casters and hemp would be a good bet; a bait that a lone barbel would take over a bed of particles, that would also avoid the attentions of pesky small fish.

We had one last chance of a fish before Gerry had to leave.

I set up a pellet rig with a PVA bag of crushed pellet, and lowered it into the swim.

The centrepin sang away within ten minutes, and Gerry was soon posing happily with his first double, a solid twelve pounder that saved the bacon for both of us, suitably impressed with my advice!



Healthy Avon twelve



Gerry with his first double, an Avon twelve



Healthy Avon ten

Lovely little rivers

1st August 2012

The Avon is still running high and slightly coloured, with the steady release of aquifer water maintain an almost constant level despite a dry spell. Chalk streams are well -buffered against dry weather, but this is a case of a river acting in the way it generally does after sustained winter rains, rather than normal summer flows. Freaky weather produces freaky flows and weird weedgrowth too; the ranunculus has made a very late start, then made a fast growth spurt as the water cleared, and is now breaking off and drifting downriver in a constant stream that makes it look like widespread weedcutting is occurring.

Time to visit the smaller rivers further up country, and it was delight to see that the upper Loddon was at normal summer level, running fresh and clear. It was possible to spot a couple of barbel, cagey fish that are used to angling pressure, and feed them up and tempt a couple of takes during the day, then off at dusk as the night-nerds arrive. They may be easier to catch at night, but not as much fun at all.

A chunky eight pounder made a mistake first, then the bigger fish in the swim followed suit, but came off almost immediately, just pricked him. It was great to feed them on little bits of pellet, and watch as they became braver and braver, emerging from the weed cover to have a quick nervous nibble in the open area I was fishing.

The Lea is another intimate and slightly wild and natural little river in the upper reaches, and the barbel struggle to reach double figures, but make up for it with their numbers. Clear water makes them tricky though, and unlike my first visit there this season, they were hiding under cover and not willing to come out and feed without some

careful and persistent persuasion, again a constant trickle of hemp and crumbled pellet. The small fish fight brilliantly in these small rivers, great fun and always good to catch from a new stretch.



Chunky Loddon eight pounder



Lovely upper Lea



Nice little Lea barbel

Avon fourteen

26th July 2012

The weather has finally cheered up a bit, getting quite hot, almost too hot.

The water temperature was a shade under twenty degrees, and enough to trigger a cessation of the salmon fishing, and possibly a second spawning by both chub and barbel. The carp in the nearby lakes were certainly having a go, and the excuse of spawning was a good excuse for not catching much in the way of barbel during the heatwave.

The river is still very high and quite coloured, making spotting fish almost impossible. You have to fish with a memory of the weedbeds and bottom features in mind, and I chose a fairly shallow run where I had seen barbel in previous years in the early season, but had to cast to a clear patch in the thick streamer weed that I had hopefully remembered would still be there. This high water in summer is tricky to fish, unlike winter fishing when you know most of the weed has gone.

The lead clonked down firmly on what seemed like a hard bottom, but there was a band of thick weed just visible out from the bank. I trickled in bits of paste and broken boilies, and hoped for a response from one of the big barbel I had seen in the past in this area. A rainbow trout of about three pounds engulfed the boilie within seconds, ripping the rod round violently and fooling me for a second or two into thinking he was a barbel. A chub a couple of ounces under six did the same thing next cast, but by now I knew the bait was landing in a fairly clear spot.

A quiet spell followed, and despondency began to creep in. Fishing the Avon is hard enough, and spotting fish

is essential for hope of consistent success. This rotten summer has made that impossible so far, but fish are coming out if you are lucky enough to drop on them.

I was lucky today, and the third bite resulted in contact with a powerful fish that roared off down the middle of the river, stopped and kicked, and went off again just as powerfully. A carp was a possibility, and only when I saw the first glimpse of the great long golden frame of a substantial barbel did I put carp out of my mind. A twenty pound common is not that uncommon on the river, and they fight as hard as a barbel, though not usually as methodically, dashing about in a more mindless, cavalier manner as a rule.

A lovely chocolatey-brown barbel, with immaculate fins was eventually in the net, and at fourteen three, a most sizeable specimen and extremely welcome. Sizeable, exceptionally long droopy barbels on this fish make it recognizable should we meet up again, and it was given plenty of recovery time in the big deep net before release.



Nearly six pounds, again



Fourteen pounder recovers safely in the big net



Big whiskers on the 14.3

Pastures new and more Avon crayfish evidence

20th July 2012

An investigative trip to the River Lea was an interesting interlude, and the upper river was a pretty sight, with lots of natural features and a good head of young barbel made me very welcome. After a good look round, and just one chub in my first choice of swim, I moved to another cracking- looking swim and had four barbel in four casts. Not big fish, but great fighters in a small river and terrific fun.

A couple more fish, including the biggest at about six pounds and the smallest at barely a pound followed before a threatening storm made me pack up early.

There were signs of a significant signal crayfish population too; a couple of big ones were crawling about in the

shallows under my feet as I fished. They can be a real pain on small rivers, but generally only when there are no barbel in your swim! No crayfish trouble means that barbel are not far away. There is no doubt they eat them, although not clear if they affect either growth rates or spawning success of barbel. There are those who spout these assertions as facts rather than just possibilities, and it is not wise to do so without hard evidence.

There is evidence of signal crayfish in the Hampshire Avon, and the latest was in some otter spraint I found on the middle river the next day. The poo of otters is quite distinctive, and smells strongly of violets. The flowery odour is unmistakable, as well as the mixture of small bones and scales that indicate the content of the otters last meal. This one had clearly munched the whole of a large red signal cray, and had passed large chunks of shell and an assortment of knee joints; bet it made his eyes water. I very much welcome control of that horrible invader by the otter.

Lea barbel seem to be thriving in conjunction with a heavy crayfish presence however, as Kennet fish have for many years, and a visit to the Kennet this season had no crayfish trouble, and not much trouble from barbel either. One fish first cast, a healthy nine pounder, and not a bite or nibble from either species for the rest of the day.



Lovely little Lea barbel



Colourful Kennet fish



Colourful otter spraint, crayfish muncher!

Old Warrior of the Avon

18th July 2012

The weather is so depressing and dreary that I have hardly fished at all, not keen to fish in cold rain or wade through water and sit perched in a puddle to sit by a brown, boily and uninspiring river.

I dragged myself out on a fairly dry day to wet a line, and was rewarded with a hefty twelve pound ten ounce barbel that made the trudge over the soggy meadows worthwhile.

An obviously old fish, with gnarled and slightly ragged fins, patchy scales, and a distinct two-tone appearance, with a light front end and a darker tail section. An excellent fight though, after one of those long slow confident bites that woke me from a doze and signalled a bigger than average fish. A spanking young six pounder, one of the new generation, made an appearance on the next cast. Fish do get old, lose condition, and eventually die, and the younger year classes will inevitably arrive to replace them if the river is in a reasonably healthy state.

The latest invader to pollute the river is the azolla water fern, and it is apparent everywhere on the Avon on the slacks and backwaters. It is more of a problem in ponds and lakes, however, and it is not clear if it will cause any major problems on the river other than being a bit unsightly. The water drops from a recent shower sparkled and shone like diamonds on the surface of the mat of fern, and made it a bit less unpleasant in appearance I suppose.

A welcome river tourist was a big eel that gave me a vicious bite and had me thinking it was another barbel for a few minutes, as it burrowed into the weed. It must have been nearly three pounds in weight, and I was able to unhook and return it without too much fuss. The bigger ones are quite well-behaved as a rule, and it allowed me a quick photo before it slithered off through the wet grass and back into the river.



Big greedy eel



Azolla sparkling with water drops



Two tone twelve pounder

First double and a rising river

4th July 2012

The first Avon double was a fat sparkling eleven pounder, that took a big lump of paste fished winter-style in a rising and coloured river. Big lead and backlead, rod tip submerged, and a patient wait for the reel to scream. A lovely fish, arriving just after a big dog otter had porpoised elegantly under the opposite bank, then carried on upstream, leaving that tell-tale line of bubbles to mark his path.

I saw a bitch and two cubs work their way through my swim one afternoon last winter, and caught six chub after

they had passed, so it does not seem that they spook fish unduly when passing through. Might be different when they are hunting, but all the evidence from spraint is that they eat small fish mostly, along with a range of food items that does not normally include double-figure barbel.

The prophets of doom do not seem to be correct in the view that otters are going to munch their way through the Avon barbel and chub stocks, and catches indicate a boom in chub of all sizes and healthy barbel numbers capable of self-sustaining a good population.

A couple of smaller barbel the next afternoon, one a lean, clean fish of about six pounds, and another solid nine pounder, were quite welcome in the circumstances, along with a couple of ubiquitous chub, young fresh fish, and the best just over six pounds.

It is like winter fishing still, wading out to a swim and perching miserably in a grey rainstorm waiting for a fish to take. The summer had better arrive soon.



Well-whiskered nine pounder



Nice fat eleven pounder



Another six pound chub

First barbel and chunky chub

25th June 2012

The first Avon barbel was a stocky nine pounder, looking very fit and young, and an obvious female. To get a barbel on the fourth trip is about average, but there are odd fish coming out all over, with at least four thirteen pounders from the middle Avon I have heard of, and the Royalty is fishing quite well for barbel I hear.

The sexing of barbel is not easy, but the females have a very fleshy vent, and the males a much smaller, neater orifice in that area. Barbel eggs are the biggest of any coarse fish, so the ladies need a sizeable oviduct!

It is still hard to spot the weedbeds and clear areas need to be found by plonking about with a lead or

baitdropper. The dropper will not open on a weedy bottom, and that is another clue to a clear area.

Hemp was used as an attractor, but the fish took a nice big paste-wrapped boilie, and woke me from a doze as it ripped line off the centrepin on the bite. Great stuff.

The chub are still in good condition, and may spawn late this year; they are still quite patchy in numbers, and may be gathering on the shallows.

A six pounder that took next cast was in almost perfect condition, scale and fins all in a pristine state, which again indicates not having spawned yet.

As I write, the river is dropping and clearing, and the weedbeds are starting to show. Farmers and some anglers moan constantly about the weed, and want it cut, but I think it is best left alone, so it can form natural, self-draining channels and continue to provide shelter for inverts, fry and big fish alike.

Where weed has been heavily cut, it tends to come back even more vigorously, and generate a vicious circle, with weedcutting begetting more weedcutting as thicker growth returns. Weed cutting in low flows, in order to make fishing easier, is a fairly brainless exercise, and low flow is not a result of heavy weedgrowth; the reverse is true. Cutting weed will only lower levels and ultimately reduce local flow even more.

A few holes cut in weed manually do no harm though, and I carry a rake to do such work myself, but wholesale removal is counter-productive.



Chunky Avon chub



Weedy Avon



9lb barbel

Slow start to season

20th June 2012

it in winter, with high coloured water, no obvious swims established, and weedgrowth very patchy and submerged.

The start is always slow for barbel, which is no doubt due to them being on the move after spawning and not yet settled in, and possibly not yet used to angler bait. It is often July before I get an Avon barbel, and this year it looks like being no exception.

Opening day was a ritual more than anything, a chance to break the water and with only the hope of an inaugural chub. The chub and a couple of hefty Avon bream did inaugurate the season in the first couple of days, and they were in good condition. The bream are fighters, and quite hard to get to the net. Once they get above six or seven pounds they have a good amount of stamina and surface area to help in the fast flow.

The river is dropping fast, but recent rains may hold it up a bit more, so I do not expect much in the way of barbel for a while. Still having to wear wellies and sit in water to fish in some swims, and the wet windy cold weather dampens my enthusiasm to fish at all.

The terns and egrets are having a lovely time thinning out the minnow population, and these little fish are extremely numerous in both Avon and Stour. I have watched minnows hanging about in huge shoals just downstream of spawning roach and barbel, and they are quite ferocious and aggressive feeders. Makes you wonder how many eggs and newly-hatched larvae these little fish eat, not to mention the loach, bullheads, perch and eels, but then again chub eat barbel spawn, and vice versa, and this is the reason why fish produce so many eggs; most are eaten within minutes, sometimes by the parents.



Avon minnows grow big



Avon chub like all and any boilies



Fat Avon bream

Salmonid matters

April 2012

must be said the chances of actually catching one are still remarkably slim.

The Avon rod catches are bumping steadily along the bottom in terms of numbers, and it is arguable whether the species can exist as a sustainable population in the long term. They keep spawning and coming back in sufficient numbers to maintain a viable fishery for the time being, however, and local activists have recently come together to buy out the net fishermen in the harbour.

Congratulations to all those involved, and hopefully a move welcomed by the salmon and sea-trout as well. There have been several salmon taken on the fly so far this season, with a 22-pounder just below Ringwood the latest encouraging capture. Despite the low flows, fish are clearly creeping their way upstream. Salmonids will possibly suffer poor recruitment with low flows, but it is hard to predict what will happen. Better fry survival may more than compensate for less well-scoured gravels and late runs of fish. The whole lifecycle of salmon is enormously complex and difficult to make predictions about, so as much research as possible is needed.

The EA are doing a bit of interesting work on smolt migrations, which could be affected by low flows, which involves capturing samples and tracking them with small acoustic tags. The rate at which the smolts move, and where they gather together should be useful information.

The smolts tend to migrate downstream, usually just under the surface at night, and a clever device that can be placed across the smaller tributaries has a good capture rate. I was also interested to see the tags in action, and we discussed the extent to which they could be used with barbel. The tags are inserted into the body cavity, and remain active for three months, and would be ideal for tracking barbel movements prior to and after spawning.

Detectors at regular intervals along a stretch can identify individual fish, and could record their movements very accurately.



Smolt trap in action



Small smolt, too small to tag