

13lb 9oz from the
Lower Severn

**"Big exceptional
barbel are caught
every year from the
lower Severn"**



Winter Barbel Fishing

An introduction

Let's face it, winter barbel fishing is never the most enjoyable pass time and winter barbel fishing on a spate river like the lower Severn can sap the most determined of barbel fishers.



However, we also know that as barbel anglers the period between October and the middle of March can be the most productive of times and can produce the biggest of barbel.

This is because they are potentially at their heaviest due to those big females starting to bulk up in preparation for spawning, so there is a very real reward for the more enthusiastic determined barbel angler and his

efforts. A thirteen pounder in the summer can become a fifteen pounder in February. Winter barbel fishing on the lower river rarely rewards an affable easy going casual approach; a cast out and hope for the best attitude will generally be rewarded with failure, unless you are very lucky, however a determined, purposeful, planned mind set can offer you the greatest of rewards.

I have often said in response, when questioned on winter barbel fishing on the lower Severn; "don't

bother as only fools and horses would be on the banks of the lower Severn when it is at its harshest". Fish for chub, big roach, go fish for pike, go and find a nice warm running, grassy banked small river, then if you blank, you won't drive home wet, cold and muddled up, uttering the usual mantra of "never gain or what the hell am I doing here".....been there done that one and I have various T shirts to choose from!

There are some of us however that do this year after year, like me, and vow never to do it again, but come back for more, with the hope and knowledge that the next trip could be the trip that will wipe away all the failures and frustration of previous trips and sessions;

the trip that will see a monster grace our net that will be forever remembered and never forgotten.

The obvious attraction is that the lower Severn can produce exceptional barbel; a potential monster. Big exceptional barbel are caught every year from the lower Severn with plenty of back up fish of over ten pounds to keep the juices running and the flame of hope burning bright within us.

I can fully understand the dilemma of someone turning up on the banks of Kempsey or Severn Stoke in November with seven feet of rushing water on, coloured and raging. The lower Severn at this time can appear to be a very angry, unpleasant river, where nothing lives, never mind a big barbel, but ironically the harder the conditions appear to be, the easier the barbel can be to locate and capture; it is all about adopting an analytical process, of being risk aware



Another Lower Severn barbel, this one at 13lb 2oz

and risk adverse, with the risk being failure.

Something I have learnt in fishing for Lower Severn barbel over the last 35 years is that a rising river after heavy rain in Wales is never the best time to go. It can rain all day and for a week in Worcester and it won't make a lot of difference to the lower river, other than that the banks maybe muddy and very dangerous. However, three days of heavy rain in Wales can send the river into a rising mode, so with the extra dirty and cold water also pouring in from the Teme and from the upper river, the barbel can appear to be very much switched off. It may be full of flotsam and jetsam (leaves, twigs, branches plastic bags etc.) causing presentation issues and a rapidly rising river causes barbel to continually move from their station. This means that what was a good

barbel swim at 10.00am in the morning, could be devoid of barbel at 3.00pm in the afternoon. This is because the way the flow changes as the hours drift by; a smooth glide can become a boiling cauldron of muck and debris in a short length of time, so it pays to be flexible and be prepared to move if the need is so.

Barbel on the lower Severn, like lots of other rivers, have holding areas, where the barbel can hold up for long periods. These maybe underwater features of deep water, sunken trees, snags, depressions, shelves, extended willow roots, plateaus and over hanging trees. These may not be feeding areas; these are areas where barbel feel safe, from predators, noise and angling pressure and that's the first plus point that we must acknowledge of the heavy water coming down and

raising the river fast. Those once safe holding areas can now become very unpleasant for the barbel to live in as

the whole river changes by the hour, so barbel start to move to find new and more comfortable areas to reside



The double boilie wrap

**“Steve is a
lower Severn
barbel man of
many years”**



**Steve Pope with his
13lb 3oz barbel**

and feed, yes feed. The moment a barbel starts to move and use energy they start to feed. During that initial period of the river rise, they move about with considerable pace and can move from swim to swim, as the swims and areas change.

One example comes to mind on a stretch below Worcester, where one particular swim in the summer and autumn rarely produces any barbel of any size; it appears to be a typically featured swim with a large plateau of even depth with over hanging willows to the left and right and faces the opposite bank that is in complete contrast: the opposite bank has a pacey flow and its resident extra-large barbel often display themselves by tail walking and crashing around. We often see barbel clear the water like missiles and hold for a second in time, as we admire their size and bulk, it is clearly is a superb holding area for the summer months, but unfishable from our bank and the opposite bank for various reasons. But with eight feet on that holding area becomes a raging torrent, whilst the swim on our bank becomes what I consider to be a perfect winter swim. The plateau offers confidence in the presentation of our bait, it creates a smooth flowing area with a crease dividing it from the main flow. Twenty yards down the swim the plateau drops off by over two feet because of a formed ledge that is perpendicular to the bank, where the normal ledges on the lower Severn run parallel to the bank; a most unusual feature for this part of the river. The big barbel from the opposite bank soon drift across to this area and hold up in the calmer flow and the longer the river stays up the more barbel pile in to take sanctuary here.

The importance of understanding on how the



changing river in winter causes barbel to move, even to the other side of the river if it benefits them, is even more poignant when you realise that this relatively small area during the 2015 and 2016 season produced seven barbel over thirteen pounds (all different fish) plus numerous twelves, elevens and tens during the winter period.

I remember Steve Pope coming down for the first time last year. I had told Steve how perfect the conditions were; it was bank high with a water temperature of 9.5c and slowly climbing. I also told him the history of the swim I was in. Now Steve is a lower Severn barbel man of many years and his record of big barbel on this part of the river is very impressive, so he is not easily impressed, but within a very short period of time my boilie wrap was soon taken by a large barbel of 13lb 5oz. Steve was clearly impressed and very happy for me, but Steve being first and foremost the barbel man that he is, soon had me explaining the features of the swim to him and I made an undertaking to him that the next trip he could fish the "Flood swim" as we called it.

Within a couple of days we were back on the stretch and contemplating where

to fish. I kept to my word and got Steve quickly into the plateaued flood swim; advising him where to cast, how far out, size of lead, length of hook link etc. Within a few hours of torrential wind driven rain, Steve's rod whipped round to the sound of his bite alarm and the buzz of his baitrunner. After a dogged fight in the powerful flow and bank high river, I soon slipped the net under a very large barbel and Steve was justifiably rewarded with a barbel that weighed in at an impressive 13lb 3oz. "Another thirteen" I shouted as the digital scales rested, the dream continued and was shared.

Remember, as long as the river is within its banks and you can place a bait in the main flow, barbel will come very close in. Steve caught his barbel virtually under the rod top, but it is important to recognise that barbel rarely leave the original river course and when the river is up to the top of the bank and you know the swim, you can catch under the rod top, especially when darkness starts to envelope the landscape. It can be a very productive type of barbel fishing and very safe and comfortable as you sit on the top of the bank. It also enhances your presentation in positioning the bait and

free offerings.

My advice always is to look at the whole area where you intend to fish. Understanding the river in normal summer low water conditions will help you in understanding the river in the winter, but if in doubt and you don't have this knowledge, it is best to wait for the river to settle and steady itself.

So when the river is rising fast and has the potential to reach the top of the banks, pick your time if you can and wait for the river to peak. However a gentler, less dramatic, smaller rise with a tinge of colour caused by a more moderate rain fall can really stimulate the barbel to feed, especially if this is combined with a water temperature that is rising and above 8c. Couple this with a low barometer reading, is about as good as it gets, so get out there and catch.

Winter barbel fishing, especially on the lower Severn is very much influenced by the water temperature and how it performs, anyone wishing to achieve success with the lower Severn's big barbel during the winter must acknowledge this and understand the cause and effects of falling, rising and steady water temperatures.

I am going to be fairly

brief on discussing water temperatures, not because it's a subject that I treat flippantly, it is because you can summarise the subject pretty well. My findings and records show that with a water temp of between fifteen and ten degrees centigrade, even if its falling, barbel will feed and they will feed quite hard and confidently. However between seven and ten degrees, things aren't so clear cut and a water temperature of nine and a half and falling down to seven and a half and below can almost shock the barbel into what appears to be a comatose state that causes an initial cessation of feeding, though after a period of acclimatisation to the lower temperature, barbel will start moving and feeding again, but maybe more selectively and for shorter periods.

The other thing that winter water temperatures indicate to me is what bait

to use during the different conditions and how things are influenced by water temperature changes. Here we have two issues: water character; is the river up? Is the river falling? Is it steady? Is the river rising and the temperature falling at the same time? What I look for is consistency of one prevailing condition to another. Up and down river levels and water temperatures are not conducive to feeding barbel, so to summarise:

A river that has reached the top of the bank, but is now falling or steady, with a water temperature of ten centigrade is about as good as it gets for a November afternoon session.

People often generalise as far as baits are concerned during the winter and often choose a large meat bait as a matter of preference. I am a great advocate for large pieces of luncheon meat as bait for offering the angler a selective approach in catching big barbel. My

advocacy for large meat baits is well documented, but as a winter bait in water temperatures below ten centigrade, my advice is to make another choice. The first choice to consider is the reduction of the bait size, whilst in the summer (Eels permitting) I would happily use a quarter of a 340g tin of spam on a size two hook. Things change dramatically when water temperatures of below ten centigrade are suddenly forced upon us. I would definitely reduce my bait size to a size where the barbel could suck the bait in with little effort, without having to consider the negotiation process of taking a very large bait. This could mean taking a chunk from the side of the large piece of meat or crushing the meat between its lips, or maybe sucking the meat in one go. This will not happen at water temperatures below

ten centigrade as the meat hardens in the colder water.

Without a doubt, the introduction of boilies to barbel fishing over the years, either homemade or shop bought has taken winter big barbel fishing to another level on all rivers. The versatility and choice of boilies and the eclectic presentation variations they offer the barbel fisherman makes them the perfect choice for fishing the lower Severn in winter.

My general approach from October onwards was a boilie in the size range of 10mm, 15mm or 20mm. I generally offered a free offering bag that included 10mm boilies, matching 5mm pellets and two or three of split 15mm boilie segments, with a double 15mm or a single 20mm sample as hook bait. You can also dropper these in, especially if the river is bank

Richard Frampton
14lb 4oz



“Richard Frampton proved this last year with his magnificent lower Severn barbel of 14lbs 4oz”

high and you can lower the dropper in under the rod top. When I dropper freebies in I like to create a density mix of tasters and titbits, this means some samples stay put, other samples move slowly below the area and others drift many yards downstream. I have a belief that it only takes the smallest of morsels to be sucked in by a held up barbel to change that barbel into a feeding barbel that will follow the bait trail to your hook bait, but I am always careful in not overdoing the free offerings. My free offerings, are softened pellets, softened boilies, small pieces of meat and a damp stick mix, I call this my "Bombay mix".

I always soaked my hook bait boilies in the appropriate matching hook bait dip. I do this over a period of days prior to a fishing trip as this keeps the boilies moist and softens them slightly and makes them very attractive to the barbel, especially when combined with a paste wrap, which I mostly do, during the winter.

The attraction of the heavily flavoured boilies hidden beneath the paste is very effective. The very nature of the makeup of the hook bait had an effect of inducing the take from the barbel I reckon once they started to investigate the area. My thinking was that if a barbel approached the paste wrapped single or double boilie and mouthed the bait or if any accompanying small fish took pieces off the paste, they would expose the heavily soaked boilie(s) beneath it and this would quickly give an explosion and flavour blast trail that the barbel zoned in on with a level of intensity. The initial experiments with this method quickly showed us the superiority of the method as it soon out fished the unsoaked boilie approach.

I present the bait on

a fairly longish hair, with the boilies being about three quarters of an inch or so from the hook bend, this then allows for a good sized ball of paste to be moulded around the single soaked 20mm boilie or a single/double 15mm boilie, something like a golf ball size ball of paste.

One tip that I have great faith in is this: if you use a gripper pear shaped lead, they usually come with a hole in the centre, I suggest you press a small amount of the paste you are using for the wrap into here, this adds to the whole attraction of the presentation, well it makes me feel better anyway. I often use a completely different flavoured paste when doing this however, it's a quirky thing to do I know, but I do like to mix things up a little.

I generally always put half a dozen 10mm or 15mm boilies (broken and whole) in a small mesh bag. This puts freebies into the immediate area of the bait and concentrates the draw attraction to the smaller area of the hook bait, but I am always conscious of not over feeding.

But don't abandon luncheon meat; if the water temperature is right and above ten centigrade, there is no better bait in coloured bank high water and a quarter of a tin will turn up sometimes the biggest fish of all has history shows. Richard Frampton proved this last year with his magnificent lower Severn barbel of 14lbs 4oz.

When the river is at the top of the bank you will be probably fishing in 20ft of water, that could appear to be slackish, moving or running through at a fast pace. Look for the absence of boils and water coming back on its self, barbel like to face the current. Avoid reverse flows like the plague; look for an even flow that runs slower than the main centre



My Bombay mix in the dropper

of river flow and that has a distinguishable and desirable crease between the flows. You will have three flow lines, as the river increases its flow from the bank to the centre of the river.

I know there are some that advocate fishing right into the main flow in the centre of the river using weights of six ounces or more to hold bottom, or even the use of up tide wire grip leads, each to their own I suppose and I will not condemn anyone, but from a personal point or view I have little interest in this approach and if I have to use more than 4 ounces of ledger weight, frankly I don't bother because my approach is and has always been so is to enhance my presentation as natural as the conditions or approach allows and anything that frustrates this I tend to shy away from.

Your summer barbel fishing will give you plenty of opportunity for some worthwhile investigative and reconnaissance work; checking potential bankside snags, rocks etc. Take photos during low water, give names to the swims so that when you share the information with your friends you all know where you are talking about. It's a small thing but its things like that that give you the edge.

The lower Severn is a very harsh, aggressive place to fish in the winter and your

tackle needs to be up to mark in dealing with everything as casting heavy leads, heavy baits and bags of bait out, to playing very large barbel in the strongest and most forceful of flows. As much as I love using my old aerals when I can, the winter limits their ability, so during heavy winter water I do make way for my Shimano 5000 aero bait runners. These ensure I can set the drag to combat the flow and give a good level of hookability to a taking barbel and it can help in combating whatever the flow is bringing down with it and dragging line from the reel. I combine these with a minimum monofilament 12 pound line and 2lb test curve rods.

The whole environment of a bank high lower Severn is a harsh place in the winter and it can sap your attention levels. It can bring on unexpected barbel naps as longish periods of inactivity can be experienced, so I do use bite alarms especially in darkness. This diminishes the stress in watching the rod top or listening out for the buzz of a baitrunner as this can be very difficult with a wooly hat on over your ears and a hood up with a North wind howling through the trees, so the beebabeebeeeeeeeep of one of my mini microns is just as welcome a sound as the scream of my centre pins I can assure you on a cold

dark, dank and wet February afternoon!

One photo that probably inspired me as much as any other was the famous picture of Ray Walton's eight pounder in the snow from the Hampshire Avon. Now apart from the fact that pictures of barbel in the snow are pretty rare, I thought more about it and started to analyse the circumstances of its capture, I suddenly thought about Ray's favourite type of barbel fishing.

As we all know Ray likes to not only rock and roll, he also likes to rove and roll; he likes a moving rolling bait. He has developed the whole process into an art form with specific rods and reels being designed for that task and he has proven that rolling meat around and taking the bait to the barbel is a very successful type of an approach, any time of the year.

Without doubt, the hardest thing to achieve during the winter is to get barbel to move to you, especially if no barbel are in your swim. I believe that barbel feed throughout the winter, even at the lowest temperatures, what they don't do is move about as much in low water

temperatures. Barbel during the winter on the lower Severn can not only become forced to move because of a rising river, they can, once the river has steadied, become very opportunistic in their feeding and sit tight in their comfortable holding areas. They can be in very tight groups, sardines in a tin type thing. I have had a lot of success in the winter on the lower Severn with the roving rolling meat approach, not only does it put fish on the bank, it also shows you where the holding areas are whether the river is high or low. It's almost like spinning for pike; where each swim or glide can be thoroughly search out with a moving bait.

My approach to this is to use enough lead to just hold bottom. Plasticine just hasn't got the density or weight for these conditions so enough lead is required (2 to 3.5oz) so the rod can be raised just enough to inch the bait downstream. A piece of luncheon meat cut to a size that the barbel can suck in whilst the bait is on the move, something between an OXO cube and a small matchbox sized piece is best for this. I don't use hair rigs with this approach as that brings its own obvious

problems. I tend use the hook through the meat and turn approach. I also use shorter hook lengths of braid or fluorocarbon, about twelve to eighteen inches is adequate for this approach as it reduces tangles. Baits can be cast upstream, across and close in, and is not much different to this same approach you would use in the summer.

This method excels when the river is to the top of the bank. It gives you so much scope, every inch of a crease between moving and slack water can be explored as every swim can require a different approach and thought process before each cast. Often you can get takes where during the previous summer you were previously sitting.

I always make a mental or detailed note of where these barbel turn up from as this could be a good area to concentrate a static bait approach when the river recedes and runs off. It also gives me an opportunity to question myself why barbel find that particular area so favourable.

So winter barbel fishing on the lower Severn isn't just about sitting tight with a couple of rods out, trying to entice the barbel to move

to you by enticing them to feed, it's about taking your bait them. This approach can often turn up really big fish because they are used to sitting tight and sucking in anything that comes towards them. Cold water doesn't necessarily mean barbel don't feed, it means that don't move about as much, so go to them.

Like all types of fishing where you hunt the biggest of your target species, time is your greatest resource, you need to be able to respond to the change in conditions of the lower Severn fairly quickly. Short sessions can be very productive; I have always advocated that three hours at the right time is far better than eight hours at the wrong time, but it is all based on your personal circumstances and geographical location to the part of the river you intend to fish.

But when the river is to the top of the bank, be careful and be very, very afraid as it can be very inhospitable and dangerous. Don't take any risks. If you do go down the bank take a dog spike and a length of rope; this ensures you will be able to get back up to the top. This is a monster of a river that can take you in and spit you out at will, be safe.

A few years back I had the pleasure of witnessing Howard Maddocks's Severn record barbel and I wondered if I would ever see another lower Severn 16 pounder or bigger, ever again, I am in no doubt they are there, as Kevin Gittins proved a year or two ago with his magnificent fish, but in the meantime I will continue to enjoy the tens, elevens, twelves and thirteen pounders that are there for us all to catch and there are plenty of them too. These will keep my eyes bright, my smiles wide and hopes high as we all await that next Severn monster.

Ray Walton's eight-pounder in the snow from the Hampshire Avon.



Gregg Dobson's 13lb 1oz