

A Guide To AUTUMN BARBEL

Alan Stagg reveals why he thinks the autumn is best for barbel and advises that a short session "hit and run" approach is often the one to go for.

For me September and October signal the start of my autumn barbel fishing. Over the last three years I have considered this to be prime time on my fishing calendar to target this species. These are excellent months for big fish anglers on our rivers. The close season and the months leading up to this time are vital in my big fish river preparation for the coming season. This work is invaluable as I base most of my autumn and winter months around my findings during this time.

Why is my fishing based around these two vital months, through to the end of the season? As an angler who likes to target many specimen fish of different species, my time is usually spent in pursuit of tench, bream and Crucian carp during the early part of the season. At this time thoughts of barbel are at the very back of my mind. Why? Well, the answer is simple. It lets the big fish that I often target recover from spawning. The big fish I target can, and often do, vacate their autumn/winter haunts, sometimes swimming miles and often not returning until well after the ordeal of spawning has finished. Other fishes' patterns are dictated by river conditions and big individual fish often move into certain stretches or areas of the river when water levels are high in readiness for the autumn and winter months.

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around when rivers are in tiptop condition can only help maximise your chances, especially when time is tight.

September sees the evenings start to draw in and at this time of the year it gets dark around 7:30pm. This fits perfectly around the short session fishing that I like to base my autumn approach around. Short sessions allow you to turn up before the light fades giving time to prime a couple of areas with a small amount of bait. This is where the vital preparation work, if carried out in the summer months, can be advantageous as I will already know where to place a bait that will give the best chance. Ideally I look to bait a handful of likely areas and fish them in rotation throughout the evening.

I usually plan to start in my first swim at dusk and will often not present a bait until the light is fading fast. I usually give each swim 45 minutes to an hour and during this time I look for any indications of fish activity. This may be in the form of line bites, fish rolling or even a bite. If the fish are acting in a wary way and are hesitant to pick up the hook-bait I often introduce a little more bait and revisit the swim later on in the evening. Resting a swim and allowing the fish to gain confidence is usually rewarded. This tactic will often bring an immediate response. If indications are not forthcoming then I will move to the next swim. When fishing short sessions I want to make the most of my time and maximise any opportunities.

Right Time, Right Place

I aim my sessions to be around four hours long, basing them around the prime times I expect to get a bite, the hours either side of darkness. I believe in the saying that it is not how long you go fishing for but how often you go, a rule that has proven correct many times in the past. On countless occasions I have passed anglers on my arrival complaining that little has happened all day as they have sat in bright sunny conditions. As soon as the light fades the river will often come alive, a time when action can be expected. However, on some rivers dusk is not always the key time to expect a bite. On a stretch of the River Kennet I fished back in the mid '90s the best time I could expect some action was between 2.00pm and 4.00pm, showing there are exceptions to this rule. Early morning sessions can also be productive. It is a common time when targeting tench and bream and other specimen fish, but how many anglers make the effort to fish at dawn when targeting barbel?

Warm Autumn Rain

September is, historically, a month which is synonymous with rain. I often time my sessions when river conditions are at their best and in the autumn mild wet conditions are ideal. Keeping an eye on the weather is important and websites such as Metcheck (www.metcheck.com) are brilliant at giving up-to-date and reliable information. Basing sessions

An 11lb 8oz short session barbel caught in fading light.



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The Key To Success

This short session fishing has become known as 'hit and run' style of approach and is often well-suited for after-work sessions or when there are a few hours available to put a fish on the bank. There is one golden rule if you are to succeed using this approach and that is preparation. A few hours walking the river can be rewarding and a lot can be learnt by anglers who are willing to put in the effort. It allows the riverbed to be searched to find areas where fish are likely to be hiding and to pinpoint presentable spots nearby where fish are likely to feed. Weed and reeds are likely to be in abundance on many stretches at this time of year as they have had the whole of summer to flourish. Take time to find the small spots when not fishing and reap the rewards during the prime big fish months.

Above: Visually spotting fish can give you the confidence to fish swims when the water is more coloured and ideal for fishing.

Tackle And The Approach

Your tackle and bait should be ready to pick up and go at the drop of a hat. You never really know when an unexpected opportunity may arise and you can grab a couple of hours fishing. I keep my tackle to a minimum (the bare essentials). Forget about taking the 'might need' items of tackle. If you have walked the stretch of river you intend to fish you should have a good idea of how it should be approached. A small bag of essentials, rod, net, seat etc, will allow you to stay mobile and search out the fish and build up a picture of the stretch quickly.

Below Right: Alan uses a carp rod to baitdropper feed into his chosen swims.

I usually carry two rods, one for fishing, which is a Fox Duo Lite Xtra barbel rod. The other is a heavy carp rod that is ideal for using as a baitdropper rod allowing bait to be accurately deposited into swims. I tend to choose to fish with just

one rod as I don't like the disturbance of casting two rigs into the swim as this often puts fish on edge or causes them to vacate the swim. Remember, there is only a small window of opportunity for a bite. Also, I don't like the idea of two lines running through the swim. I have fished this way on some of the big fish stretches in the hope that two rods over the course of an autumn/winter would result in an increased number of bites. I experimented a little on several occasions last autumn and the fish acted very edgy, however when I removed one rod a bite was often forthcoming.

In all my barbel fishing I like to keep my rigs as simple as possible, and none more so than in the autumn. More often than not the low, clear water situations of summer barbel fishing will be behind us, however weed will still be abundant and will test tackle to its limit. I am a great

believer in using the most reliable tackle I can. After the hours of preparation work that I often put into some of the fish I catch, the last thing I want is to be let down by an inferior item of tackle. My reel lines are based on my ever reliable GR60 in 10lb or 12lb breaking strain. I often use a short length of Plummet lead core and a flying back lead above this as it helps keep the main line pinned to the bottom as well as offering extra abrasion resistance against any snaggy situations. The last twelve months has seen me field-testing the new coated hook-links from Gardner Tackle, in particular Sly Skin and Chod Skin in 10lb breaking strains. These have proved very effective and I can honestly say that I have yet to use another hook-link since I started using them, such is my confidence in the product. Hooks are my ever faithful Talon Tip patterns, which can deal with anything I am likely to hook in the rivers I am fishing.

Great Bait Believer

I am a real believer in using the best quality bait when targeting big fish. A good quality bait will outperform one of a poorer quality time and time again. Boilies or barrel shape boilies are my favourite autumn barbel bait. They have everything a good barbel bait needs, they are small fish resistant, strong smelling so fish can find them in high water conditions, results are instant, they are easily prepared and have a

good track record on the rivers I fish of catching the big fish. Whilst walking the banks this summer I have been feeding fish at very close quarters with SonuBaits Crab and Crayfish boilies from their Action range, as well as a new prototype boily they have been working on. The feeding reaction has been encouraging to say the least and these two baits will play a major part in my autumn and winter barbel fishing this season.

I am not a big fan of using pellets as hook-baits. No-one can deny their effectiveness, however it seems such a common approach nowadays. However, I do favour them in small 4mm and 6mm sizes when mixed with hemp as my loose feed for priming swims. This simple combination is a proven winner and, apart from maggots at certain times of the years, is a firm favourite.

Effectiveness

This 'hit and run' style of approach to autumn barbel fishing can be devastatingly effective considering it can sometimes only take less than a few hours to put a big fish on the bank. Many anglers bemoan the fact that they don't have enough time to spend on the bank fishing, but then don't consider popping to the river when they have a couple of spare hours. Many of my big fish captures have come using this style of approach. To demonstrate the effectiveness of this style of fishing, last autumn I had

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been concentrating on a low stock big fish stretch of my local River Loddon. Arriving late one evening I went about preparing what had become two of my favourite swims ready for an evening assault. At dusk I settled into my first choice swim and lowered a rig into my pre-prepared run. The next 90 minutes produced six bites resulting in chub weighing 5lb 10oz and 6lb 5oz and barbel of 9lb 6oz, 10lb 3oz and 11lb 8oz, as well as one lost fish where the hook pulled soon after a thumping bite. I don't need to say that I didn't get round to fishing my second area that evening which just goes to show the effectiveness of this style of fishing! So, if you want to get the best from your autumn barbel fishing keep an eye on the weather, make sure you know where you are going to fish and don't think that a lack of time means a lack of results. After all you'll catch nothing sat at home. **CF**



Alan's Top 5 ... Autumn Barbel Tips



1 Wait until the light is fading. In the autumn it's best to get on the river just after tea until it gets dark.



2 Travel light. It pays to move swims on short sessions if you aren't catching.



3 On small and medium rivers, use one rod. It's just as effective and much easier than two.



4 Have your hook-lengths tied and ready to use. Store them in a rig bin or rig wallet.



5 Use quality bait. Alan's choice of hook-bait is Sonubaits Crab & Crayfish boilies.