



BIG PRIZES

From Small Waters

Alan Stagg loves his piking in the winter and this month he recalls a couple of glorious days chasing the freshwater shark on a tiny river pool.

The pike is a species that will feed readily in all but the harshest conditions and I love nothing more than gazing down at these magnificent-looking creatures when banked on an early winter's morning when frost covers the ground.

Most of my pike fishing opportunities have arisen out of trips targeting perch and there have been some surprising results, often from small waters that many anglers would not afford a second glance.

Deceptively Good

Last winter while fishing for perch on my local river I had a close encounter with one or two of our toothy friends. And my advice to anyone who thinks that small venues will only produce small fish is simple: Think again!

The venue in question is only a couple of rod-lengths wide along this particular stretch and at its widest maybe three rod-lengths. You would think, perhaps, that most large fish would find it difficult to turn around, let alone thrive in such an enclosed environment.

My morning started when the alarm made its screeching noise at some unearthly hour and I soon rolled out of my nice warm bed, ready to make my way to the river.

That was after I had scraped half-an-inch of ice from the windscreen of my van. With my tackle loaded into the back, I was soon heading for the river and trudging my way across the frost-covered fields towards a pool I had been giving a bit of attention over the last few weeks.

This tiny river's perch potential is massive and several 3lb fish had been caught, alongside a number of two-pounders.

Thank Goodness For Gudgeon

In the half-light my first job was to catch a few small livebaits, a method which had proved effective time and again in recent sessions.

Half-a-dozen livebaits later I was soon swinging out a couple of small gudgeon in the dawn mist.

They are, for me, the perfect livebait for such circumstances and I had total confidence in them as I believed that the perch had been feeding heavily on small fish that had become resident in the pool in the previous weeks.

I had chosen to present the gudgeon using a free-running float paternoster 10 inches off the bottom, allowing them to swim freely. I was hoping they would prove irresistible to any predators which may be lurking in the gloom.

My chosen main line and matching hook-link was 6lb GR60 and a size 6 Gardner Mugga hook.

Dawn is a great time to target predators and I hoped the big perch I was after would be feeding in the early morning sun. The baits were positioned on a far-bank shelf, a great place to target predators, as they herd the shoals of fry up the shelf and gorge themselves. I had seen this behaviour at first-hand several times in the past few weeks, particularly in the early morning or late evening.



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bush on the far bank. The plan was still to target the shallow water on the top of the shelf as that was obviously where the fish were happy to feed.

The float laid half-cocked in the slack water and was only in position for a few minutes when it dipped a couple of times and slid away in a positive fashion.

And I'm In!

I knew a pike was the culprit and I could see the red-topped float following a couple of feet behind the fish as it made its way upstream.

I wound down and made contact when a massive boil appeared and the rod bent double.

The fish fought hard in the shallow water, trying to gain the sanctuary of the bush, stirring up the silt that had been deposited in the late summer floods.

The pike soon made its way

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across the pool to the deeper water under my own bank, and gave an excellent account of itself before I drew it across the waiting landing net.

Once on the mat I safely unhooked the fish – single hooks are so much more fish-friendly.

At 18lb 8oz it was a nice start to the day, particularly from such a small river. I returned the fish just below the pool and decided it was time for another cast. Soon my float was sailing across the pool and I awaited a response, thinking that maybe a perch would follow.

Double The Fun

A further two hours passed without any action when, without warning, the float slid away and on picking up the rod I could feel another pike was responsible.

I wound down and the line went tight, a fish was on! From the size of its tail, and the way it was thrashing around in the shallow water, it was definitely a better fish.

It fought extremely hard and tried its damndest to get under the bush. With very little overhang in the water, I sunk the rod tip deep so the line would not make contact with any branches which lay just above the water's surface.

Heavy pressure took its toll and the fish was soon ready for netting.

As I looked across the pool I could see large silt clouds drifting downstream, shallow water pike fishing at its best!

There was another nice little surprise when I lifted the fish out of the water. It certainly felt a little heavier than the first one I'd caught earlier and the scales agreed, registering 18lb 15oz.

A lovely brace of pike from a small river. It was interesting to note that both fish took a small gudgeon and were hooked in the scissors, using a single hook.

Back For More

Dusk was looming and I was soon making my way back across the fields to the van, pleased with my efforts. It was Sunday tomorrow and with no other plans I knew I could make it back to the river, with the hope of maybe more pike.

At 5am the alarm went off and I soon found myself in the same swim as the previous day. The baits were soon in position and I could just make out two floats side-by-side as dawn began to break.

I was confident of action and it was no surprise when, shortly after, one of the baits became agitated and the float bobbed along the surface and slid away.

The rod surged over and it was obvious another pike was the culprit. I couldn't believe the action from the pike as it had been a rare occurrence over the previous two winters and I knew I had to make the most of this opportunity.

A great dawn battle began as the sun started to creep above the trees.

It had been another cold, frosty night and I could feel the cold air biting my hands.

The fish decided to fight in the deep water of the pool, where it obviously felt safe.

After 10 minutes, with neither of us budging, the fish soon broke the surface and a big pike lay on its side, ready to be netted.

From the picture below, you can see it's a long fish, in beautiful condition, and on the scales it weighed 19lb exactly. It was a great start to the day, made better by the capture of 2lb 12oz perch, before things quietened down, not unusual in such a small pool.

I decided to call it a day and was soon at home, tucking into a late but welcome breakfast.

Tell Tale Signs

The quick action that I had hoped for had yet to materialise when there was a huge explosion at the back of the pool.

After a quick glance I was sure I had seen the tail of a large pike as small fish scattered in a bid for freedom.

I had successfully fished this stretch for large perch during previous winters and had experienced little trouble with pike, hence the lack of a wire trace. But after seeing this activity I was soon reeling in the rods, and the pike tackle that I always keep with me was to make its first outing.

I rigged up with 15lb GR60 main line, with my usual float fished paternoster. I decided to keep the small floats and a single hook I had been using while targeting perch, as I preferred to use a simple and sensitive set-up. On top of this, I felt a single hook would be far kinder to any hooked fish.

I tied a suitable wire trace and was soon swinging another gudgeon across the pool, tight under the overhanging



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Divine Intervention

After some deliberation I booked the Tuesday off work as I knew the pike wouldn't be about for long and didn't want anyone else to stumble across them.

Tuesday couldn't come around quick enough and I couldn't wait to get to the river, hoping the pool had been left undisturbed the previous day.

After another early morning wake-up call I was back and it was obvious the pool had not been fished the previous day.

All was quiet until late morning but then my prayers were answered as a large pike boiled across the far side of the pool as it herded small fish into the shallow water.

I quickly edged the float back to where the fish had shown and a bite came immediately.

It's a lovely sound when the float sinks away and the baitrunner ticks slowly.

I quickly wound down and bent into the pike as a huge cloud of silt erupted from the bottom.

The fish felt big and as soon as I picked up the rod I knew it was in a different league to those which I had previously caught.

It surged across the pool as it headed downstream and tried to make its way round a bend in the river 20 yards below where I was standing.

I held on for dear life but I knew the heavy tackle would eventually take its toll on the fish. Finally the fish was under control and it stayed deep in the water in front of me.

After 10 minutes it finally surfaced and I was able to bundle the fish into the waiting net. It looked magnificent on the mat and at a weight of 22lb 4oz, a new PB, I was over the moon.

And They're Gone...

That was the last I ever saw of those pike as, true to form, they quickly moved on. Despite countless sessions staying mobile, and trying to track them down, I have yet to hook anything near their size.

They vanished as quickly as they arrived.

But hope springs eternal and who knows, one day they could be back at the secret pool - and when they do return ... I'll be waiting! **CF**

