



BIG SUMMMER BARBEL

Targeting big barbel from small rivers is one of **Alan Stagg's** favourite types of fishing. Here he points you in the right direction if you want to pick the cream of the crop from your local river.

With the river season upon us and many anglers hoping to bag a big barbel, I was recently asked the question, how do you go about targeting and catching a really big one? A very good question and one I have decided to base this month's article around.

Targeting and catching big barbel is a simple recipe and although many factors will determine a fish's downfall, my answer to the question is quite straightforward - you have to find them!

Finding the size of fish you wish to catch will depend on several factors. It is all well and good if you are wired up to the local barbel fishing grapevine and your sources of information will reveal big fish haunts, but this is not the case for everyone. Often these places can become busy and it is always much more rewarding and peaceful if you avoid following the crowds, do your homework and locate and catch the fish of your dreams.

Fish-spotting

Finding the size of fish you wish to catch has to be based around the stretches of river available to you. Club tickets often offer value for money and commonly hold several stretches of river on their books. On some of the country's smaller rivers fish can often be located visually, an experience which can make a capture even more exciting and rewarding.

Hot summer days or when the river is running low and clear and weed growth is abundant are ideal conditions for spotting fish. Good quality Polaroids, walking boots and dull clothing are a must when trying to spot big fish, especially the Polaroids. Baiting a few likely areas with a mixture of hemp, pellets and broken boilies will usually draw fish from under the cover where they feel at their most comfortable and will allow you to see exactly what is in residence.

Chub will usually be the first on the scene and it can be worth feeding an area for a few hours, as the bigger fish

and especially barbel usually make an appearance later on. It never ceases to amaze me the depth of water fish will feed in when they feel confident. On stretches of my local River Loddon I have had fish swimming right up to a baitdropper and eating bait in inches of water as it is being released onto the riverbed.

Once fish have been located and their confidence has been won, often the bigger more dominant fish will be first on the scene. With this method of 'training' you are getting the bigger individual fish you want to target used to eating particular food items, priming them ready for when a rig is introduced. This is all valuable time spent and well worth the effort. When an area has been correctly prepared the bite will often come in seconds of the rig being introduced. Most of my Kennet fish came in this way and winning their confidence and getting them to feel happy feeding in a particular area was half the battle.



Above: Alan with a huge 16lb 5oz Kennet fish from a swim located by watching fish feed on some loose fed bait.



Left and Below: You don't have to use a bait dropper for feeding but for short range they are accurate and fish aren't as scared of them as you might think.





Narrow Down Swim Choice

Any number of swims should be baited and it is worth walking the stretch with a plumbing rod to find areas which are worth depositing bait into. I often start with around four or five areas, depending on how busy the venue is. These will be narrowed down to one or two spots depending on how they perform, what arrives on the scene and how the fish behave. I try to keep these areas as far away from each other as possible. Not only does this help to keep different fish visiting the spots but also keeps inquisitive anglers guessing.

Quality Bait Really Counts

It is important when starting to introduce bait that you use the very best you can. A good quality food item will outperform one of lower quality every time. Boilies in their normal round form or barrel shape are always my chosen food item. If a good quality food item is introduced then there is no need to take bags and bags to the river. Feeding a good quality bait little but often will outfish a poorer quality bait thrown in by the bag load every time.

My chosen bait this year will be Sonubaits Crab and Crayfish boilies. When I first saw these I knew instantly that they were going to be a winner. Their texture and make up looks perfect for what I want in a bait. My main feed rarely consists of just boilies. I will often introduce a mixture of smaller food items and favour hemp and small pellets as a base with a small sprinkling of boilies. I always deposit the feed via a baitdropper ensuring pinpoint accuracy. Once fish get used to the sound of a baitdropper hitting the water's surface they rarely become spooked by its presence and will often ease to the back of the swim as they know more food is on its way.

Above: Once you find feeding fish you can see how big they are and decide if the swim is worth fishing.

Snag Search

When carrying out this exercise I always investigate the biggest snags on the stretch. This may be a fallen tree, areas of dense cabbages, rushes, streamer weed and any cover where the fish feel happy to spend time during daylight hours.

Snags are ideal places to draw fish from to feed and view them. Note I said draw fish away from – I never fish directly into snaggy areas. Not only is this dangerous to the fishes' welfare, which should always be paramount, once a fish has been hooked its fellow companions can reside in their safe area and their confidence can be further won. This method can commonly result in multiple captures. Fish will never be far away from these features and will often visit them frequently. Where possible I look for features on the near bank. Not only are they easier to bait and introduce a rig into, but they are also easier places to view fish from and get an accurate estimate on their size.

Below: You don't need a lot of gear. The bare minimum allows you to move between swims easily in search of the biggest fish.



It's Not Easy

It is never as easy as simply turning up to your chosen stretch of river, throwing in some bait and watching the fish bow wave upstream as they search out the food. At times I have spent several days baiting areas with hours perched up trees in an uncomfortable position waiting for fish to arrive on the feed. Sometimes it can take a couple of hours, at other times nothing turns up at all. However, the wait is often well worth the effort and when fish do arrive you know exactly what you are fishing for.

When fish are able to roam and their passage is not restricted between weirs, large fish can often take a bit of effort to locate. Often they can be found swimming in particular areas of the river. However, this is not always the case and although some fish feel happy doing so, some are very nomadic and will often swim many miles between captures making them very challenging to pin down. I have witnessed a very big fish in the Loddon swimming over two miles between captures that were 24 hours apart, challenging fishing indeed.

What Kit Do You Need

At this point it is worth taking some time to explain what kit I use for this style of fishing and its benefits. Keeping gear to a minimum is essential to be able to move around quickly and efficiently. I take two rods, one for fishing with and the second as a baitdropper/plumbing rod. A 42" net, small bag, just enough for camera equipment and a few bits of essential tackle items and an unhooking mat completes the kit. I tend not to take a seat as my unhooking mat doubles up as a cushion to sit on. I like to keep active and keep mobile and do not plan to sit down for long periods.

The tackle and rigs are an important aspect of all fishing. I like to keep to tried and tested items that I have 100 per cent confidence in and know that once a big fish has been hooked they will not let me down. Over the last few years I have settled on the following set-up. My rod consists of a 13/4lb test curve Fox DUO Lite Xtra teamed with a 5010 Shimano baitrunner reel. My chosen main line is 10lb or 12lb GR60. A line that is extremely durable and is able to cope with any situation I am likely to face. A flying back lead runs on the main line above a small bead and a length of Plummet lead core. Keeping the line pinned down around the rig is important as I want the fish to move around the swim without being spooked. A running lead to suit river

conditions runs along the lead core down to a small bead which rests on the swivel.

The hook-link I have been using over the last twelve months is a new coated version from Gardner Tackle called Chod Skin in 10lb. A coated braid that is far superior than any product I have used before. I prefer a coated hook-link material in comparison to fluorocarbon as it is much better suited to the demanding conditions that are often faced when targeting big fish. I use a length of 8" which I steam before placing a couple of small blobs of putty along its length to ensure the hook-link sits flush to the riverbed. Hook choice is very important; the last thing you need is to put in the hard work and the choice of hook to let you down. I favour Talon Tips for all my barbel fishing. A

hook that once it goes in rarely falls out and I have yet to be let down by this trustworthy pattern.

When fishing in areas of thick weed I fold the lead and hook-bait into a solid PVA Bag as this ensures the rig is not fouled and offers a very good presentation.

Big River Location

Locating fish visually is not always possible when fishing larger, deeper rivers such as the Thames, Severn and Trent. Keep an eye on the weekly papers and walk the banks regularly as this can often throw up some good information. Target stretches where big fish have been caught in the past and play the numbers game, often one will turn up when you least expect it, which is what makes fishing so exciting. **CF**



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