

Ever caught one off the top? Ever felt the adrenalin rush as a fish's mouth engulfs your floater and your line tightens? Ever appreciated the pleasure of sneaking up on a fish in this way? Like many angling disciplines, surface fishing is an art form all of its own; perfect for targeting individual fish but equally suitable for a day's fun fishing on a more prolific venue. It's one of the greatest joys of angling, but one that people rarely take advantage of. I can't fathom it, myself. Floater fishing is such an exciting and involving way to catch Carp; every take has to be earned and when you do catch one you know you genuinely deserved it. That's what makes this method of fishing so rewarding - it takes real skill. With a little patience and a very careful, stealthy approach, you will have consistent success and get the maximum enjoyment out of your fishing. Someone who has mastered the art of stalking and surface fishing is Ben Hamilton, no stranger to success I think you'll agree. We got hold of him and gave him Chinese wrist burns until he kindly agreed to give us an insight into his methods.

Two words: finesse and stealth - that's how I'd sum it up and that's what you need to catch Carp off the top. Your equipment is vitally important; having a heavy test curve rod and a

big fixed spool reel won't do as the necessary balance just isn't there.

Which rod?

I use a Sportex 13/4lb test curve rod. The reason behind this very soft rod is to cushion the take once the fish is hooked. You don't really want a heavy stiff rod because it just wouldn't be right for the situation. You are normally using light line and very small hooks and with a soft rod it can take all the lunges and movement that the fish is giving you, whereas with heavy rods it would normally result in your hook link snapping or your hook pulling out of the fish's mouth because the test curve is just too powerful.

Which reel?

If you think about it, it makes perfect sense. With light line, little hooks, light test curved rod and a small reel you have got everything balanced accordingly. The reel is just as important in getting this set up correct; a big reel with heavy line just isn't going to do. Picture it - a massive spool and heavy line curling out across the surface with the line getting caught under the big spool resulting in tangles and lack of sensitivity. It is much more suitable to use a small reel which has an excellent clutch and is super smooth when casting and winding in your dainty little presentation.



"When floater fishing I normally fish the reel's clutch just so there is enough drag for when you initially hook the fish, as quite often they do tend to bolt off initially and this is when your line will result in snapping or your hook will pull out."

The clutch 'drag' on the reels of today is so good that you don't really have to back wind, although I often mix and match because that is what I had to do when the drags used to be jerky. Modern reels are simply a dream to play fish on now.

Which main line?

Line is important in many factors. Firstly, it has to be strong enough to take the pressure (abrasion) of thick weed beds or lily pad stems or any other snags it comes across, and yet be subtle enough as to not give the game away to the unsuspecting carp.

We are spoilt with lines these days and most companies are supplying very good abrasion resistant lines which are very low in diameter for their breaking strain. I only use one particular line and that is good old GR60. I've used this line for about ten years and rely on the old adage 'if it's not broke then don't try and fix it'. And GR60 sure isn't broke, literally! It's as tough as old boots and I can go as low as 8lb if the area is not too weedy or snaggy, but for the majority of my surface fishing I use a 10lb breaking strain which is really strong and abrasion resistant. You have to remember that it has to be strong enough to pull the fish free from the weed or obstructing lily pads. You could use a lighter line and get better presentation but you need to land the fish not just fish for bites!

Which rig components?

There are many types of hook link materials too, but the majority of the time I use double strength fly leaders usually in 10lb but again may use

lighter versions when fishing open water. You can normally assess a fishing situation and see if something is not quite right (eg. when the fish are eating lots of your free offerings but avoiding your hook bait, it suggests that they can see your hook, hook length, float, etc). When this happens you need to fish like the match men and change or tweak your initial presentation, maybe come down on the breaking strain of the hook link or downsize your hook to a smaller version.

We can learn a lot about fishing on the surface of the lake from the trout anglers and how they camouflage their end tackle. By popping into a fly fishing shop you can see the array of different leader (hook link) materials for fishing on the surface.

When fishing in weedier conditions you can fish heavy tackle as a lot of it is sitting up on the weed and the fish can't see the majority of your end tackle. Also you can fish much shorter hook links as quite often you can pull your controller float up onto the weed with just the hook bait sitting in a clear area in the weed.

I often find that if a carp does get weeded, steady pressure and keeping the line tight will often result in the fish moving.

"You don't need to pull for a break. Just be patient and the fish will gradually start to move, then you

will be able to land it."

Controllers and Floats

There are now such selections of controllers, all of which are purpose designed to get your hook bait to the desired area where the fish are comfortable and hopefully feeding. Again, it is very important to use the lightest float for the situation as all you need is enough weight on the line to get the hook bait to the right spot.

There are quite often times when the fish start to get caught from the surface very frequently and they only really take baits that have drifted out into the middle of the lake - this is when a much heavier float is needed to get the desired distance. There are some really big floats available, up to weights of over 3oz (85g), which act like a bolt rig on the surface as when the carp takes the hook



bait and straightens the hook length it comes against this heavy float and hooks itself almost without the need of striking.

"This is an excellent way of fishing for the carp that haven't been fished for at distance, as is often the case. They are much more comfortable at taking a bait out in the middle of the lake."

These big controllers can be cast up to nearly 100 metres (this is the only time that stronger rods are used to punch the float out and give a bit more control once the fish is hooked). Gardner also manufacture a few floats which are ideal if the carp are still spooking from your hook bait, i.e. they approach your hook bait and mouth the bait slowly and bolt off without getting hooked. This is when it is time for a different approach, this time with your line above the surface.

The Gardner Suspender float may look a bit funny on the lake surface but from below all the carp can see is a shape with bait next to it - and no line!

"When fitted with a short 15cm hook link with bait on a hair, even the hook is out of the water resulting in a carp that looks up from below the inky surface and sees nothing more than just bait."

One tip is to grease the antennae with some fly fishing line grease on the suspender. This will

help it 'cock' more easily by helping to break the surface tension. This rig is really effective for fishing near snags or lily beds because you can get away with using heavy line right the way through to the hook with no chance of the carp seeing the thick line, giving you far more control once you have hooked your fish. You can also use a larger, stronger hook pattern for this set up which again gives you much more confidence when a big fish is hooked. The great thing about this set up is if you're having problems with the bird life when presumably they can see the line and float.

The other float that Gardner produce is called the Flatliner which, as the name suggests, lies on the surface not sinking below the water line like most other floats do. These are green in colour and very easy to cast. With traditional set ups use a long hook length of at least six feet in length in order to keep the hook bait away from the float. When you cast out always feather the line with your fingers; this straightens out the long hook length when it lands. If the carp are feeding, just keep tightening up on the slack line between you and the float as when you are about to strike it makes it much easier to be in direct control of the float and to reduce the chance of missing your bite.

I think what people get wrong when fishing off the top is they are too eager to strike and this often results in the float and end tackle landing



behind you or up the nearest tree. The adrenalin is flowing as these big white lips engulf the bait but this is when you have to be a bit patient and wait until you see your main line straighten or your float plink, then you should meet with solid resistance as your little hook buries into the Carp's mouth.

Floater fishing, stalking fish close in and watching fish as they go about their business in a natural way sure takes some beating as camping just isn't my style!