

Give 'Em Some Groundbait

Ever thought about incorporating groundbait into your basic barbel approach? Big fish ace Alan Stagg has been experimenting for several months and he insists it could be the way to some bigger, better catches in the future.

In recent years pellets and boilies have dominated the barbel scene. The angling weeklies are flooded with catch reports as proud captors hold aloft another barbel that has fallen to these baits.

It is rare when fishing rivers not to see a pellet or boily in sight. Packaged and ready to use, these convenience baits have taken the barbel world by storm and, combined with their track record, have become an angler's number one choice when targeting barbel.

A Pleasing Discovery

By comparison, groundbait is at the other end of the scale. It is seldom used on rivers by specialist anglers and is often seen as a small fish method, adopted by match anglers.

However, there is more to this method than meets the eye and is an edge I have adopted over the last couple of months and used to devastating effect.

Groundbaiting for barbel is a method that I stumbled across when returning from a morning targeting Crucian carp. On my way home I stopped off at my local stretch of river. I had some groundbait left over from the session and rather than waste it, I decided to take it with me and bait up a few shallow areas to see how the local barbel population would respond to this approach.

After introducing a few balls into each swim I decided to let them settle and returned to the van for a drink.

Fish Soup

Later as I peered through the undergrowth of the first swim I had baited, I was expecting to see the groundbait still evident on the gravel shallows. What I saw could not have been more different.

The swim was like fish soup! I had baited the top of a near-bank shelf in shallow water and fish could be seen as they grazed across the area. Some good fish, running to low doubles, were pigging out on the food I had introduced.

It would have been very easy to catch one of these fish as they confidently fed, though I decided against this as I had little motivation to catch them again.

When the activity in the swim ceased, I introduced further balls and the fish reappeared and fed without caution, obviously attracted by the scent trail flowing downstream. It was great watching them in the clear, shallow water and I watched them for more than an hour before returning home with my mind in overdrive.

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It Works As A Prebait, Too

I have since used groundbait on a tributary of the Thames that contains a low stock of very big barbel.

After lots of scouting around, I found the fish held up in a very weedy section of the river that contained lots of underwater cabbages. The plan was to send a scent trail downstream to where these fish were living, and draw them away from the area where they could be landed safely.

This worked to good effect and led to the downfall of a new personal best barbel weighing 18lb 6oz. Although I did not use groundbait while fishing on this capture, I have used it and believe it makes an excellent prebait.

Leading up to this capture, I prebaited for a couple of evenings. I had limited time available and wanted to give myself the best possible chance of catching a good fish. Groundbait was the perfect answer. It's an excellent carrier for larger food items that I wanted to introduce and would leak a scent trail downstream that I knew the barbel could not ignore.

The plan worked and after the second evening of baiting a very weedy swim, heavy feeding activity had cleared the area.

I knew the fish had found the bait and the plan was coming together nicely. After a few evening sessions my ambition was achieved and I slipped the net under a fish of a lifetime. A memory I shall never forget.

More Pluses Than Minuses

As this experiment showed, using groundbait created an excellent feeding situation. It has many advantages in its use. Firstly, it is versatile and can be used in all manner of situations and conditions. As mentioned before, it has good attraction levels and continually leaks off a scent trail.

Made up of hundreds of little particles, these help keep fish in the swim for long periods and increase the chance of a bite.

Its advantages and possibilities are endless. In the colder months, or when conditions are poor, I will use its attraction levels to their best. Adding very little food and increasing flavour levels and adding the odd larger item of feed can sometimes bring a bite when all else fails.

Groundbaiting is a good method when an angler wants to lay a carpet of feed down on the riverbed. This is undoubtedly its most common use. However, it can also be used with a roving approach. A small feeder cast into likely areas can bring instant bites. I know some good anglers that have been using this method and catching some very nice fish.



“So what's so good about groundbait for barbel? Firstly, it is versatile and can be used in all manner of situations and conditions. As mentioned before, it has good attraction levels and continually leaks off a scent trail.”



In The Mix

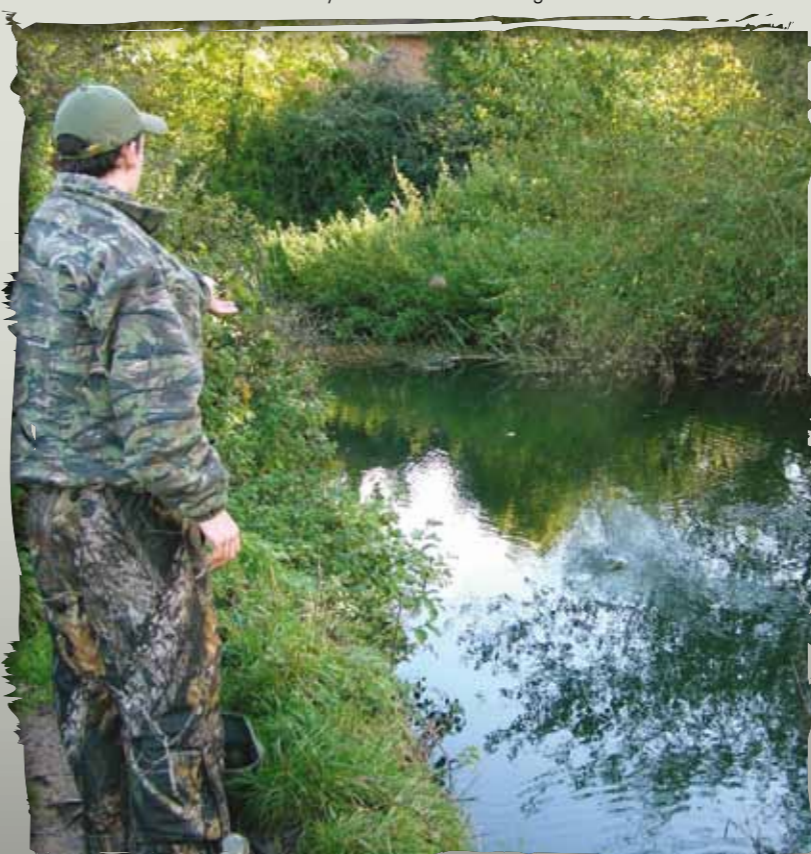
My standard mix consists of Sonubaits Hemp & Hali Crush groundbait and crushed halibut pellets. I also add hemp and various sized pellets, depending on how many food items I want to introduce. After adding water, the mix is very oily and has excellent levels of attraction, ideal when fishing for barbel.

I seldom use a groundbait riddle, as I am not concerned with any lumps or larger food items. These are big hungry fish that I am targeting. I have found it is always best to prepare the mix the night before. It can absorb a lot of water and this will ensure the very best feed possible. Mixing using warm water can also help boost the mix - but be careful not to burn yourself.

Give 'Em A Scalding

I have also used scalded pellets and these make a fantastic groundbait. Adding warm water to pellets speeds up their breakdown and turns them into a mush. Play around with the amount of water added to get the mix right or add a few dry pellets if the mix is too wet. This can be a devastating method and has the bonus of being cheap and pellets are convenient to use. The flavour trail, once cast into the swim, has to be seen to be believed.

Before introducing any feed in the swim, I always take into consideration the stretch I am fishing. The population of barbel, the size of fish likely to be encountered, weather conditions and fishing time available should all



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be taken into account before filling a swim in. It is always better to build an area up rather than blowing your chances before you have begun.

Rein It In When It's Hard

When planning to fish a static approach, and conditions are favourable, I start by introducing six to eight big balls into the swim, containing lots of pellets, hemp and larger food items.

However, if conditions are poor or I want to fish a roving approach, I rely on a feeder alone.

Once mixed, it is important how the feed is deposited into the swim. I tend to ball it up, but I use different-shaped groundbait balls to ensure the feed gets to the bottom where I want it to be.

When fishing large, fast-following rivers, it is important to shape the groundbait balls into a rugby-shaped ball, or even a cube. Round balls tend to roll around when introduced into fast-flowing rivers, particularly around drops-offs or ledges.

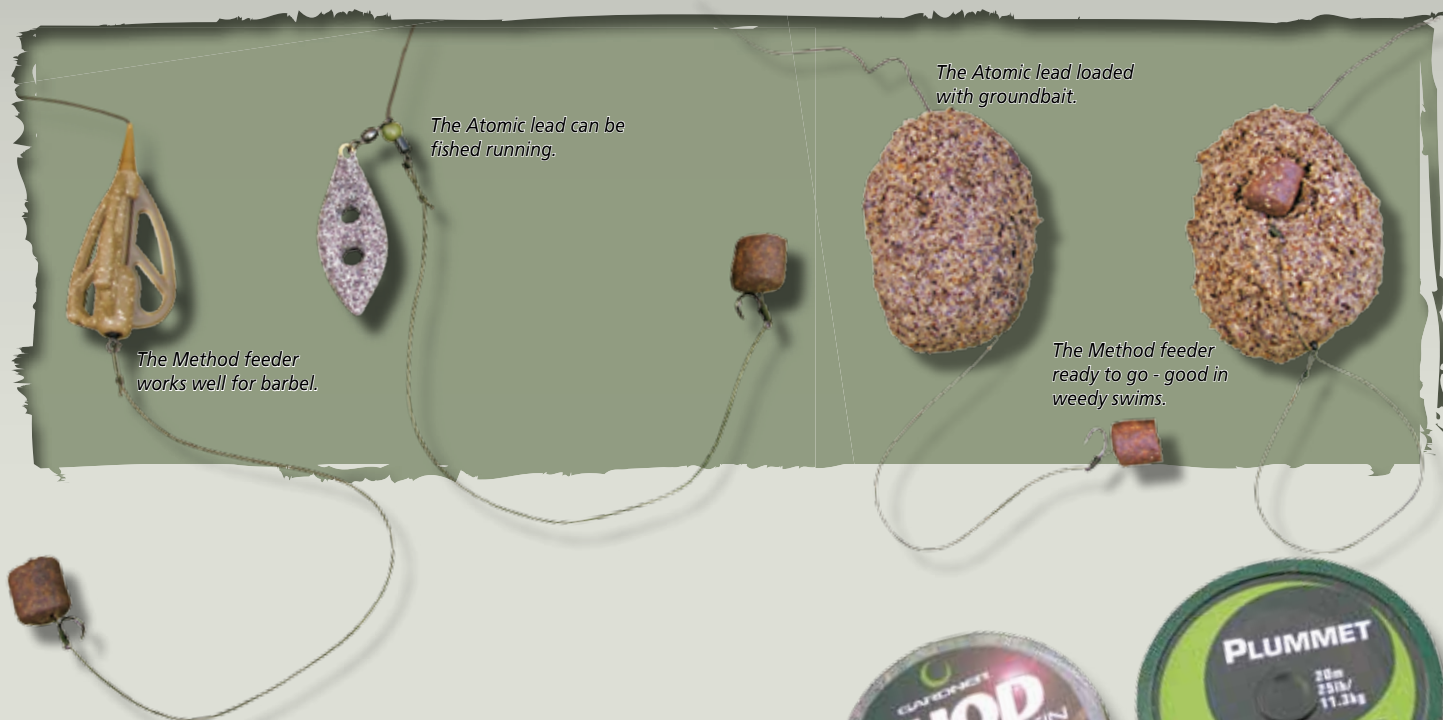
When faced with these conditions, it can be worth adding leam to your mix. This will help bind the balls and make them sink like a stone.

Molehill soil can also be a great attractant and have a similar effect.

The main thing to ensure is your bait is getting to the bottom where you want it to be, and not rolling away in the force of the flow.

If in any doubt, use a baitdropper to introduce your feed. At least you will be one hundred per cent sure where your bait has settled on the riverbed.

“When fishing large, fast-following rivers, it is important to shape the groundbait balls into a rugby-shaped ball, or even a cube so they are not washed too far downstream by the current.”



The Method feeder works well for barbel.

The Atomic lead can be fished running.

The Atomic lead loaded with groundbait.

The Method feeder ready to go - good in weedy swims.

Rig Tips

I have been using two different rigs recently when adopting this approach. The first is a standard running rig, using a nobbler lead from Atomic. These leads grip groundbait perfectly and allow the angler to fish Method style.

The second rig uses a Method feeder. I tend to fish the Method in a semi-fixed fashion and prefer the inline style versions that are available.

I use them exactly how I would on a lake, but I prefer to use a slightly longer hook-link of eight to ten inches.

When using either rig, I experiment with leaving the hook-bait free or moulded inside the ball of groundbait, to see what the fish prefer on the day.

When fishing in this fashion, make sure your set-up is rock solid, as bites can be vicious. Large style cage feeders are also a good way to fish when using groundbait. These have the added bonus of allowing the angler to plug both ends of the feeder and to fill the centre with freebies.

A Heavy Approach Is Best

I use my normal 1.75lb test curve barbel rods when using these rigs. Quivertip and light Avon rods are out of the question, particularly when fishing rivers such as the Thames or Severn.

Heavy main line is a must and needs to be able to cope with the strain of casting heavy feeders. I use trusty 12lb GR60 main line, particularly when targeting big fish.

I incorporate a flying back lead and a length of Gardner's Plummet Lead Core to keep the line pinned to the riverbed.

Hook-lengths are made from 10lb Chod Skin and a size 8 Talon Tip completes the set-up. When fishing feeders, my hook-bait choice is a 11mm or 13mm pellet from Sonubaits.



When it comes to using groundbait on rivers or stillwaters, we have a lot to learn from match anglers who have this approach perfected. Continental match anglers have this method down to a fine art, particularly when fishing large canal and river systems.

A lot can be learned from watching match anglers and by talking to them. Using groundbait on rivers is a method I haven't used extensively but the results speak for themselves and will certainly be a method I will be using a lot more in the future. **CF**

