

Prime Time Perching

Ah, the Striped Sergeant Major, more commonly known as the perch. A big, splendid fish, bold of stripe, and full of indignation should you catch one. Alan Stagg loves this fierce-looking predator and here he explains how you can catch your share in the coldest months of the year.

With summer turning to autumn, and now autumn to winter, things sometimes look bleak as we open the curtains in the morning and stare out into the inky darkness. Yes, the winter can be a depressing time for the angler.

Yet, to be honest, although I love the spring, summer and autumn months, I always look forward to the first signs of winter, as in previous years it has meant one thing to me, big perch.

We can all head to our nearest commercial carp puddle, where perch often thrive on neglect and grow big. However, there is always something that fascinates me about small rivers when it comes to targeting perch. I have to admit I have something of an obsession with my local small river, and as soon as the first frosts arrive I'm keen to get in among the river's stripeys.

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A Well-kept Secret

The river, and the perch it contains, has been something of a well-kept secret over the last couple of years. The winters have seen me almost exclusively fish for these species in solitude on the river. Call me a secretive angler, if you like, as I have enjoyed the success mostly on my own, only occasionally inviting a few friends along the way, as long as they were happy to be sworn to secrecy.

The first winter that I seriously targeted the river for big perch, it was common to get a few chances on every trip and most of my sessions took place either early morning or in the late evening. But the floods of last year had a terrible effect on the river and I went from catching several fish each trip to very few.

Yes, I still did catch fish, with several weighing over 3lb, but it was nowhere near as successful as the previous winter. This could be down to angling pressure, but with very few people knowing about these fish, I thought this was definitely not the cause for the low catch rates.





Crazy For Crays!

One change I have been aware of since the first winter I spent on the river is the arrival of the American Signal Crayfish. The perch and pike populations have been gorging themselves on this high protein diet.

Crayfish are present and their populations multiplying, and I expect them to be a common occurrence

Above: Crayfish - a high protein diet!

throughout the river system in the future. As crayfish grow they go through a process of moulting as they lose the hard shell around their body. At this point they are vulnerable to predators.

Crayfish are an excellent source of protein, from which fish will benefit and grow quickly. Last year I caught several big pike and each one was coughing up claws of crayfish. This high protein diet is bound to increase the perch and pike populations and I hope to see some big fish put in an appearance in the next few years. Fingers crossed!

Perching on small rivers suits itself to short sessions and a few hours at dawn or dusk can produce the goods, and can often be more profitable than spending a whole day on the riverbank.

The prime time is most certainly dawn and dusk as perch often switch off when the sun gets high in the winter sky. Never write a swim off until you have fished it at dawn or dusk. Fish will often be present, but conditions and light levels will dictate when they decide to feed.

Gudgeon Are So Good

Live baits have definitely sorted out the bigger fish on the river in comparison to worms and other tactics, which have only yielded relatively small fish. Put on a live-bait, which moderate-sized fish tend to leave alone and are perfect when targeting the specimens. My favourite live bait is a gudgeon, which are hardy, very active and quite easy to catch. When presented above the riverbed, they swim vigorously and they are able to withstand a number of casts, making them the ideal bait.

I also never leave home without a couple of pints of maggots. These are continually fed into the swim, in small, regular amounts. A constant trickle of maggots helps to attract small fish and, in turn, the perch. Casters and finely chopped worm are often fed using a baitdropper, and combined make an excellent feed.

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Rig Of Least Resistance

When it comes to rigs, there must be very little resistance to a taking perch. I always use a free-running float paternoster when using livebaits. Watching a float in the dawn mist is a great way of fishing. It is very exciting when the float bobs and twitches, as the livebait gets nervous, and the angler knows a bite is imminent.

I use 6lb GR60 main line and a float, which is attached to the main line using two small latex bands. These help grip the float perfectly and allow for easy adjustment.

These latex bands are quite hard-wearing and have the added bonus of being very cheap, too. My chosen



float always carries an attachment to support a Starlight.

There have been many occasions when, had I not used an illuminated float tip, I would have missed out on catching a 3lb-plus fish. To do this, I make a tiny hole in the top of the float and insert a betalight, which is held in place with Araldite.



This rig, presented up off the bottom of the riverbed, allows the bait to swim freely, but the float prevents it from getting under any stones or debris that it might try to hide under.

Hook-link choice is also 6lb GR60 with a size 6 Mugga hook on the business end. If pike are present then I always use a wire trace. I usually use a lead around ¾oz to 1oz in weight, and I find this perfect for balancing the set-up.





And The Weakest Link Is...

I fish the lead on a weak link using 3 to 4lb line. I fix this to the swivel using a couple of overhand knots. This has an added advantage, as when playing a fish it is not uncommon for the lead link to get snagged on the bottom.

By using a weak link it is relatively easy to break, helping land the fish for the price of a lead. This tip has saved the day on a few occasions, allowing me to land fish that I would have otherwise lost.

When using this method I always use a long bankstick and position the rod so that all or most of the line is raised above the surface of the water. This helps give a much better presentation.

I find baitrunner-type reels very helpful when fishing in this manner. Often bites can come out of the blue, and there have been a number of occasions when my back has been turned, while I sort out the other rod or I am playing a fish, when the float has slid away on the other rod.

After an early morning call, I arrived at the river just as dawn was breaking. I was happy to see that no other cars were present and I hurriedly grabbed my kit from the van and headed for the river.

Fishing with the baitrunner engaged allows the fish to take line with little resistance, and the sound of line being taken from the spool alerts me that the rod needs attention.

Putting It Into Practice

I have just returned from my first trip of the winter. Starting a little earlier than in previous years, I was keen to see what the river might have to offer. A quick trip was planned early one Saturday morning, just as a trial session, to see whether I should think about making other plans for the winter ahead.

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The first job of the morning was to catch a few livebaits. This was done relatively quickly and I soon had enough gudgeon for the morning. Both rods were set up with a float paternoster and under-armed out to a far bank shelf.

Past experience had shown me that this is a great ambush point, as perch had commonly been seen attacking fry as they drove them onto the shallows in the dawn mist.

Alans Top Tips

1. Dawn and dusk are the prime times for specimen perch. Time your sessions around these key times in the day.
2. Small live-baits and lobworms are the perfect baits. Experiment to see what works best on the venues you are fishing.
3. Put a starlight on your float so you don't miss out on the prime feeding time.
4. Spraying maggots or introducing small balls of cloudy ground bait can help attract bait fish and, in turn, perch.
5. Bites can often be instant. Be ready at all times.

I didn't have time to put the rod down when the line tightened in my hand and the float sank. Minutes later a big river perch slid across the rim of the waiting landing net.

Two floats were sent sailing across the river. I didn't have time to put the rod down when the line tightened in my hand and the float sank.

I have noticed on several occasions that these fish respond to the slap of a livebait hitting the water, leading to instant action. I let the line tighten and wound down to the fish, feeling the tail thumps of a big perch.

After a short scrap the first fish of the morning was sliding over the waiting net. This was a sign of things

to come, as over the next hour-and-a-half I connected with several more perch, the best weighing 2lb 10oz, 2lb 12oz, 2lb 14oz and 3lb 10oz.

This made for a great catch in the morning mist and backed up the knowledge I have gained about these sporting beauties.

Why not give my approach a try this winter? On the right venue, where big perch live, it can be a real eye-opener. **CF**

