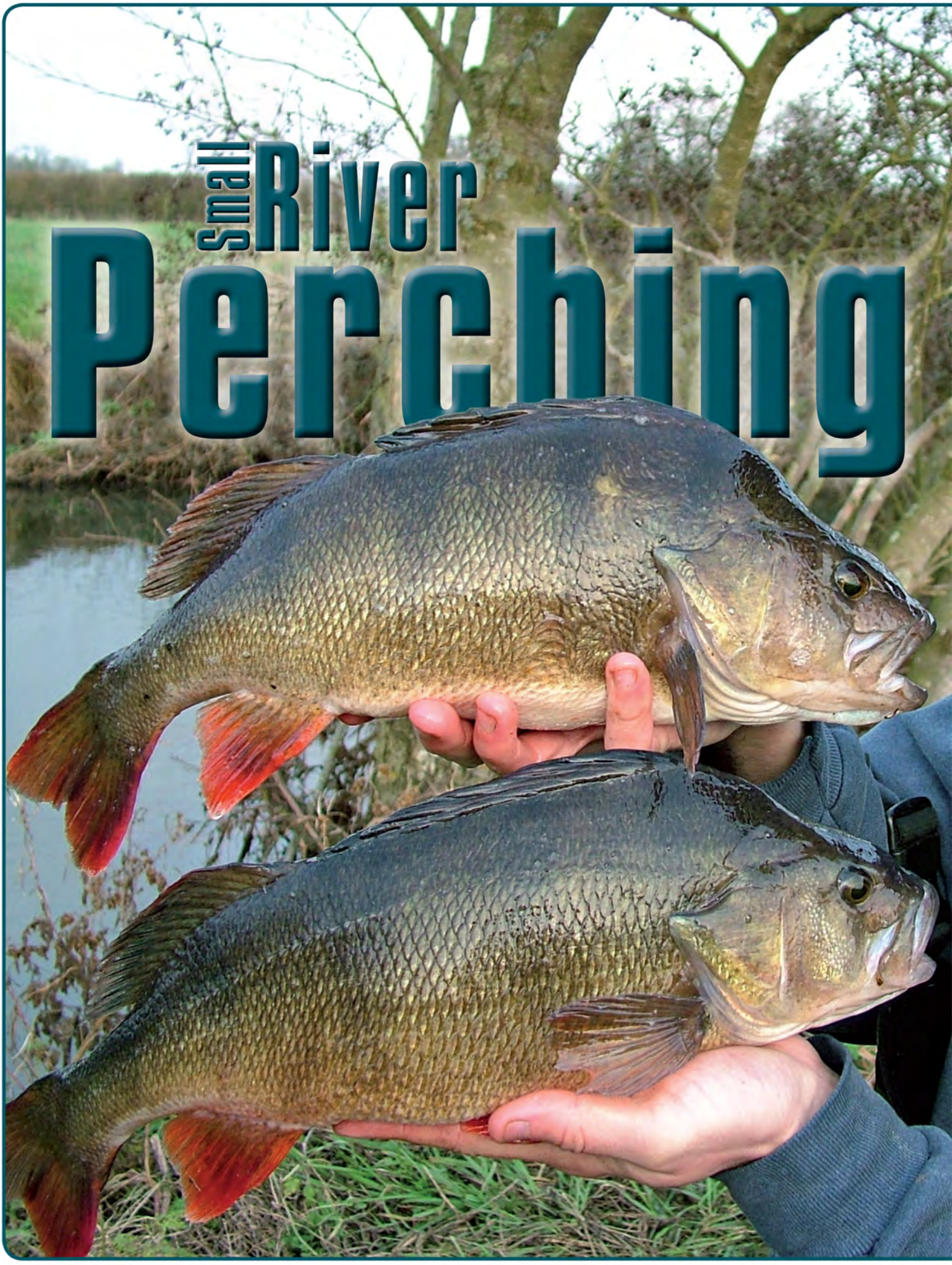
Small River Perching



Alan Stagg loves to get among some big stripeys and he reckons the time has never been better as this beautiful predator gorges on crayfish and mitten crabs.

Perch fishing today is as good as it has ever been. As I sit down to write this article, the angling press has this week reported on the country's first 'six' pound monster and a 'five' has also been reported in the same week. Amazing stuff, truly what dreams are made of.

A massive well done to both anglers, a fish all anglers dream about, and river fish to boot!

Future weights for the species look very good as more and more, bigger fish seem to be turning up every year from rivers and commercial fisheries alike, some in the most unusual circumstances.

The Sky's The Limit

Early December, weather permitting, is always a time when I start to think about perch. Rivers are my ideal venue, which really fire me up, particularly small rivers, which have a healthy small fish population.

An added bonus is crayfish or mitten crabs, which contain high levels of protein in their meat.

These form an ideal recipe for big perch, which thrive on being ignored by anglers who regularly target the more popular barbel and chub that swim in these stretches.

The perch angler in this situation can expect excellent results and the sky can sometimes be the limit on what you can expect to catch. Believe me, anything is possible in this situation.

One such venue which I have been fishing for the last two winters is a small southern river, which fits the criteria in all of the above, and has provided some exciting fishing.

An angler in these circumstances, after a bit of hard work, can expect good results in a couple of hours fishing.

I stumbled across the venue one cold winter's afternoon when I was carrying out the usual routine of preparing a couple of likely swims with barbel and chub in mind.

A friend was pike fishing one of the many pools on the venue. My mobile rang with an excitable voice on the other end stating that a large perch had just picked up a roach intended for pike and I'd better get up there and have a look.

As we folded back the mesh a big perch greeted our eyes – and at a weight of 3lb 1oz I knew the venue might contain something a bit special.

Magical Times

The next day I was back with the perch rods, first checking with my friend that he did not intend to target the pike in the same pool the next day. I knew I might have stumbled on something a bit special a little while later after banking three fish over 2lb and one weighing 3lb 4oz.

The winter proved productive. Trying stretches around the same area also proved fruitful with a number of fish over three pounds in weight and multiple catches commonplace.

This culminated in one of the best and most exciting winter's fishing I have experienced.

My main approach, when I have little or no information to go on, is to fish short but regular sessions and keep on the move.

Club cards offer excellent value for money and often have a number of stretches on their books, which are close to each other, making it easy to switch between venues.

Above: *Magical times with the biggest perch weighing 3lb 4oz.*

This can prove to be very rewarding, allowing you to make the most of your day.

Stand By Your Rods

If perch are in the area then bites can be expected within an hour and it is common to expect bites as soon as the float hits the water, which has happened to me on a number of occasions.

If bites are not forthcoming then it is time to try a new area. By using this approach you will soon learn the areas which are worth a more dedicated approach.

I mainly target the deeper pools and sections of the river, or anywhere which might hold cover for the fish which provides the classic ambush point.

Never be scared to present baits in even the shallowest water. A number of the perch I have caught have ambushed baits presented on the far bank shelf in less than two feet of water.

Fishing in such shallow areas is an ideal tactic, which I used to devastating effect early one morning when perch could be seen pushing fry up the far bank shelf as they attacked their prey.

The timing of sessions is very important, particularly when fishing small rivers. The ever-increasing rain we seem to be facing determines when you should be out on the bank.

I have tried fishing in flooded conditions many times and have yet to find them successful.

The river I am currently fishing tends to rise quickly after heavy rain. However, 24 to 36 hours later with no further rain, the venue is perfect and ideal conditions can be expected.

I increasingly find myself throughout the winter months only getting occasional opportunities to wet a line before the next band of rain ruins conditions.

As I write this I haven't been able to wet a line for two weeks, making it very frustrating.

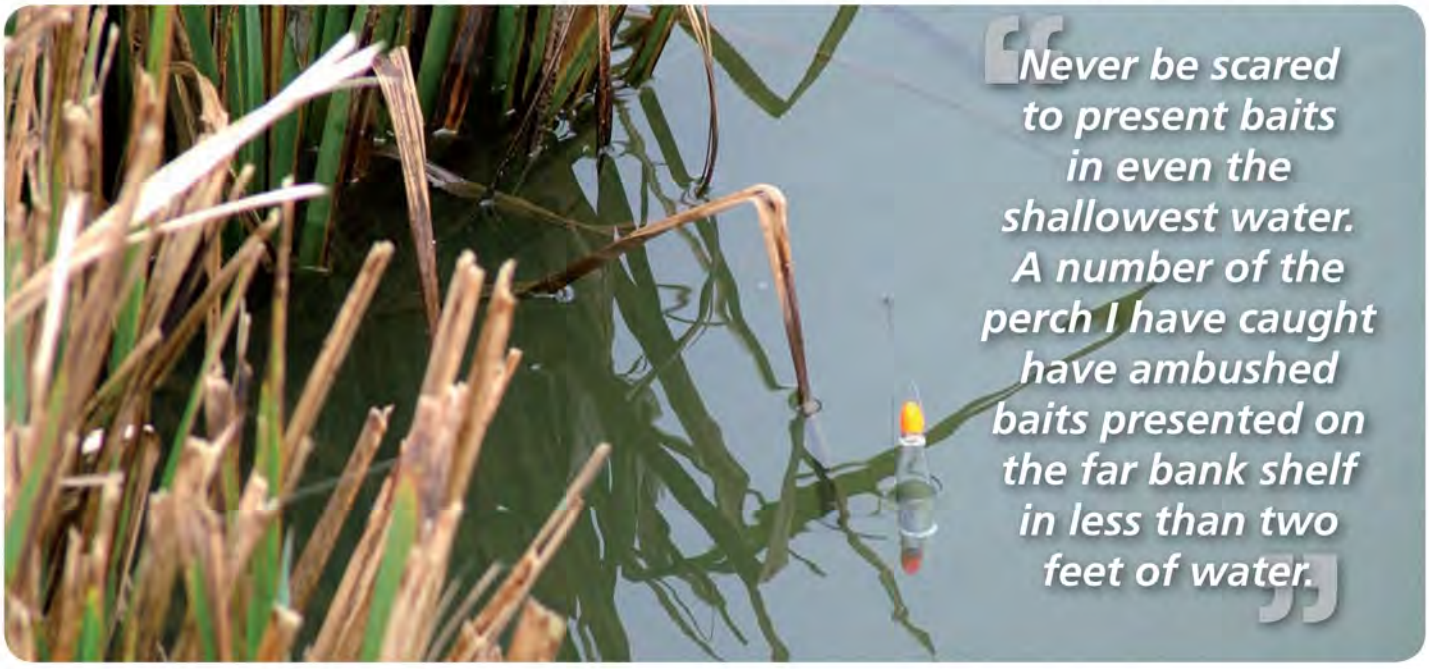
Livebaits Rule

Livebaits, without a doubt, outfish worms or any other bait that I have tried, particularly when it comes to the larger fish.

Gudgeon, my favourite, are hardy and very active, particularly when presented on a paternostered float, always trying to swim downwards to reach the bottom.

Remember, always try to match the hatch and use what is in plentiful supply and what you think the fish may be feeding on.

Perch can gorge themselves and it has been evident on numerous occasions that they have showed a preference for one livebait rather than another, even when fished no more than a few feet apart.



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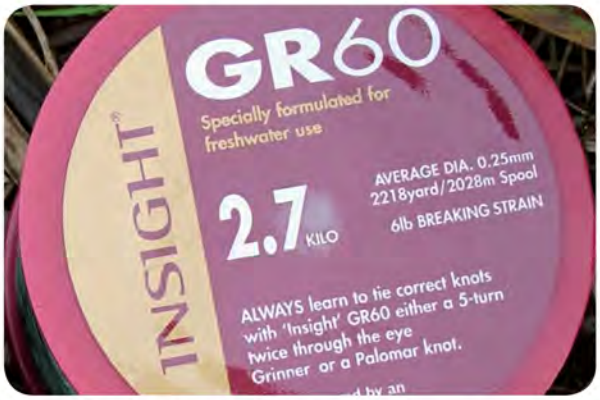
Travel Light & Keep Moving

Travel light and roam. After a few sessions you will have mapped the likely looking spots and swims you have caught from in the past. My tackle is made up of two light Avon-style rods. I use 6lb GR60 reel line, which is tied to the ever-faithful free-running paternostered float.



Using this rig allows baits to be presented off the bottom in the perch's eye line, where they cannot hide or sulk, causing them to swim in an agitated action.

Chubber-style floats are ideal for presenting baits in this fashion, and I usually find a 5AAA+ ideal for most situations.

A short hook-length of 6lb Sufix Invisiline is used to a size 6 Mugga hook, which is ideal for even the largest gudgeon.

It is important to note that if pike are present then a suitable wire trace should always be used.

Weak Links Are Useful

I always use a weaker lead link when fishing this rig, usually around 4lb, which is tied to the swivel using a couple of granny knots.

This technique has proved effective, particularly this winter after the summer floods moved a lot of new and unseen snags around the river and into some of the deeper pools.

On a number of occasions a fish has reached an unknown snag and the weak link has broken under light pressure, allowing the fish to be landed.

A lead of half to three-quarters of an ounce is perfect for presenting baits in deep pools and slacks, ideal perch territory.

One year later and I was itching to get back, eager to see what the winter may bring. With some time off at Christmas it seemed an ideal time to have another go.

One month or so earlier than the previous year saw me trudging across the fields armed with the perch tackle.

It was still dark, which was ideal, as it gave me time to catch enough livebait for the day ahead.

Two gudgeon were presented on the far bank shelf and it wasn't long before one cocked and slid away in the half light.

Pike Surprise

A strike met with a solid resistance and I was surprised to see my Avon rod bent double.

I had only caught two pike the whole of last winter and they were both from a different stretch, with none coming from the venue in question, even after countless sessions the previous winter.

Consequently I was undergunned and the fish tried to escape the pool I was fishing on more than one occasion.

After a good battle a bonus pike was landed and, at a weight of 18lb 8oz, it really was a bonus.

I took a quick trip back to the van for some heavier kit, which I always keep ready for such occasions. I re-spooled with 12lb GR60 main line and a wire trace hook-link, still keeping with a single hook.

My next cast saw the float slide away again and after an explosive fight another pike was brought to the net weighing 18lb 15oz. A couple of jacks soon followed.

It was by now 10:18am, plenty of time for a couple more bites, I thought to myself. Where had all the pike come from?

The stretch I was fishing at the time consisted of about a mile of river with a weir at the top and bottom of the venue, making it difficult for fish to move around. A nice 3lb 6oz perch made for a cracking day, but those pike where still on my mind.

Three sessions later, and with over 20 pike seeing the inside of my net in comparison to none the previous winter, it was really starting to puzzle me.

Right: *A nice 3lb 6oz perch made for a cracking day.*

Flood Fallout

As I write this it is now mid-January with still a couple of months of the river season left.

The only explanation that I can come up with is the pike were washed downstream in the summer floods that we experienced.

Having worked a livebait throughout the entire venue, working almost every inch of the riverbed the previous winter – and seeing many anglers blindly fishing for pike on the venue leave with a dry net, I am convinced the stretch originally held few, if any, pike.

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This has been commonplace with many fish. Take, for example, the many fish that have ended up in the Thames from nearby lakes. I was amazed to find out that a large carp from a lake in Twyford was found in an EA electrofishing exercise at Kingston Bridge, many miles away from where it used to live.

The number of locks and weirs this fish had to pass through to get to this area is incredible.

One memorable session I shared with a close friend resulted in six pike – the best weighing 22lb 4oz and 22lb 12oz – and a 3lb 3oz perch.

This, I believe, proves the point that these predators are thriving on neglect in the small river environment, which is packed with small fish and mainly targeted for their barbel and chub populations.

Try it, you may be surprised – I know I certainly was.

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