

THE BOUNTY HUNTER

A certain Thames tributary had fascinated CF regular Alan Stagg for some time - but little did he know what lay in store for him when he finally bought a ticket.



I had been thinking about trying my luck on a particular Thames tributary for barbel a few years ago but never did anything about it.

Finally I got round to acquiring a ticket and I knew it was time to don my walking boots and do some serious preparation work.

It is usually quite easy nowadays to pick up a few magazines or do some digging locally to get some reliable information on stretches you fancy. The internet can be helpful, too.

But with regards to the length that I wanted to target, no matter where I looked or who I spoke to, the information coming back to me amounted to very little.

It wasn't because people were holding back, it was merely that very little was known about the stretch. Encouragingly though, I had heard a few whispers that there might be one or two good fish to try for, so I knew it had to be worth a look and, after all, isn't it the mystery that entices us to the waterside?

Nobody But Me

As soon as the fishing permit dropped onto the doormat, I made plans for the coming weekend to visit the river, as I was eager to have a good look around.

The season had just started and I thought some like-minded anglers might be out trying to bag an early season barbel. You can imagine then that I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived to find the venue deserted and very overgrown.

The first thing that I noticed as I peered into the river was the amount of weed, reeds and cabbages it contained. I had never seen anything like it, top to bottom along the entire stretch, creating the perfect barbel habitat.

I must admit that I found all this weed a bit off-putting and as I drove home I was wondering how on earth I was going to fish in that lot!

Clearly it was a very rich aquatic environment that I was facing - and I realised that it might have the potential to throw up something big.



Above: Short sessions don't require much kit.

Reconnaissance Mission

I decided on a couple more recces over the coming weeks, not to fish, just to try to get a feel for the place. I often find that time spent like this is never wasted and can be extremely valuable, especially heading towards the autumn months, which was when I planned to have a dabble.

Things had been going well personally on the angling front and after catching some nice rudd, tench and a catfish in the early part of the season I was at a loss over what to do next.

I decided to have a quick walk along the river one evening after work - and this is when I decided it might be worth a go. I had seen very few anglers and while the stretch was being left alone I thought it might be worth an assault.

From the recce trips I had undertaken a few weeks previously, there were a couple of areas I was interested in. I was still trying to get my head around the weed in the river and how to present a bait in amongst all the cabbages.

I felt sure I could extract a fish once hooked, as a lot of the weed had long thin strands that would part when put under pressure. My primary concern, however, was that the presentation may become masked and I realised my end tackle needed to be spot-on if I were to give myself the best chance of a bite.

Creating A Cunning Plan

I had discovered a couple of clear areas among the weedbeds but it was obvious that the fish were spending a lot of time in the sanctuary afforded by the weed cover.

It all made perfect sense to me. There was simply no reason for them to move away as they had everything they needed right there.

I felt that if I could draw fish away from the weed then it could open up a few options, but I doubted if the fish would feed confidently in an area devoid of cover.

I felt the only way to fish here was to present a bait safely in the middle of this cover, albeit in any small clear areas that were available.

The way I looked at the problem, any small channel could present an opportunity and I was sure the fish would feed confidently there.

Many of the channels could be watched from a viewing position up in the trees and, by using polarised glasses, I could see many were only a few inches wide.

Yet it was this fact which I felt could make them so attractive to the fish. The barbel didn't have to move far to eat and they would have plenty of cover around if they felt uneasy.

Presenting a bait in these weedy spots can be extremely difficult. Casting has to be spot-on and sometimes it took several casts before I got it right.



Heavy Gear

Heavy tackle was essential as once a fish was hooked I wanted to be certain that it could be safely extracted.

I rigged up using my ever-faithful GR60 main line in 12lb breaking strain. This is a very durable line and one I have complete confidence in. I used a length of Plummot lead core above the main line, initially to try to keep the main line pinned down and out the way of any feeding barbel, but also because of its abrasion-resistant properties.

A small running lead completed the set-up. My hook-link material was a coated sample from Gardner Tackle that is currently on test. The results so far have been very encouraging and it is a far superior product to anything I have previously used. I finished my end-rig off with a size 8 Talon Tip hook.

New Water Monsters

Thank Heavens For PVA Bags!

I decided to fold the whole lot into a solid PVA bag in order to get the best presentation possible. The idea behind this was to settle it in among the clear channels in the weed, creating a pile of freebies around the hook-bait.

The solid bag also made me confident that my rig would not be fouled in anyway and my hook-bait would sit in a nice pile of bait on the riverbed.

I decided to use Carp Company's Icelandic Red Barrels, as the results

I achieved last year with these exceeded my expectations. I started to trickle a bit of bait into a couple of areas I fancied.

Short sessions were the name of the game, just a few hours after work to see what would happen.

The idea was to get a feel for the place and learn about the river for the coming autumn and winter, when a big fish could be on the cards.



A Big Fat Blank

My first session lasted only three hours. I had planned to fish either side of dusk as I felt this would be the prime time for a bite, but I drew a complete blank.

It was early days and I trickled a little bit more bait in before I left. I was confident I would catch there and I returned two days later, after a period of rain, and I just had a feeling that things were looking up.

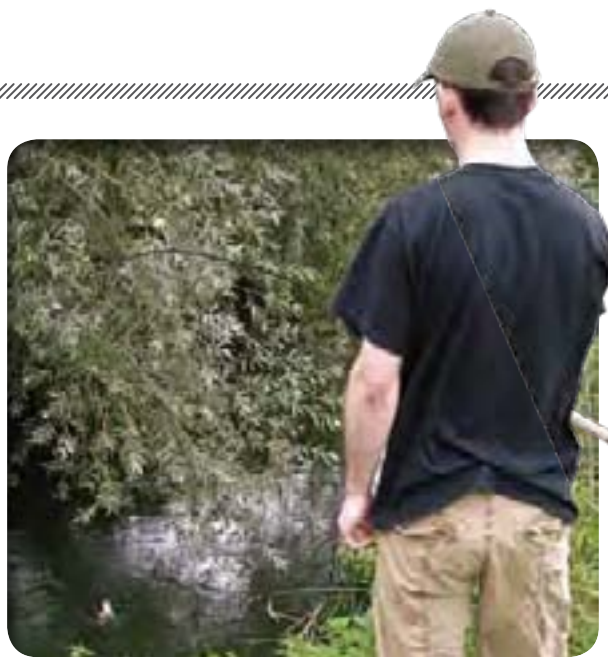
I had not been fishing all that long when the rod tip bounced as I experienced a couple of line bites ... then the rod tip went over.

After a short but strong fight, the fish was in the net. As soon as I saw it I knew it was a double and tipping the scales at 11lb 14oz, I was more than pleased. The cabbages caused me few problems and I had a feeling there was more to come from the stretch.

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Follow Your Gut Instincts

I hadn't planned to go back the next evening but, after another night of rain, I got the feeling there might be the chance of another bite.

After a hard day at work I was at home having my dinner and just had one of those gut feelings when I knew I had to be out on the bank. I left the house quite late, just after 7pm.

It was gone 8pm by the time I reached the river and I knew I didn't have much time as I had work the next day. After a long walk I was at my chosen spot and the rods were ready to go. I threaded a bait onto each hair and filled a solid PVA bag up with freebies. Once the rods were out I expected a bite.

About 45 minutes later, the top rod went over and a barbel was on. As soon as I picked the rod up it was real 'hit-and-hold' stuff and, to be honest, I had no idea what size the fish was at this point. I just wanted it out of the weed and in the net.

The Big Test

The fish tried to go downstream but I held firm and didn't give it an inch of line. I knew the tackle I was using would stand the test with a big fish on the end.

The barbel battled hard and surfaced halfway across the river. From what I could make out it looked very long. I soon had it swimming upstream but it kept going for the weed before trying to power off downstream.

It was around five minutes before I finally drew the fish over the net and it really did look long.

I was unsure at this point how deep the fish would be, in terms of its build. The fish I had caught the previous evening was a lean, empty specimen so I presumed that might be the case with this one.

Once in the net I donned my head torch and was greeted by an amazing sight.

Time For A Big Surprise

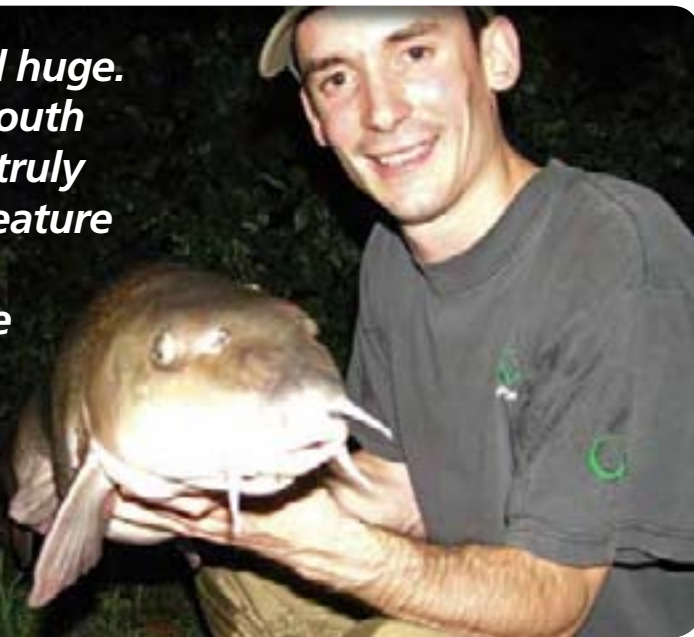
I thought the fish was maybe 15lb but I was in for a surprise. I bit through the line and gave the fish a chance to rest

as I got the camera and scales sorted.

The fish looked huge. Its head and mouth were massive, truly an immense creature in magnificent condition. Once on the scales the dial swung round past the 18lb mark and I just couldn't believe it. It settled on a weight of 18lb 1oz. I could not believe what I was seeing – over 18lb!

After taking some pictures and allowing the fish a decent recovery period, I returned it to the water. What a result, my third session on the stretch and I had fished for no more than seven hours. It just goes to show that preparation work really does contribute to success. **CF**

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Alan's Top Tips

1 Preparation work is key when targeting big fish. It pays to be organised and have your kit ready to go, with rigs ready made up and enough bait for a session to hand.

2 Follow your gut instincts when conditions are right. Short sessions can yield big fish if you are willing to put in the effort.

3 Barrels are a deadly barbel bait.

4 Solid PVA bags give good presentation when fishing near weed. Take your time when tying them up and make sure you are as accurate as you can be when casting them into small gaps in the weed.

5 Time spent searching for new swims and then looking for clues of big fish is never time wasted.

Tie A PVA Bag



You will need

- 1 Solid PVA bags of various sizes.
- 2 Free offering of your choice (make sure they are PVA friendly)



Put your baited hook into the bag and push the point through a corner.



Add a few freebies to cover the bottom of the bag.



Add the lead into the opposite corner to where the hook is.



Fill the bag up with freebies



Pinch the top of the PVA bag and twist until the bag becomes tight.



Using the strip of PVA you cut from the bag in step 1, wrap it around the top of the bag 3 times.



Tie a couple of overhand knots in the PVA and trim off the tag ends.



You're now ready to cast in!