

Winter Barbel Fishing

When it comes to netting his share of winter barbel, Alan Stagg is the kiddie. Here he gives you an insight into how he does what he does. And there's no smoke and mirrors, whistles and bells. It's simple and it's straightforward.





However, don't let this put you off. It is worth persevering and being confident in these conditions, as the rewards are there for those that are willing to put in the effort!

If you are planning barbel fishing in winter, waterproof thermals and warm boots are a worthwhile investment. There are many different styles produced by a number of manufacturers – shop around and find something that suits you and your pocket. A shivering angler sitting out on the bank is not a happy angler and will not fish effectively. Bear this in mind.

Venues

Club card tickets can offer excellent value for money and often control some good river stretches. It is, of course, an advantage if you have access to a number of different rivers and stretches as river conditions and water levels can vary considerably between locations. A prime example of this is my local River Loddon, which rises very quickly then drops considerably in 24 hours.

However, after a short drive to Burghfield Cemex's water on the River Kennet, I can find water levels which are still high and coloured. A quick change of venue if conditions aren't right can be a big advantage – travelling the extra few miles can often be well worth the effort, sometimes it only takes a few minutes to get a bite when conditions are favourable.

Tackle

Winter tackle should be stepped up considerably compared to your summer kit. Your chosen river will probably be carrying a lot more water and debris coming down the river can take its toll.

I favour rods of around 1.75lb test curve, but more importantly they should have a progressive action to deal with large fish in high water conditions. Shimano Baitrunners are my chosen reels, but more importantly they need to be strong, reliable and have a good clutch.

There are lots of good lines on the market. Use something you have 100 per cent confidence in. It should have high abrasion qualities and be able to deal with large amounts of debris coming down the river, which can take its toll on inferior lines.

Your chosen line needs to be able to deal with heavy leads, 7oz, 8oz or even 10oz, comfortably.

When it comes to hook choice the most important aspect is they need to be strong and reliable – a hook you can trust is imperative. My preferred hooks are Gardner Talon Tips, used accordingly to match the conditions and size of bait.

October signals the start of my winter barbel fishing campaign. This is the time when all the information I have collected over the previous couple of months will, hopefully, pay off and help put a big fish on the bank.

Weather conditions play an important role in winter barbel fishing and, if at all possible, should dictate when you need to be on the bank. However, I accept this cannot be the case for everyone.

Our winters are becoming increasingly wet, so get used to fishing in high, coloured water conditions. The advantages of fishing in swollen rivers are the barbel cannot see you, cannot see the tackle and they are very receptive to heavy feeding in these conditions.

The disadvantages in these conditions are that you can't see the bottom, you can't see the fish, can't see the position of the hook-bait and, more often than not, weather conditions can be very uncomfortable.

“When looking for the ideal speed of flow, walking pace or fast walking pace is about right. More critical is to find a stretch of river where the surface is smooth, almost glass-like, as the odds are that is where the barbel are going to be.”

Conditions – When To Fish?

After a few days of heavy rain it is common to find branches and other debris being carried down the river. If you encounter these conditions stay at home and wait a couple of days for the debris to clear before venturing out again. Even though the water may still be high the fishing can be fantastic.

Criteria

When looking for the ideal speed of flow, walking pace or fast walking pace is about right. More critical is to find a stretch of river where the surface is smooth, almost glass-like, as the odds are that is where the barbel are going to be. The smooth surface water indicates that the bottom is likely to be sand or gravel with no major snags present. The

only exception to the smooth surface rule is to look for surface movement that identifies live and dead weedbeds.

Typically when rushes die back in the winter, they leave stalks on the riverbed.

The flow hits these stalks and boils to the surface giving an indication of where the weedbed is located.

A bait positioned around this weedbed is likely to bring an immediate response.

Another great place to fish in high water is on the inside of a bend. This seems to be the case on most rivers I have fished, as the barbel seem to tuck in here out of the flow. Another brilliant place is at the confluence of two rivers; sometimes you can actually see

different colours of the waters where the rivers join. The barbel seem to sit in here out of the way, feeding happily on what's been getting washed in from the other river. One place I never fish in high water conditions is snags as I have found them unproductive. This may be due to the barbel moving out from the snags into the river making the most of the food which is being washed down in the current.

Confident In Coloured Water

One of the advantages of high, coloured water conditions is that it gives the barbel confidence to feed all day, instead of waiting for the cover of darkness.

Ensure that you have a hook-bait that is positioned correctly and make sure the fish can find it by wrapping some paste around a boily.

Above: Wrapping paste around a pellet or boily hook-bait increases attraction.

When the boily is in the water the paste begins to break down and its flavour and scents are released downriver, attracting fish to it. Once the paste has washed away it leaves the boily in place for the fish to discover.

In flooded conditions you rarely see other anglers on the bank. It always amazes me in such good conditions how few anglers want to venture out on the bank to fish in horrendous, messy conditions.

Make the most of it, but please don't take any risks – no fish is worth your life!

However, not all floodwater conditions produce good fishing. The reason for this is temperature. In an ideal world you should be looking at a water temperature of about 44° F and rising. But in reality what you can sometimes get is a falling water temperature and a river full of snowmelt and road salt, an absolute waste of time!

However, not all coldwater conditions are bad. When the river has stabilised and the temperature has levelled off, water conditions can recover and lead to some quite good fishing.



Go Easy

When fishing in really cold conditions, try not to introduce too many freebies as the fish will not be moving around very much. Location is important, put the bait where the fish are. The fish aren't going to be eating very much, so if a barbel comes across a bait, you really want it to be your hook-bait.

Try using very small pieces of paste flicked regularly into the swim. If barbel are around they will soon be on your bait. If a bite is not forthcoming in a few minutes move on, they are not close by. When it is very cold a small ball of paste, equivalent to a one egg mix is all that is needed for a day's fishing.

In cold, clear conditions, presentation is critical. You need to be on small hooks, small bits of bait and clear line. Using the smallest piece of paste or boily you can get away with can sometimes induce a bite, particularly when all else fails.

It amazes me when the barbel aren't that hungry they will often pick up small offerings and ignore a big boily or piece of paste.

However, most of my fishing in the winter is not like this and when conditions are poor I hardly think it is worth the effort.

PVA – Yes Or No?

I find myself using PVA in one way or another for pretty much all my barbel fishing. I doubt if there is a more accurate way to get freebies close to your hook-bait on the bottom of a flowing river.

This can be particularly true in high water conditions, when it can be common to have problems with accuracy when using a bait dropper. PVA string, PVA tape, solid and mesh PVA bags all have their application. A wide range of PVA is sold by a number of companies but it is worth taking into account that



Above: Alan's winter flood rig with a flying back lead and lead core.

some may melt at different rates, which can be a particular problem in coldwater conditions. Experiment and find one you are happy with.

Rigs

It seems nowadays we get floods from October right the way through to March and you are going to need big leads to hold bottom in these conditions.

I find that the gripper style of leads with dimples on them stop the lead being dragged out of position. Anti-tangle tubing or lead core stops the line being damaged by any floodwater debris being washed down in the water.

It is also a good idea to use paste moulded around the hook, instead of hair rigs in the winter, because you don't want any debris hanging up or the hook getting caught on the bottom. My standard winter barbel rig consists of a simple running lead with a hook-length

of around 12 inches of the new Sufix 10lb Camfusion.

However, if conditions are particularly bad, this is often stepped up to 15lb breaking strain. A long length of Plummot lead core and a flying keep lead is incorporated to help keep the line pinned to the bottom of the river.

Baits, Flavours and Additives

My chosen winter barbel baits consist mainly of boilies and paste baits, but there are times when more traditional baits such as luncheon meat, maggots etc. are very effective.

Carp Company Icelandic Red Boilies and paste flavoured with Caviar and Cranberry is an outstanding barbel bait.

I have found barrel-shaped boilies particularly effective recently, especially on stretches where a lot of pellet is being used. Whether this is due to its different shape I'm not quite sure.

I mould a matching paste around the hook-bait to help boost the hook-bait further and help the fish find it in high water conditions.

In cold clear conditions, half a 14mm barrel in conjunction with a size 10 or 12 hook can be very effective. This rig is commonly brought into play if the barbel are particularly wary or bites are not as confident as I feel they should be.

Flavours and additives can play an important role in winter barbel fishing. They can be used to release scent trails downstream, leading fish to the hook-bait. A liquid additive that I use without fail is liquid fish protein extracts, which can be deadly if used in the correct manner.

They can be used to boost the hook-



“Flavours and additives can play an important role in winter barbel fishing. They can be used to release scent trails downstream, leading fish to the hook-bait.”



bait and freebies, or used neat in a PVA bag, the list is endless. However, make sure it is water soluble in all but the coldest conditions. Carp Company Aminol is the one I favour and it fits the bill perfectly.

However, there are a number produced by different companies. Just remember, quality is important!

I hope this helps you catch a big winter barbel. But more importantly, get out there and enjoy yourself! **CF**

Below: A big floodwater barbel caught on a 'glugged' boily.



Venue Facts



Angling



River Kennet, Burghfield, nr Reading

The River Kennet at Burghfield is probably one of the most prolific barbel stretches of this fine river. It has produced many double figure barbel, with fish to over 16lb. Having a variety of features over its 1400m length, including two weir pools, gravel shallows and slower deep water. There are also many specimen fish of other species present including chub to 7lb, carp over 26lb and pike up to 21lb.

Season tickets for two rods cost **£50** for adults
OAP and disabled anglers cost **£46**
Under 18s cost **£37.50**

For more information

Call Cemex Angling on 01932 583630
Email info@cemexangling.com
or visit their website www.cemexangling.com