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Don't waste winter!

Words / Photography: Ian Russell

The irrepressible Ian Russell tells us why winter is for learning, trying new things...and enjoying

This month's piece is a sort of natural follow-up to last month's, where I explained how to get something of value from every session, no matter how bleak the conditions. Well, no season does 'bleak' – and I don't mean the fish – like winter, and I've lost count of the sessions I've endured where the nights seemed endless and the bites weren't ever going to come. These days, rather than nutting it out through the freezing weather, I treat winter as a giant session in itself and do everything I can to get as much from it as possible. It works, too, and for the past few years I've not only had more enjoyment than ever from my winter fishing, I've learned to look forward to it as a special time. Yes, really.

First, let's get a couple of things straight; if you want to tough it out through sub-zero conditions, that's entirely up to you and I'll wish you the best of luck with that. I've done more than my share of hard weather head-banging, and while that's not for me any more, I can remember the joy of holding carp for the camera while the world around me glistened magically. Truth to tell, those magical times were few and far between, and although that's what makes them so special, it eventually dawned, even on me, that I was enduring more than enjoying my fishing trips, so I changed my approach. It only took me about 30 years to suss that out, you know. Proper sharp, that's me. So, don't think this is about me wussing out, because it isn't. It's about getting the most pleasure out of my fishing time, and for me most of that pleasure seems to be coming from learning new ways to catch fish.

Teaching the teacher

As some of you may know, I'm an angling coach. The process of becoming a teacher has definitely turned me on to the endless possibilities of learning. Studying for my coaching course implanted a desire for learning I never had at school or throughout the years that followed, but I'm a learnaholic now all right, and I'm swotting up like the clever kids used to do at my school. I even make notes!

The Internet is brilliant for this sort of thing and the CEMEX Angling forum is a mine of really useful information. I'm lucky enough to know a few of the lads on there, but even if you don't, it's easy to work out which members know their stuff and pick their virtual brains. You can also ask questions on the public forum, or send a PM – Private Message – to one of the more knowledgeable members and politely request assistance.

You can also Google the subjects you're interested in, and I'm constantly amazed at the sheer amount of information available on even the most obscure fishing topics. The 'net is great for graphics, too, especially when it comes to explaining rigs, feature finding, tying knots and anything else where a picture paints a thousand words. Moving pictures paint even more of course, and Sky TV is definitely your friend, as once again out comes my swotty notepad, this time used in tandem with the TV remote control to freeze-frame noteworthy scenes in fishing programmes. If you can't learn from John Wilson and Matt Hayes, you really are in the wrong game – and I'm not.

Books are an obvious source of information, and the best ones will inspire as well as teach, but let's not forget the extremely valuable resource that this magazine has become in just over a year. I've learned a ton of useful stuff from reading Carp and Coarse Angler, and there's never an issue without at least three or four new angles for me to explore, especially in winter.

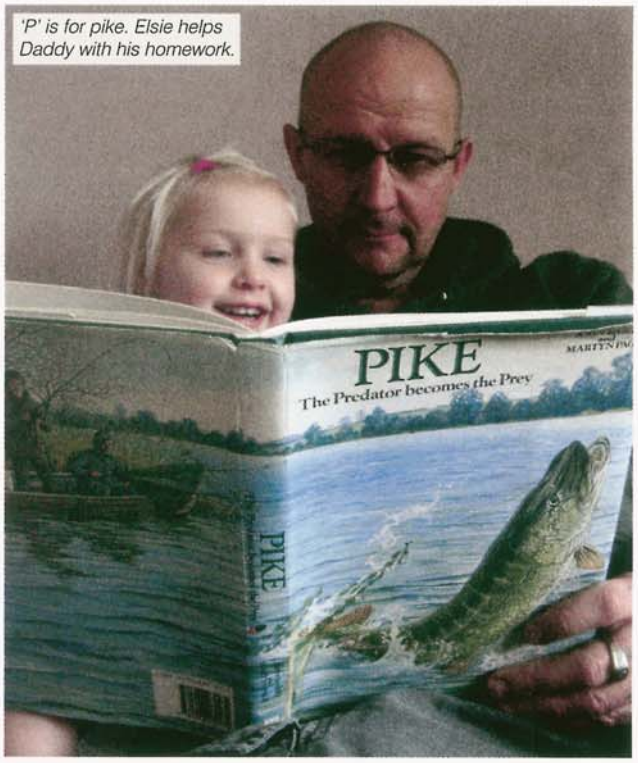
Theory and practise

The learning never stops, and that's the way it will always be, but there comes a time when theory must give way to practise and you absolutely have to get on the bank and have a proper go at it. My latest exploration into 'alternative' angling came at Old Bury Hill in Dorking, where, despite the weatherman assuring me that it was going to be chucking it down all day long, I pitched up at dawn with some float fishing gear and my life jacket in search of a winter carp from the boat, with a backup bucketful of assorted deadbaits and some predator tackle on hand for zander. The conditions were every bit as awful as predicted, but with endless opportunities to learn sure to unfold throughout the day, I was absolutely buzzing as I paddled through the wind and rain toward the island on the main lake.

Less than 40 yards out I was just about making headway against a lusty south-westerly as an ominous black mass frowned on me from above. Ever the optimist, I made it to the lee of the island and dropped the boat's mud weights to anchor us about 20 yards from the bank. I've done quite a bit of this sort of fishing at Old Bury Hill and in the summer there's every chance of some fantastic sport. My angler's brain ignored the reality of the conditions and switched to 'recall', transporting me back to those great summer sessions, where carp to over 20lbs queued up to make my adrenaline pump and my arms ache. My hands actually trembled as I mounted the mini-boilie on the hair, and I know the cold had nothing to do with that.

My float set-up was simplicity itself, with a Korum Twin-Tip Barbel rod, a reel loaded with 10lb mono and a size 12 hook, hair rigged on 10lb braid. The float is a chubber design, fished with a drilled shot sliding beneath it, buffered with a rubber bead against the hook link swivel. I set the depth with a pair of float stops and, with the shot on the bottom, the hook link was lying flat, and so was the float. I prefer to fish this system without multiple shot on the line because it's easier to cast, less prone to tangles and I don't want lumps of lead hanging in mid-water around feeding fish. Besides, when there's a ripple on the water, it's easier to see a flat float rise than a cocked float dip, if you get my drift.

There I sat, with my float flat but my hopes still high, bobbing like a cork on Old Bury Hill lake, as the wind pushed the waves in one direction and the undertow in the other. I was happy, wrapped in my thermals, with my Thermos serving hot, sweet coffee, while the waves lapped against the hull of the boat and tried to rock me to sleep. Only anglers as sad as I am could truly appreciate the joy of a situation such as this, and I caught myself smiling.



'P' is for pike. Elsie helps Daddy with his homework.

Surfing up a storm. The 'net is a mine of useful information.

Blimey! - there's a ton of stuff to learn.

I eventually lobbed out a zander rod, too, but as it turned out, that smile, a marginal snag, and the ugliest crayfish in England, were the only things I caught from the boat, although pneumonia would have definitely been on the cards if I hadn't paddled back to the boathouse like a madman before a curtain of wind-driven rain blasted across the lake. With a full day's worth of winter angling ahead of me the last thing I needed was a fine drenching and I was glad to see out the most Biblical bit of the downpour from the shelter of the boathouse. As soon as the animals stopped going in two-by-two, I turned left out of the boathouse and headed for a swim next to the large oak about 150 yards down the bank. Mercifully, the rain took half an hour off while I staked out my brolly and set up my zander traps.

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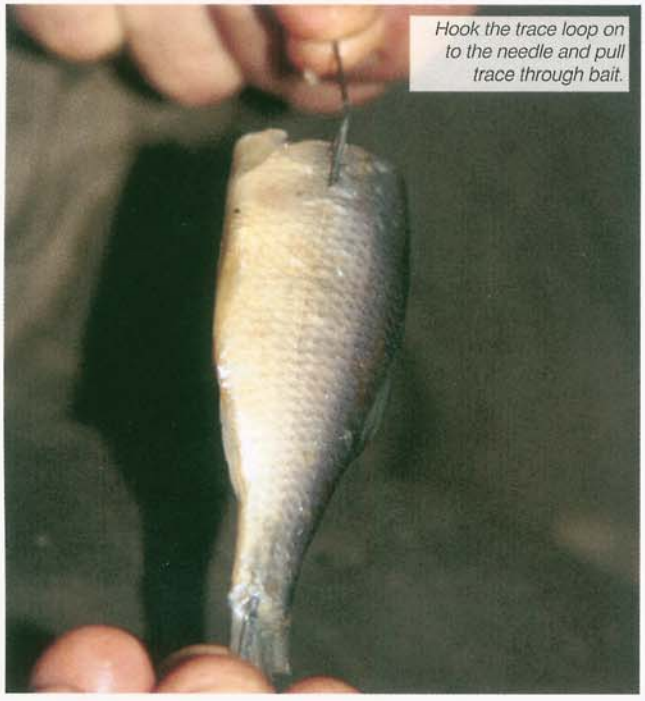
I'd read about the zander chasing exploits of this magazine's own Thinking Anglers, Ben and Steve, and I went with my version of their single hook and deadbait section approach. I've been testing a flexible new trace material and tied it to the size 4, wide gape hook with a simple blood knot. A loop at the opposite end allowed me to un-clip the trace from its quick link and thread on my deadbait sections – sprat, joey mackerel and small roach – as I would with a PVA stick, leaving the hook point exposed and ready to do its work. A sliding drilled bullet and a small buffer bead completed the rig, and a Korum Precision Specialist 12-foot rod in 2lb TC gave me enough power to set the hook and play the fish, plus I could cast my baits with a smooth 'lob', which with soft-bodied baits like sprats was pretty much the only way to get the 30 yards or so I needed.

Now, let's establish a few things, here; first, I'm no expert predator angler. Second, the majority of my predator angling 'lessons' have been devoted to fish care, and finally, not being an expert is probably the best thing about it. You see, every success is a bonus and every failure teaches me something important, and when you've been fishing as long as I have, it's one hell of a buzz being a super-keen student of angling.

Is it a whacker?...

...no. It's the ugliest crayfish in England.

Push the baiting needle through from tail to head end.



Hook the trace loop on to the needle and pull trace through bait.

Leave the hook point exposed like this.

So it was that I sat beneath my shelter, leaning forward in my chair and willing those Delkims to warble, while the rain jet-washed Old Bury Hill. There came that dopey smile again, and my face began to glow with the pure pleasure of it all.

By now it was midday and even I knew it was about as far from bite time as it could be, but my pulse quickened with every wind-generated bleep from the buzzers. My studies had shown that zander prefer to feed in lower light, so at this time of year that meant any time from 3.30 pm onward. With the fishery closing at 4pm, I was hoping that at least one fish might fancy an early snack, and I 'roved' my baits by 'leapfrogging' along the bank toward the boathouse. Get me with my predator anglerspeak, eh? In case you don't know, 'leapfrogging' is simply the tactic of moving one rod past the other and working your way along the bank, exploring any features that present themselves as you go. I was working my baits on a 'one close, one further' system, where I had a bait about ten yards out among the dormant lilies, and the other 30 yards or so out in the open water.

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Again, having read up on zander tactics, I left my baits no longer than 20 minutes, before 'twitching' them back with a couple of turns of the reel handle, hoping to to tempt a strike from a reluctant zander. I love this active type of angling, because I'm a hyperactive type of angler, and knowing that my constant re-casting and twitching of those baits could improve my chances of a pick-up makes the process all the more exciting. Yes, I was out in the freezing rain doing this and so far I'd caught sod-all, but I was learning all the time and refining my approach, so as far as I was concerned I was winning.

At the boathouse end, right in the corner, a better predator angler than I am had already caught two pike and two zander, and knowing the lake as I do I knew he had to be fishing in deeper water than I was. He was tucked away in the very corner of the lake into which the wind, waves and weather were pounding. These fish didn't seem to be on the back of the wind,

I'm a hyperactive type of zander angler, and I prefer it that way.

then, and all the bites I'd seen this chap get had come about 40 yards from the bank in fully exposed water. Mind you, by now I'd had three serious enquiries, which caused the bobbin to lift and the Delkim to squawk, and these had all come on my margin rod. What's a chap to do? Especially a chap who is learning this game as he goes along.

Summoning all of my predator angling smarts, I made a bold tactical decision; I would make a move...to the Old Bury Hill canteen, for egg, sausage and chips. This was a replenishment strategy, purely intended to fuel my enthusiasm for twitching, re-casting and everything else I needed to do to catch myself a zander.

Back on the bank, I upped sticks and shifted my shelter right next to the boathouse, and I managed to do so between downpours, which was a right result. I then wasted that result by messing with my rods instead of leaving the baits to work their smelly magic, so I got soaked anyway. I truly didn't care and another enquiry on my margin rod saw me drop two new baits fairly close to the boathouse. With bite time fast approaching, I forced myself to sit on my hands and let things happen as the angling gods intended.

That lasted all of ten minutes before I was back at my rods and twitching like a man possessed. A turn here, a tweak there, it soon adds up. Eventually, with just half an hour to go before the 4 pm watershed, it added up to a stuttering take which was no different to the enquiries I'd had earlier, only now I was right over my rods and able to hit the twitch.

It's still chucking it down, and I'm still twitching those baits!

A fine handful of sprats.

If that bobbin lifts - I'll strike!

And hit it I certainly did, sweeping the rod back and feeling the double-thump of a fish ready to have a row. Zander don't mind a scrap, at least this one was up for it, and twice I was ready with the net before the fish had finished trying to throw the hook. There was all sorts of head-shaking, a bit of gill-flaring, and even a reasonable attempt at a tail-walk, before the zander jacked it in and let me pilot it into the net. I do believe I did that tragic air-punching thing when that fish was safely mine. Yes I did, I remember doing it now. I do hope nobody saw me.

As you can see, the British Record Fish Committee needn't worry itself about interviewing me or testing my scales, but one thing I can confirm is that very few zander will ever be caught by a happier angler. I didn't even weigh it, but then I didn't need to. You can't weigh pleasure, not even the huge amount that I had going on right then, as I slipped the zander back and stood there staring into the gathering darkness of the absolutely wonderful Old Bury Hill lake. A ten-minute pack up saw me and my gear bundled into the car and, with the heaters thawing my twitching fingers, I nosed out into the Dorking rush hour.

By the time I got home I'd arranged two more early learning trips; one after grayling, and another back to Old Bury Hill for a proper go at those zander, preferably without Noah standard weather. There are so many different types of fish I want to catch and ways of catching them I want to learn, I really do think I'm going to run out of winter before I work my way through it all. Oh well, I'll just have to extend my learning season, that's all. Winter, eh? You gotta love it. ■

No happier captor, anywhere. I love winter more than ever.