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thinking anglers challenge

Words / Photography: Steve Fantauzzi / Ben Hamilton

With the cold weather now drawing ever closer, with clear and cold nights and crisp sunny days, both of us are wondering if we actually had a summer at all this year?

This month's challenge was to have another go for the zander, and hoping to catch Steve his first double-figure fish. Steve and I planned a few hours fishing at the Old Bury Hill lake in Dorking, Surrey, which is my home town. This holds a large number of zander with some real clonkers in there up to 16lbs at the right time of year, usually the latter part of the predator season when the big females are full up.

On arrival, we walked up to the picturesque Bury Hill boathouse, which is a tackle shop/cafe right on the lake itself. I wanted to check in with Russell, the ever helpful Bury Hill manager, and ask how it had been fishing and which bank had been more productive in the last 24 hours since my little recce trip a few nights before. The previous evening had been really hard going as an oxygen crash really put the zeds off the feed, with me moving about seven times for just three bites with one nice zander just under 10 pounds and two smaller samples.

I was well pleased as Russell said that the oxygen had climbed back up to almost double what it had been a few evenings previously, and an angler further up the island bank had been having it right off with the zander that day. So, first port of call was to go and have a brief chat with him. With a big grin on his face, he told us that he'd had an excellent day. He had banked a lot of zeds with a new PB of just over 14lb, which is a really good fish and great news for us.

Steve

We pitched up at the top end of the lake with a view to leap-frogging each other down the bank back to the car park area. The first casts each produced nothing, only a couple of small bleeps on Ben's left-hand rod, which we put down to crayfish. Ben had found one crawling in the margin so we got a snapshot as an excuse just in case we blanked. The conditions were bright but with a few fish out in the day, we were confident we could catch a few as we still had an hour in front of us before we had to leave.

A bait-robbing git. The crayfish, not Ben. Probably.

After not getting a bite in my swim, I moved to the other side of Ben and within five minutes, one rod was getting the odd beep then pulled up tight. I struck into it; fish on! Just as we got the fish on the mat, one of Ben's rods was away. Things were starting to pick up. We'd both wanted to get a few fish under our belts, instead of panicking in the last hour.

Geared to go a'zandering.

Ben

I know from experience that in zander fishing, you really need to find the shoals. If you get on a good pack of them it can be take after take, normally ending up with some bigger ones towards the end of the session. Most importantly, when we fish together we fish as a unit and this takes away any competitiveness whatsoever. We fish really well together, often catching quite a few in the end and, of course, it's well handy - two pairs of hands and all that!

Now normally on the cold crispy days with bright sunlight it can be hard going but with the oxygen back up and the zander not really getting caught much In recent days I just knew if we kept mobile and recasting that we would get amongst them at some point.

Once Steve had the first it just started a frenzy with often bites on two rods at once and slowly but surely the fish

got bigger an bigger and I was sure that at some point Steve would get his biggun.

One of my favourite little tricks when you haven't had a bite in 20 minutes or so, is just to tweak the baits simply by winding the reel handle and resetting the bobbin. It's quite amazing just how quickly you get a response, as if the zeds are there all the time just lying there dormant looking at your bait deciding when they're going to eat it. Steve is a very adaptable angler and you can tell that he is an all-rounder as he quickly got in the groove and started catching quite a few.

It was during a quiet period of about 20 minutes or so that, after tweaking both my rods, I was met with a full-on bite and upon striking, the heavy resistance gave me an inkling that this could be the first double. Steve wandered up to find me with a smaller one already in the net and a biggun shaking its head in a vain attempt at throwing the hooks before I got him in. Steve just laughed at me saying, "It's zander carnage!" and as I passed Steve my remaining rod I grabbed the big one and put him on the unhooking mat that Steve had kindly put behind me.

You gotta love those zeds.

I wasn't sure of its weight and said it might just make double-figures as it was quite plump, but as Steve did the honours I saw that it was roughly the same size as my bigger fish on my recce trip a few evenings previously and not quite a double. Still, it was a magnificent fish, with proper markings and very clean.

Not quite a double, but superb all the same.

Steve

Things got really hectic at one point and we could have done with another pair of hands, even if just to take pictures. We had a number of takes and a lot of smaller fish and by fishing this way, using the tactics Ben had shown me, I'm sure if we continued regularly fishing the lake sooner rather than later we would hit one of the really big zander. Saying that, Ben banked one just under the 10lb mark, the biggest of the short session, which was still a mighty impressive sight.

We had loads more between us with almost every fish being between 6-8 pounds and then we started to run out of baits. It was nearly dark and our time was coming to an end but in total we had probably somewhere in the region of 20 takes in three hours, which made the session seriously enjoyable for both of us.

Steve caught his share, as usual.

TACTICS

Ben

Again we fished simple, lightweight rigs, with Steve coming up with a nice idea of using our Thinking Anglers Heavy Rings and making simple running rigs with three SSGs on a piece of 20lb Amnesia and, as they are all but resistance-free, buffered against an 8mm oval bead, the bites were incredible with a few dropped takes but most were turned into fish on the bank.

Steve

Ben had run out of the Kevlar trace he always used for zander fishing so I contacted Simon who Ben got his stuff from before and picked up some of his Predator Pro Kevlar traces which you can knot very very easily in 25lb just in case we hooked a big pike.

Ben

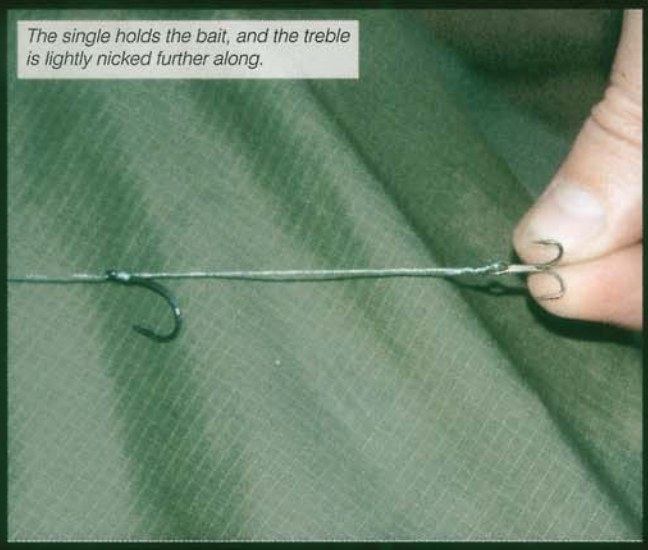
What we have found to work much better now is using one treble and replacing the other with a size 6 carp hook, as this makes for better hooking in the deadbait's tail. We simply 'nick' the treble further down the bait and the most important thing of all, is that we were striking our runs very quickly as we did not want any deep hooking. Zander are very much like pike in that they are big softies on the bank and do not take well to too much handling, especially when it involves removing trebles taken too far back.

So be as quick as you can with the unhooking and treat them really carefully, and always let the zander get rid of the

Light running rig. Melt the mono...

...and blob it to hold the SSG shot.

Rig bits are minimal.


The single holds the bait, and the treble is lightly nicked further along.

air before releasing them as they can get quite 'gassy' when you play them in. Just be patient with them when putting them back and as soon as you see them burp out those air bubbles, they'll usually give a healthy kick of their tails and swim off.

Steve

A piece of kit worth mentioning is a small glove which I saw in Ben's bag. If you're not used to handling zander or predator fish it can only help. Also, one thing I nearly forgot myself on this trip, is a pair of long forceps. These are a must for removing hooks as quickly as possible. Basically, if you're not sure of how to handle predators, or any fish for that matter, either learn how to do it, or go fishing with someone who knows their stuff. When handling large predators, there's no room for the 'make it up as you go along' approach.

Ben

One thing for sure, is that I am going to be fishing the Thames a lot this winter with a few friends who have already had the zeds up to nearly 14 pounds. They've taken them on sunken paternosters under the pontoons near a big boatyard, so that sounds like fun to me. They are also getting perch to just under five pounds, which are true giants in the world of catching stripeys, and with the carp fishing becoming hard going in the colder parts of winter, I can think of nothing else I'd rather be doing.

It was a shame Steve didn't bag himself a real biggun but we both really enjoyed the session, and there's always next time. Believe me - it will happen!

Allow time for recovery. Zander can 'gas up'.