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11 PAGE SPECIAL

The John Wilson Interview

The main man pulls no punches with his views on angling.

XMAS GIFT GUIDE SEE PAGE 57

Words and pics: Jim Foster

Shy Biters

Fancy some decent sport this autumn and winter? Then head to Bury Hill Fishery's Milton Lake, Surrey, where shy-biting roach and crucians run to over 3lb – and feed all year. Russ Evans shows Jim Foster how it's done…

You wouldn't believe Russ's stunning Milton lake peg was on a commercial fishery.

It could be a scene from a traditional fishing lake 50 years ago. Big reed beds, slowly turning brown as autumn takes hold, gently sway in the breeze. Mature trees line the banks and big beds of lily pads predominate in the margins, offering all manner of fish shelter and food beneath their canopy.

But this is no traditional lake – it's a commercial, man-made water. Aesthetically, it's one of the best-looking venues that I've ever cast my eyes on, and when Russ Evans, who I'm fishing with today, tells me that it's only 15 years old I have to pause and take another look at my surroundings.

As he fishes, I marvel at how man could have created such a natural-looking, wildlife haven. Funny to think we're just 20 minutes outside London – we could be anywhere in southern England. Welcome to Milton Lake, on the Bury Hill Fishery complex near Dorking in Surrey.

Russ's target for the day is slightly odd. Unlike everyone else fishing, he's not after carp. Instead, the target today is to catch two of the UK's shyest-biting fish – that perennial autumn feeder, the roach, and a species that isn't usually associated with colder water, the crucian carp.

By the time I turn up at around 1pm on a Sunday afternoon, Russ has already been fishing for four hours. Immediately I can see why he's picked the swim that he's in. The big reed bed I mentioned earlier stretches on for an eternity to his right. To his left, running down the entire length of the margin before petering out at the bordering swim, is a massive bank of lilies.

This has to be the most perfect, general coarse fishing swim on any commercial fishery

Angler File

Name Russ Evans
Age 45
Born Plaistow, East London, living in Oxted Surrey
Occupation Team captain of southern match outfit BCUK Sport One. Also tackle shop manager at Bury Hill Fishery
Best catch 250lb net of bream from Lough Erne, Ireland
Angling ambitions To qualify for the Fish 'O' Mania final

Shy Biters

anywhere in the country and I want to see how he goes about putting a bag of commercial redfins together.

"I've already got about 10lb of roach in the net," he says with a smile. "Nothing above 12oz, but fun all the same.

"Because 90 per cent of anglers target carp on a lake like this, the roach thrive as they're not being caught often. A few zander have appeared as well – we don't really know how – but that's a good thing as they provide a natural balance that stops the roach becoming too plentiful.

"The survivors grow large. I've caught roach in here to nearly 2lb. Fish over 1lb are relatively common," he adds. There can't be many commercial fisheries in the country that offer redfin fishing like that. But what about the crucians?

It isn't long before the float trembles. These fish are obviously shy biters.

"The same is true of the crucians," Russ carries on in his low-pitched, gentle east-London accent. "They also run to over 3lb. I'll catch plenty this afternoon. I've got about 20lb of them in the net already as well."

Gear-wise, Russ is using a pole with two top-three kits to his left on a rack, along with the one he's using. Another top kit holds a pole pot.

He's not fishing far out; his pole is capable of putting a rig in at 16 metres, but there's no need for that today. Instead, the bait is gently lowered into the water alongside some lilies – though not too tight – at around the 11m or 12m mark.

The line is fed on a little-and-often basis, with a small pouchful of B1 Micro Pellets carefully catapulted slightly to the side of the float. It's clear that Russ isn't fishing right over the loose

TOP TIP

If you find that you're missing bites from shy roach and crucians, try fishing the soft expander on a hair-rig so that the bait is set away from the hook. This fools the fish into thinking it's a free offering.

tcf Bloodworm Boost

1 Ringer's 6mm expander pellets are Russ's hook-bait choice.

2 They are soaked overnight in water to allow them expand.

3 The pellet's flavour is boosted with a BCUK bloodworm juice.

4 Roach and crucians are rather partial to Russ's perfect pellets.

Thanks to carp anglers' baits, Milton Lake's roach readily come to soft pellet hookers.

offerings, but a metre or so off them.

"I often find that the roach are more likely to be picked up away from the free bait," he says. "Today that's definitely the case. None of the other anglers fishing are putting much bait in, which is bad – because it means the carp won't be drawn away from this area and will target my feed. And I don't want to catch carp on this gear!

"I've held back on the feed because of this and will be looking to pick up roach a metre or so away from the baited area," continues Russ. "This is where they will be, especially when carp are in the swim. You know when carp are in the swim as bites from the other species tend to die off for a few minutes."

It isn't long before the float trembles. These fish are obviously shy biters.

It raises slightly, then sinks almost imperceptibly, but enough to provoke a strike.

Russ's elastic pours out of the pole's tip as a good fish starts its battle, trying to get into the forest of lily pads close by.

"This is a crucian," says Russ. "You can usually tell from the bite. They're exceptionally shy fish."

He's right, it's a crucian, and a good one too. It must weigh in the region of 1lb 12oz and it's in great condition. Most of the fish in Milton Lake are.

The roach are playing hard to get, though. Half an hour passes and two more crucians are landed, along with a 'nuisance' mirror carp of around 4lb and a tench of around 3lb. It's good fishing, but not exactly what we came for.

The feed continues to go in slowly, maybe a dozen micro pellets every put-in.

Russ is baiting three lines in all – one close to the reeds on the right-hand side of the swim, one almost tight to the lilies on the left and the third slightly further out from the pads in more open water.

It's time for a slight change of tack. Because the roach are so quiet, Russ adds another two sections onto his pole and fishes a single Ringer pellet even further away from his baited area.

Within a minute, the float rises a fraction of an inch. Russ strikes – and is into his first roach for the camera. It's not a bad fish – maybe 12oz – but not the stamp he was hoping for.

I find it slightly mad that a fish as traditional as the roach can be taken on a 6mm Ringer hook-bait pellet, but I suppose where that becomes a main food source thanks to anglers it's only to be expected.

Presented on a size 14 barbless hook, the Ringer pellets are soaked the night before fishing – covered in water and then boosted with some bloodworm juices. They have to be soft. Russ doesn't bother hair-rigging them; he puts them directly onto the hook.

The Tactical Stuff

Jim Foster: What's the stock of roach in Milton Lake like? How big do they run and what's your largest?

Russ Evans: The roach in Milton go just over 3lb with plenty in the 1lb to 2lb bracket. My biggest to date is 1lb 15oz, but I lost a bigger one at the net during a match last year. The air went blue, as it would have been a PB. I know my next PB roach will come from Milton.

JF: What about the crucians?

RE: They go up to 3lb as well, with plenty in the 1lb range upwards. My biggest crucian carp went 3lb 1oz and I have caught plenty at 2lb 8oz. They are my favourite fish.

JF: Does Milton fish well through the winter for roach and crucians?

RE: Milton fishes well during winter. Match weights of 40lb to 60lb are usually needed to win and frame. Casters, maggots and worms come into their own during this period with minimal feeding required to keep the bites coming.

JF: Tell us a bit more about the float you were using for the feature. Is it important to select the right float for shy-biting fish?

RE: Yes, it is important. You need a sensitive float that will react quickly to the most delicate of bites. The float I use is a Preston Series A 4x12 float pattern. Its plastic bristle, long pear-shaped balsa body and the carbon stem combine for balanced presentation when using pellets as hook baits.

JF: What about your line?

RE: I'm a fan of Preston PowerLine, which I use in 0.13mm with a 0.11mm hooklength tied to a size 14 hook.

JF: I've noticed a weird, blob-float rig too. What's that for?

RE: I fish this rig up in the water, as the roach can come up during a session, especially the better stamp of fish.

JF: Feeding seems to be important. You were using mainly hemp and micro pellets.

RE: Feeding is very important. I tend to stick with B1 micro pellets, which are bloodworm-soaked, and hemp. The hemp draws in all fish, especially the roach and crucians. I can get them fizzing nicely in the peg in no time. Although there are plenty of anglers fishing the lake today, from what I can see they are not feeding that much. It helps when they feed lots as they take the carp away from me!

Shy Biters

"If they're not soft, they will affect your chances of hooking fish when you strike," he says.

The afternoon progresses and the action from the crucians is unrelenting, with a good number of roach interspersed.

Then Russ decides to take a risk by putting a slightly heavier rig tight to the reeds on his right. This is a gamble. To me it looks like carp heaven there, but Russ has also had some near-2lb roach from this spot, so it's got to be worth having a go.

The rig is dropped in. The bait rests dead on the bottom. And within 30 seconds or so, the float rapidly disappears, along with about five metres of elastic from Russ's top section!

"Damn, it's a carp!" declares Russ as he battles to keep it out of the reeds. The fish charges here, there and everywhere before eventually being netted. "I'm not fishing that line again."

It's back to the lily pad line then, where our man continues to fish a metre or so away from the micro pellets. It's amazing, instantly shy bites from roach and crucians start up again. More silvers are quickly added to the net, and by the end of the afternoon 30 or so prime roach reside in a keepnet specially set aside for them (carp and crucians are kept in a separate net).

It's been a good day in wonderful surroundings. I'm not a great commercial fishery

TOP TIP

When targeting roach and crucian carp, Russ fishes his baits at dead depth or just over, so it's important he sets-up his rigs accurately. A flat-bottomed plummet ensures that the hook is just touching the deck when he sets the depth.

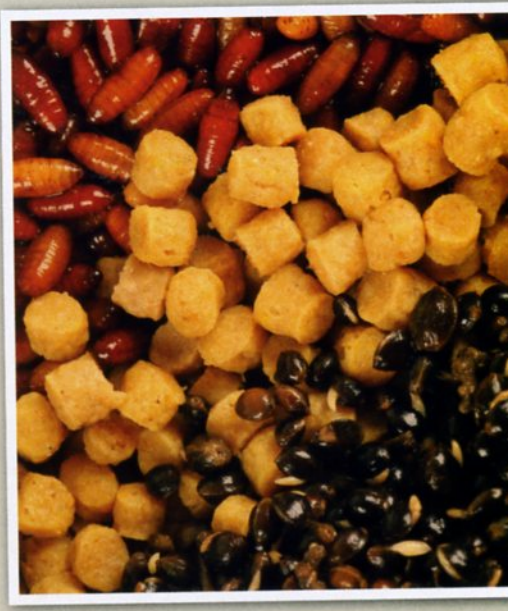
These are some of the quality roach to be found in Bury Hill's Milton Lake.

The reed-lined bank was a no-go area, as carp had moved in.

fan myself, but this place is something special – the jewel in the crown of commercial waters countrywide.

We photograph the best fish of the day, then call it quits. You can tell autumn is with us – although the leaves are still on the trees, there's a nip to the air as Russ packs up. That's a surefire sign that the best roach fishing of the year is just around the corner. So why not try Milton Lake for them yourself? Just steer clear of the carp!

JF: Presentation – bait just off, tight to, or laid on the lake bed?
RE: I fish my Ringer 6mm soft pellets at dead depth. However, if the fish are being really finicky, as they sometimes can be, I lay on a couple of inches, which works a treat.



JF: Fishing with the hook bait just off the baited area seems to work. Is there a reason for this?
RE: Carp! They can zoom in on the bait, even when you hold back on the feed. Knowing that the roach back off in this situation, I fish past my main feed and pick off roach and crucians about a metre further out.

JF: You have three top-three kits with you. How do you choose a balanced kit for the roach and crucians?
RE: I always make a big point in having my elastics balanced. I would rather have my elastics set slightly loose than too tight, though, as I don't want to bump fish off which could spook the shoal and ruin the peg.

I use three elastic set-ups. The Drennan Bungee Yellow, rated at 10/12, is with the heavier rig. White Hydrolastic is ideal for the main roach and crucian rig, fished on the bottom, and Drennan Green 6/8 is perfect for the blob rig.

JF: If you were to have to take two baits with you for commercial fishery roach, what would they be?
RE: Soft pellets and hemp, with casters if I am allowed three! I have caught most of my biggest roach on soft pellets. Most anglers feed and use pellets on commercial waters for the carp. Because of this, the roach have got used to eating the bait probably more than maggots.

The pellet needs to be as soft as possible to maintain a good hook-hold to the fish on the strike. If it's too hard then bumped fish will occur, no matter how soft and balanced the elastic is. Roach are finicky feeders at the best of times so a really soft pellet is best.

Casters have always been a good bait for quality roach and come into their own in winter. When using both baits I would prefer to feed with hemp rather than groundbait.

VENUE FILE

Name Milton Lake, Bury Hill Fisheries
Day ticket £11.50 for one rod, £17 for two. OAPs and juniors £8.50 for one rod, £14 for two
Rules No trout pellets, no floating baits, no nuts, barbless hooks only, groundbait in moderation, unhooking mats required
Website www.buryhillfisheries.com
Telephone 01306 883621
Facilities On-site café, toilets, shower, well-stocked tackle shop with all leading brands and bait