Ground Breaker

Ian Russell continues his series with a look at how to cope with fishing island margins. You thought you knew all there was to know about that? We'll see...

Fact File

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Age: 38
Occupation: Owns Heathrow Bait Services
Personal UK Best: 43lb 9oz

Desert Islands

If there's one thing you can guarantee it's this: if there's an island on your local water, and it's in range, carp anglers will be casting a hook bait close to its margins.

And why not? Over the years, islands have produced some sensational catches of fish. They offer carp an area of bank where there is no disturbance. They offer shelter - possibly under overhanging trees, or in snags. And they can also offer a good supply of natural food. So it does make a lot of sense, 99 per cent of the time, to fish an island margin if you can.

However, as with most things in carp fishing, it's not as simple as that. Other factors have to be taken into consideration. For example, angler pressure. If the carp are being fished for every day of the year on your lake, and an island is present, you can bet that on every weekend someone will have a hook bait against that island.

Carp, learning as they can through association, will soon come to recognise that if they eat food in this particular spot, something nasty happens to them - so they may shy away from feeding along the island margin. They may push further under overhanging trees, or they may simply be careful over what they eat.

Some people may disagree with this, but in my experience the way you fish an island varies from one water to the next. But before we delve into them, I'd like to tell you about some of my own experiences island fishing so you can understand why you have to think very carefully about where your hook bait lands when you're fishing one.

A lovely 20lb 6oz mirror caught after Ian took 12 casts to get his bait where he wanted it

Walthamstow

In the late 1980s and early 1990s (a long time ago now) I fished for a winter on one of the Walthamstow reservoirs in East London. Then, as now, it was day only; and my choice was to fish reservoir number three. Over the course of the winter months I managed to slip the net under more than 20 twenties, using a bit of thought.

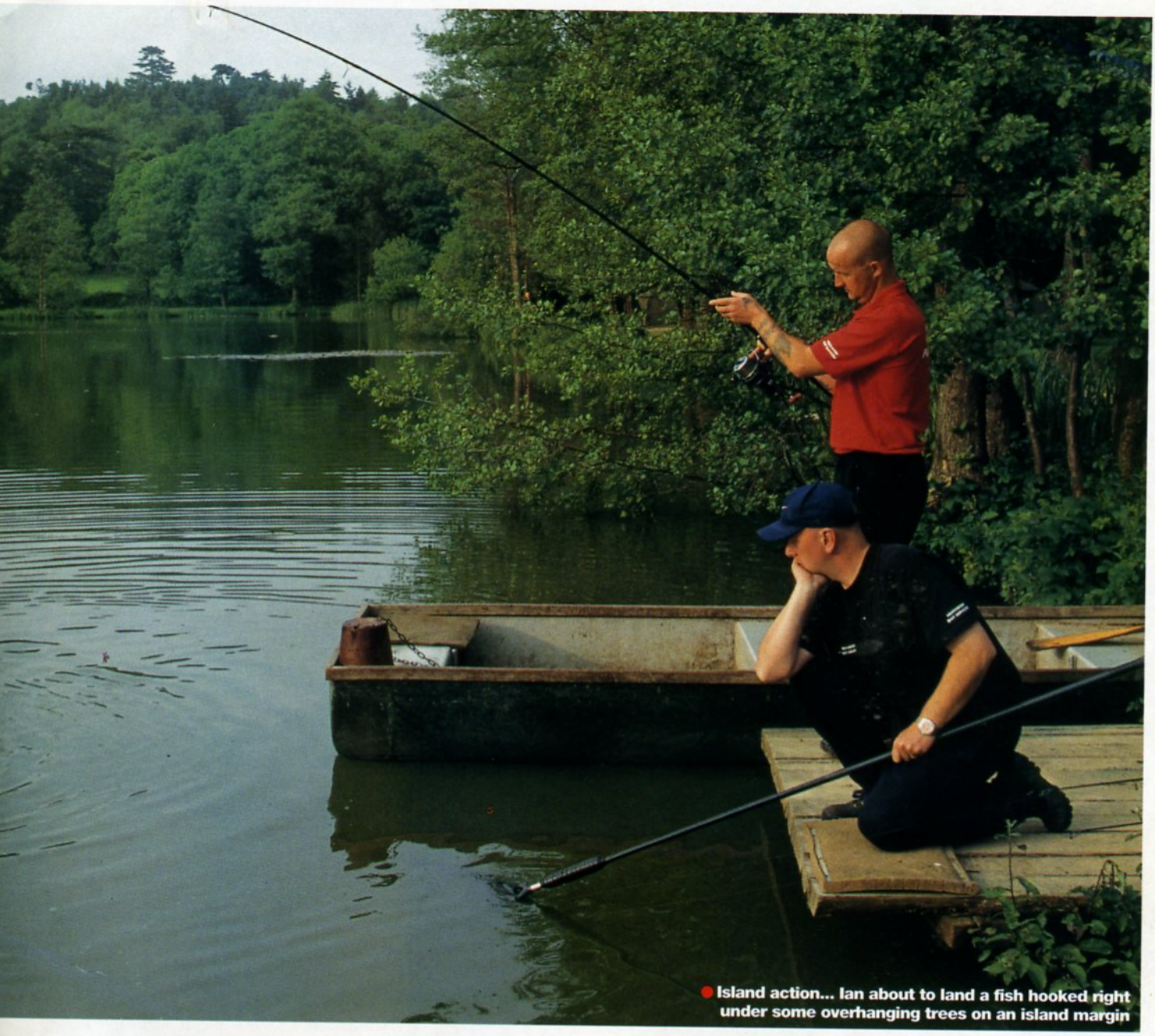
My tactic was, whenever I could, to fish one of the island swims on the reservoir. The cast, which typically would be about 50-60 yards, was the key. Because they were pressured swims, I wanted my hook bait to go where no other hook bait had been. I felt that the way to catch the carp was to put a bait where they didn't expect to be hooked.

To do this, I had to cast in a particular style. Instead of the usual, fairly gentle lob you do when fishing an island that's 50 yards away, I decided to thrash my hook bait low and hard out to the island. The idea was that, with the lead flying at a low trajectory, it would be easier to get it to fly underneath the overhanging foliage.

Then, if I got the cast right, the angle at which the lead would enter the water would allow the lead to travel a couple of yards further beneath the trees. You might think that a yard or two extra doesn't matter, but I can assure you it does.

Throughout the winter I caught consistently, but I'd only get runs when my hook bait was right under the trees. Even if it dropped a yard short, I knew that I'd struggle to get a bite. It was a case of try, try and try again when casting; and never to be happy unless I'd made the perfect cast.

Because of this, sometimes I'd end up making a dozen, maybe 24 casts before I'd



Island action... Ian about to land a fish hooked right under some overhanging trees on an island margin

Be careful when baiting up island margins... Your boilies could end up at the base of the marginal drop off, away from your hook bait

Ian demonstrates his 'force' cast... Look carefully and you can see where the lead landed. This was nowhere near tight enough to the island

leave it in place. Other anglers may have cast once or twice, then thought 'that will do'. Typically, they blanked; even though their hook baits were only a yard or two from mine. Plus, if I didn't get a bite within 30 minutes of casting out, I'd re-cast. Generally, as soon as you got that hook bait to brush the trees as it sailed in, you'd catch.

Hook Bait Placement

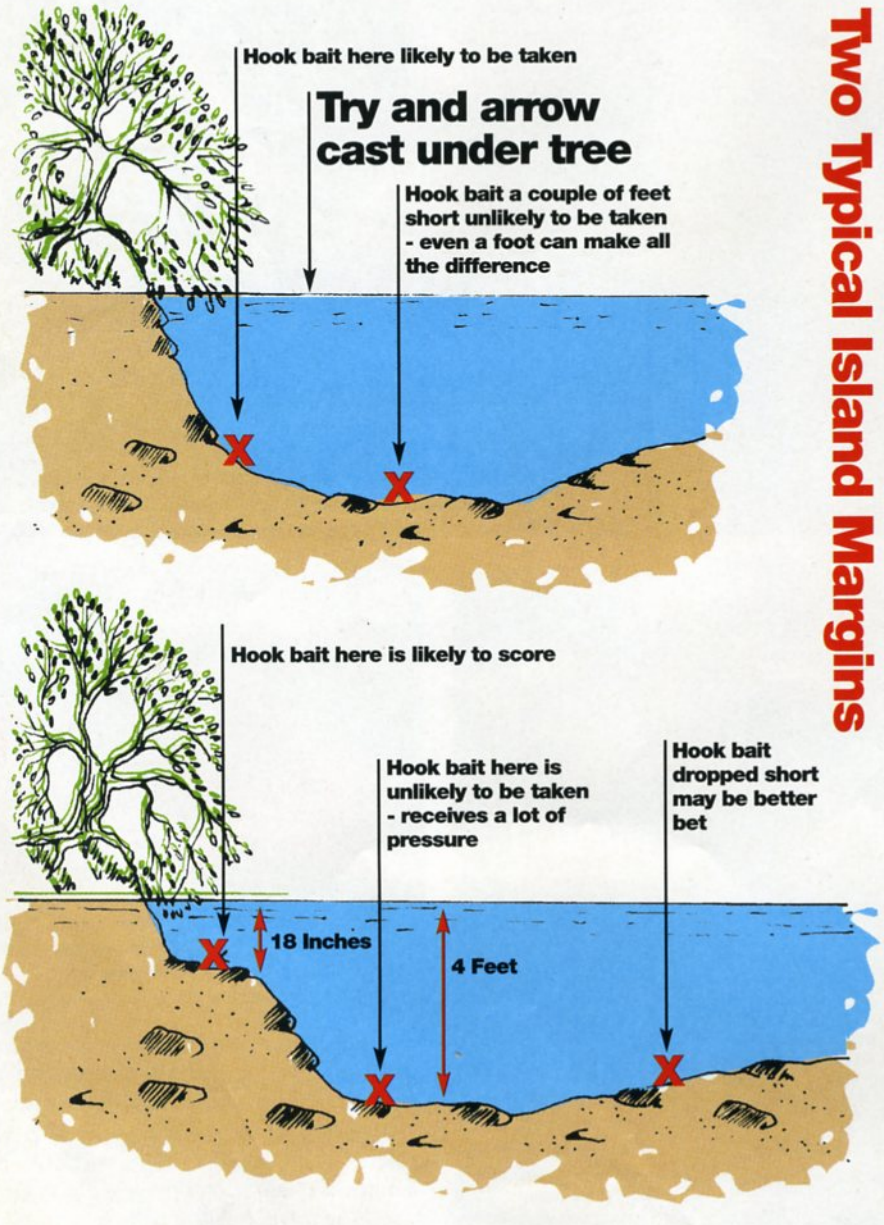
The island margin at Walthamstow was shallow, possibly between two and three feet. I was catching from the top of the marginal drop-off, on clean gravel. Even in winter, the carp were patrolling the island margin and picking up bait in the shallow water.

It's important that you find as much out about the island you're fishing as you can. For instance, what does the lake bed do around the island's margin? Does it drop straight down into a few feet of water? Or is there a ledge and then a drop off, which is quite a common factor on many islands I've fished in the past (take a look at the diagrams).

Ask yourself what kind of depth you're fishing in. It's no use casting as tight to an island margin as you can only to be fishing in six inches of water. Also, if you're fishing on top of a ledge above the drop off, you want to make sure your lead lands in the right spot - or it could roll down the ledge, spoiling your presentation and lessening the chances of you getting a bite.

If you have a pair of binoculars, use them. Watch the island margin as closely as you can. See if you can spot fish movement and, if you can, how close to the island are they moving? Cast a lead, nothing else, to the island margin. See if you can feel it down through the water. If you can, and you can feel it hit the lake bed, there's a reasonable depth. If you can't, it doesn't mean it's too shallow, it just means you need to find out more information.

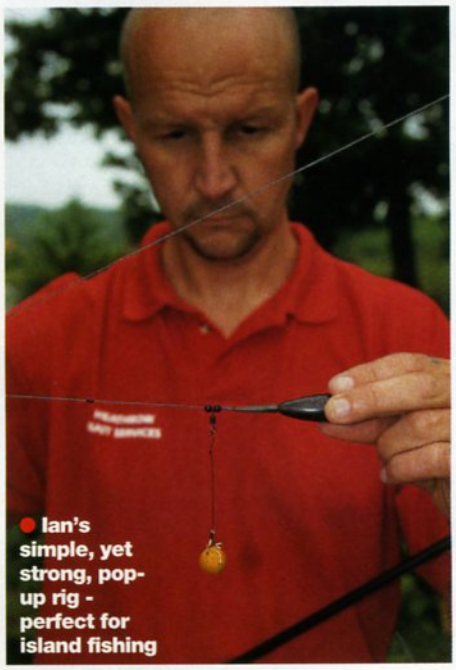
For instance, watching ducks can be beneficial. Do they dive on baits close to the island? If they do, you can probably see how far under the water they go. If they can pick baits up without going underwater, the chances are it's too shallow - and so on. All these factors can help you decide on the right spot to cast a hook bait.



Farlows Example

Another water I've fished that has islands on it is Farlows. And Farlows provides an example of how angling pressure can affect the way carp feed around islands.

For those of you who've never been to, or heard of Farlows, it's a popular southern day ticket water that has a large head of carp, mostly in the double figure and 20lb plus bracket - with a few thirties now, I believe. The islands here are very popular hotspots, but when I was there I soon observed that most of the fish getting caught tight to the island margins were smaller fish that, arguably, were more naive than their bigger brothers.



● Ian's simple, yet strong, pop-up rig - perfect for island fishing

Anyway, I found out that, a few yards short of the islands, there were clear areas on the lake bed that seemed to be strips of gravel. This gravel had been exposed by something and, if you cast a bait five yards short of the island onto the gravel, you'd seem to catch more (and bigger fish) than you would if you cast as tight as you could to the island's margin.

Like I said, part of this was down to angling pressure. But maybe not all of it. Farlows is a reasonably sized water and, as such, will get undertows like any other lake. I always wonder what effect undertows have on the natural food in a lake, and in this case I believe the margins of the island concerned were subject to erosion from the undertow caused by a strong prevailing wind.

An undertow like this not only helps scour the lake bed, but it also deposits natural food items on the lake bed. But this food does not get deposited tight to the island - it gets deposited just short, at the base of the island's marginal drop-off.

This, of course, is a little bit theoretical, but it makes sense to me. My captures from Farlows would back this up, too; because whilst 95 per cent of the other anglers

fished as tight as they could to the island, I dropped a couple of yards shorter than them - placing my hook baits on the gravel strips. So that the others couldn't see what I was doing, I'd lift my rod tip just before the lead touched down, and I'd allow the lead to sink to the bottom of the shelf.

That season I, and a couple of mates who I'd revealed my tactics to, caught most of the known twenties in the lake - not completely because we were fishing short, but because we observed the fish and what other anglers were doing, and adapted our tactics to suit.

Freebies and Rigs

Another factor you should think about is freebies. Boilies, being round, tend to roll down slopes. Many carp anglers, when fishing tight to islands, do not think about this and will quite happily bait up - without realising that all their carefully catapulted free offerings will have fallen to the base of the marginal slope while their hook baits may be at the top.

Carp can home in on this and have a free feed, almost safe in the knowledge that the traps are a couple of yards away and that they're unlikely to get captured.

The rigs you use are not as important as getting the bait in the right spot. Because island margins tend to be snaggy, with bits of lost tackle around and overhanging branches etc., I like to go heavy if I can. Fifteen pound main line will be used if I can cast far enough with it, and the hook link I choose will usually be 15lb Amnesia - in conjunction with a size six Talon Tip or ESP Raptor hook. In the picture you'll see an example of a rig I'm currently using against islands. It's a version of the helicopter rig that Frank Warwick came up with, and it's designed primarily for pop-ups off the lead - and in this case has been tied with a length of lead core.

You'll also notice that the 3oz lead is streamlined and aerodynamic. This is deliberate. When you do the power cast I talked about, when the lead flies low through the air and enters the water at an angle that will take it under overhanging trees, you need a lead that flies straight and true. Unfortunately, flat leads do not do this.

If, however, you do not need to get a bait right into a small hole or under a

● **Lead core... Can be useful, especially for its abrasion resistant qualities**

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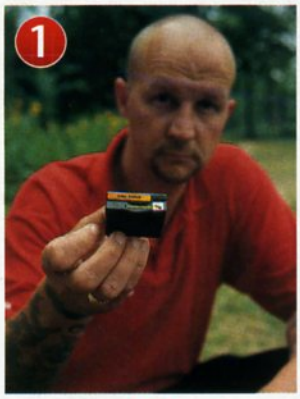
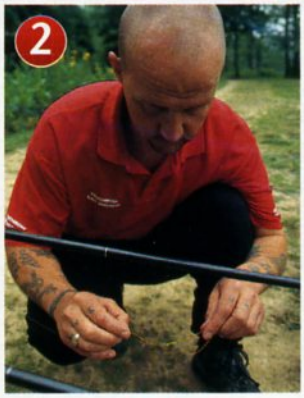
Ian's Guide To Clipping Up



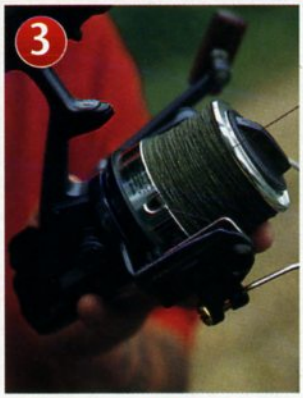
STAGE One

First thing you'll need is some marker braid - the Fox stuff is about the best on the market at the moment and is what Ian uses.



STAGE Two

Cast an unbaited rig out until you get it in the right spot. Then, leaving the rig in the water, tie a marker knot to your main line like this.



STAGE Three

When you want to re-cast accurately, make sure the marker knot is in the right position, then clip up - and the lead should land in the right spot.

canopy, a flat lead is fine and does offer the advantage that it won't slide down an underwater slope.

I'll also use pop-ups nearly all the time when fishing islands. This is because the lake bed around islands is never usually clean. Instead it's covered with detritus - you know, rotting leaves, twigs and all sorts of other rubbish. A pop-up allows clean presentation and helps your rig work more efficiently in such a situation.

I also favour fishing with single hook baits off the lead. A lot of time carp will cruise around island margins in quite shallow water. They won't be feeding hard all the time, though there's every possibility that they're on the look out for an opportunist munch. A pop-up placed in their face, right on a patrol route, stands a very good chance of being taken. But to get the most from this tactic, you must observe the patrol routes the carp are taking and know how close to the island you must cast as a result.

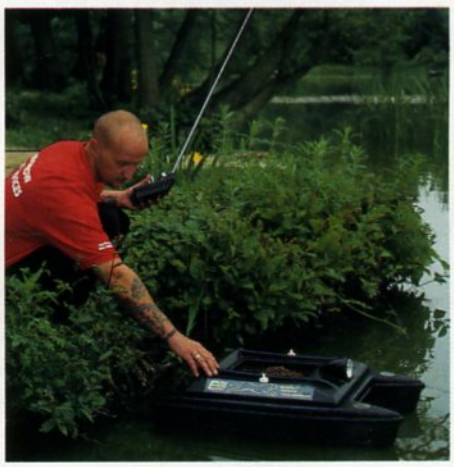
A stunning, dawn caught 19lb mirror from the island margin at Old Bury Hill lake

Waveney Valley

Finally, a quick couple of words about clipping up and a certain venue called Waveney. Personally, although I don't clip up when fishing, you can use this technique to ensure your casting is accurate every time. I've included a little sequence of photos which show you how to do this, so I shan't go on about it here.

That leaves one last point I'd like to make. As you know, islands can be top spots to fish. But whatever you do, don't do what everyone else does. Try and work out for yourselves the best tactic to employ, by taking into consideration the factors I've outlined for you in this article.

One venue I fish a couple of times a year is Waveney 'D' Lake in Norfolk. There aren't any significant islands here, but the far margin acts like one as no-one fishes there and there is a good depth of water right up against the edge.



At Waveney, anglers use bait boats. Nine times out of 10, they'll load some freebies into the boat, then place their rig over the top. Then they'll motor the boat out as tight as they can to the far bank before dropping the rig over a nice little patch of bait - as tight as it's possible to get to the margin. Almost everyone does this, which is why it's such a big mistake.

Instead, on my visits I use the boat to take out single hook baits. I drop them short of the far margin - only about five yards short, but it's enough. While others struggle, my mates and I catch. It really is as simple as that.

And Finally...

I hope that my advice has made you think about your island fishing a bit. We've all fished islands, but like everything else in carp fishing, if you think about it a bit rather than just casting out blindly to the island's margins, you'll be a lot more successful. Trust me...