Quest for a zander

Zander are rare in the south and Surrey's Bury Hill Fisheries is one of the few venues around that offers quality, double-figure specimens. However, as Gary Barnett found on a recent visit, they are not always obliging…

WORDS: GARY BARNETT
PICS: STEVE MARTIN

ZANDER are often described as being intriguing or enigmatic fish, but I'm not sure I'd go along with that.

They're certainly relatively rare and slightly unusual, which for me makes them an attractive target species, but I'd stick my neck out and say that actually they are probably just about the most predictable fish to catch that I know.

If you fish correctly, in my experience you'll almost certainly connect with a fish or two if they're in your swim.

It helps, of course, that zander are shoal fish; so, when the conditions are right, if you find one you've found plenty and it's probable that some of the shoal are likely to fancy a snack.

The main challenge on some of the best-known venues, such as the Fens, is location. With miles of waterway to roam the zander shoals can go missing for long periods and, unless you've done your homework and know their habits, fishing for them can be soul destroying.

What the region really needs is for someone to dig a lake and stock it with zander. That would make it a whole lot easier for those of us with less time on our hands. Fortunately it's already been done! Old Bury Hill Lake in Surrey not only contains them, it holds them in large numbers.

The lake holds a real mixture of species and provides a plentiful supply of food for its predators. This massive population of fish constantly stirs up the lake and colours the water, a distinct advantage for the sharp-sighted zander.

There are a few givens when it comes to zander fishing, which can make it easier to catch them if you follow them.

The first is bait. Zander rarely take sea deadbaits, so that's one mistake to avoid. Compared to pike fishing you're generally after smaller fish, with slightly smaller mouths than an equivalent-sized Esox. Small freshwater fish, dead or live, are therefore the order of the day. Generally, I've found deadbaiting to be a more effective tactic, which is pleasing as I'm a bit of a tightwad and live bait are more expensive.

The second big turn-off for zander, as with most predators, is resistance, especially changes in resistance. They are renowned for picking up baits and promptly dropping them.

A little advice if you use a bobbin for bite indication – zander seem to be able to sense the increase in tension when the bobbin reaches the top of its rise. Strangely, they sometimes don't seem to mind pulling line off a Baitrunner, as long as you're fishing a tight line to start with. I fish with a bobbin and avoid the problem by not letting it reach the top of its rise before I strike at any bite.

It is a rule at Bury Hill to strike instantly when predator fishing, to prevent deep hooking, but that's my practice anyway, because it's also the best way to get the most fish on the bank.

When it comes to rigs, many people seem to think that to reduce resistance they should use light leads; unfortunately, they couldn't be more wrong. Light leads run the risk of being picked up and dragged across the lake's bed when a fish picks up the bait. A heavy lead stays put and allows the line to run freely through it.

As ever though, life is a compromise; although I want to use as heavy a lead as possible to reduce resistance, I also need to use relatively soft rods to cushion the lunges and head-shaking antics of a hooked zander.

Hooks don't need much invitation to fly free from the hard, bony mouth of a fish when it thrashes frantically on seeing the landing net. As a result, I generally use 1½lb test-curve rods in conjunction with 2½oz leads. If I feel I need to cast a bit further then I'll step up the rods and leads accordingly.

Bite indication is relatively straightforward; I load my bobbins with just enough weight to register a drop-back bite. It should be impossible for me to get a drop back given the rig and weight of lead I'm using, but I like to have all bases covered – a tangle is always possible.

I also use bite alarms for audible indication; they need to be sensitive and ideally the sensitivity should be adjustable. Normally I'd fish at the maximum sensitivity setting, but it's handy to be able to alter the setting if I'm fishing on the end of a howling wind.

At this point I should add that float fishing is also a successful method in most swims, it's just that being a child of the television generation I don't have the

Southern Angler Top Tip

To help to reduce any resistance felt by a taking fish, Gary makes his own leger stems using rod rings. After straightening the rod rings with pliers he ties the ring to a snap link with strong braid and protects it with tubing. The buoyant foam below the ring helps keep his line free from any bottom debris.

To be quick off the mark and get an early strike, Gary Barnett sits almost on top of his rods.

Gary managed this 9lb 9oz zander on a subsequent visit to Bury Hill.

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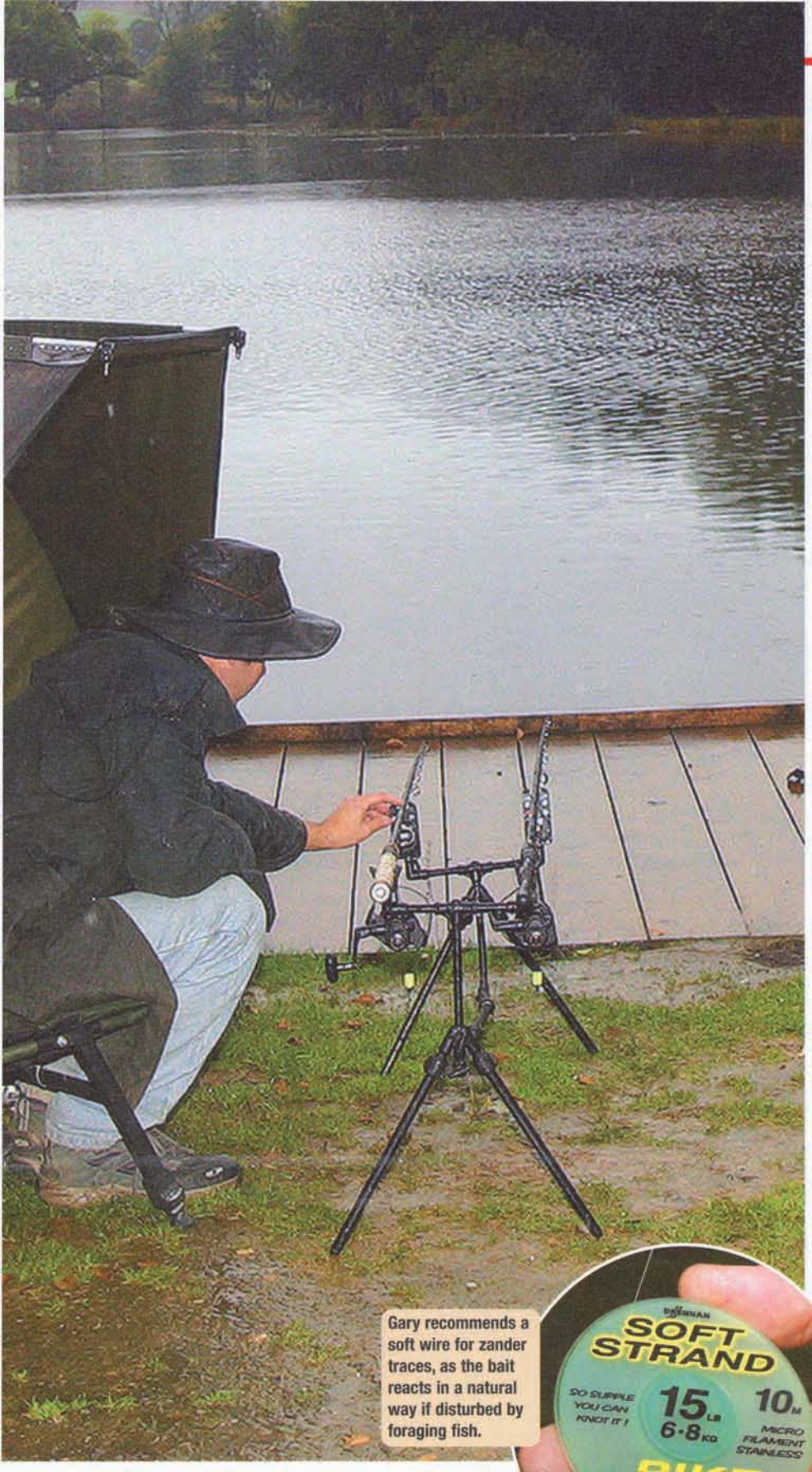
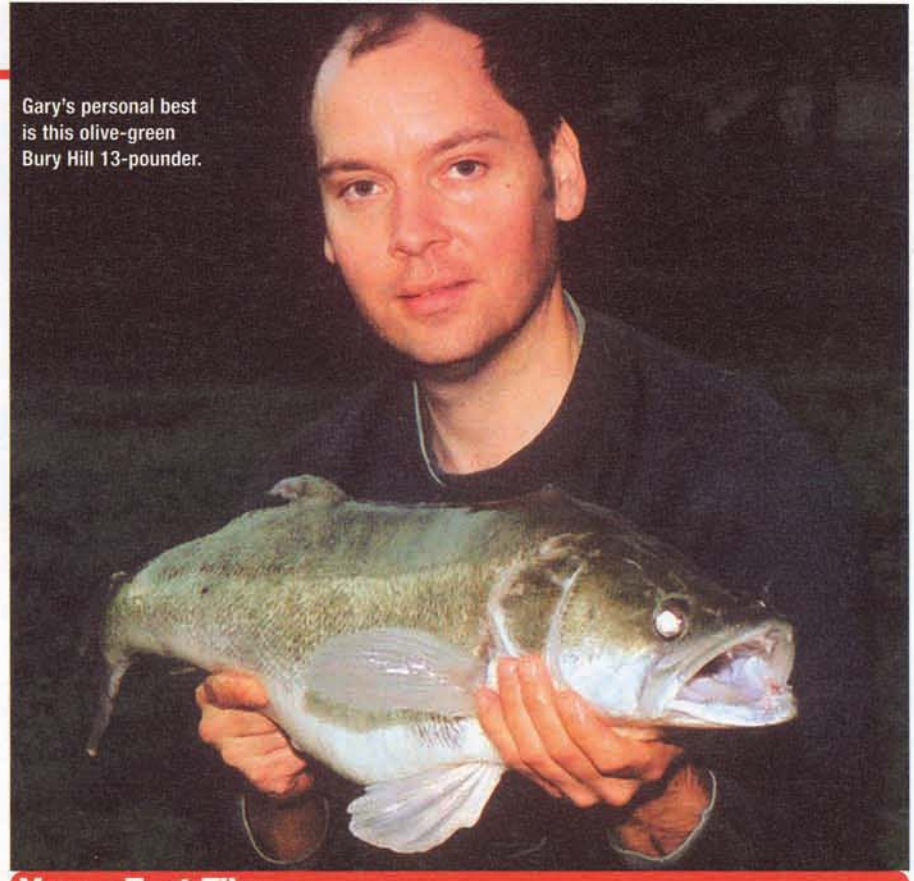


Gary recommends a soft wire for zander traces, as the bait reacts in a natural way if disturbed by foraging fish.



Gary's personal best is this olive-green Bury Hill 13-pounder.

Venue Fact File

Bury Hill Fisheries, Westcott Road, Old Bury Hill, Dorking, Surrey RH4 3JU

Contact: Call the estate office on 01306 877540, email: info@buryhillfisheries.com or visit the impressive web site at www.buryhillfisheries.com

Day tickets: Adult permits cost £11 for one rod. Juniors aged 15 or under, OAPs and disabled anglers pay £8 for one rod for permits available Monday to Saturday only, excluding Sundays and bank holidays. A second rod costs £5.50 and an evening ticket, available for the last four hours of daylight, costs £5.50 per rod. Boats are available for hire at £5.50 per person for a single booking. The fishery reserves the right to charge £11 on Sundays and bank holidays. For club, season and tuition prices check the brochure or website

Restrictions: All nets must be dipped when entering the fishery. No keepnets or sacks are allowed, except in matches. Barbless hooks only. Method feeders and fixed-lead rigs are banned. All anglers are to use large unhooking mats and landing nets. No particle baits are permitted, except sweetcorn, hemp and carp pellets

Facilities: The fishery has a lakeside café, full toilet facilities, boat hire and a tackle shop with tackle for hire. There is excellent disabled access and facilities. The fishery also offers professional tuition from qualified angling instructors

How to get there: Leaving the M25 at Junction 9, head south on the A24 London Road until you meet the junction with the A25. Turn right into the High Street and go straight over the next roundabout into Westcott Road. The entrance to the fishery is the next turning on the left

necessary concentration span to keep watching one for long periods. If you do give float fishing a go, just keep in mind the concept of reducing resistance and use the smallest float you can get away with.

My traces are homemade, using 15lb wire crimped onto either size 12 or 10 semi-barbless trebles with the hook size depending on the size of the bait. For my preferred deadbaits I make two-hook rigs with trebles fixed about two inches apart.

> Although there are some favoured areas, you can never be certain where the fish will be.

Normally when I do a feature for ***Southern Angler***, one of the side effects is sunburn. I always seem to pick a day of relentless sunshine – rarely ideal conditions for any fish, and most certainly not for zander.

Today, however, I'm blessed with just about the most miserable morning you could imagine. Battleship-grey clouds as far as the eye can see and dank, drizzly showers – fantastic!

Zander, being mainly night feeders, are particularly sensitive to light levels and are far more prone to feed on dull days like today. With my confidence sky high I pick a swim close to the boathouse. It's one I've always considered to be extremely reliable.

On my arrival, the fishery bailiff told me that the lake had been fishing a little below par in the week before my visit, but also that a good catch of zander had been taken only two days earlier.

Although each swim on Old Bury Hill Lake is furnished with comfortable, sturdy fishing platforms, I set my rods up a few feet behind them. I didn't want to disturb any fish that might be close in but, more importantly, I wanted to be able to sit under my brolly right next to my rods for a quick strike.

I baited two identical rigs with small roach deadbaits and lobbed them to marks at different ranges in front of me, one in the margins and one at about 20 yards. Although there are some favoured areas, you can never be certain where the fish will be within a swim, so it pays to cast around until you find them.

The far bait had only been in the water for about 10 minutes before the bobbin jerked up. As my hand was instinctively reaching for the rod handle I could see the bobbin steadily rising and I struck very confidently... into thin air.

I quickly rebaited and recast onto the same spot, fully expecting another run straight away, but all remained quiet. I recast the other rod to the left and 30 minutes later I tried to the right.

I then tried 40 yards out, but still no sign. I was forming the opinion that if there were any fish in my swim they clearly weren't in a feeding mood. I figured that it was time to go walkabout to see if I could find any that were in the mood.

For the next couple of hours I tried three other swims along the front bank. I fished as well as I could, changing baits regularly and searching around each swim, but again there was no response.

I returned to my original swim for the last couple of hours, still confident that I was going to catch. The rain was getting heavier and late afternoon is often the time when the zander switch on.

Personally, I believe they're nearly always around but, because the lake is so well stocked with baitfish, they're rarely ravenous. I suspect they usually know the bait is there, but frankly can't be bothered.

If you ask the staff at Bury Hill Fisheries they'll usually advise you to twitch the baits every so often to try to annoy the zander and provoke a response.

Generally, that's good advice and that's what I have been doing. However, today I'm finding more debris than usual on the bottom so, in a slight change of tactics, for the remainder of the session I leave my baits for about 15 minutes before I recast.

I bet you're expecting a happy ending; a dramatic, last-minute turnaround and a cracking, last-gasp double. Well, it didn't happen – I blanked!

Despite conditions being completely in my favour, I failed miserably. I'll admit that I don't really know what went wrong; I'd have staked my mortgage on banking a few fish. The lake certainly didn't seem to be off colour, as good catches of bream were being taken and the carp were positively partying around me.

I can only think that the fault was a lack of fish in my 'extremely reliable' peg. I have to think that, as the alternative problem is... well... um... me!

Use heavy leads to allow the line to run freely and avoid fish dragging the weight on a take.

Zander takes are vicious. Gary gets the best results by mounting the bottom treble through the bait's top lip and the upper treble in the root of the dorsal fin.

As small coarse fish are the top zander bait, Gary makes his own snap tackles, leaving only a slight gap between the small treble hooks.