

## EEL-FISHING? YOU'RE MAD

It was with those words that I was welcomed to Wraysbury as I parked the car after driving through the gates of Douglas Lane car park. Amazing! I had only been there long enough to park the car, get the brewing equipment out and pour a cup, when out of nowhere an angler appeared. 'Are you carping?' he asked. *My, my, the old fifth degree already, give me a chance to get settled*, I thought. The look on his face was a picture when I explained to him I was not interested in carp or tench, but eels. That was over ten years ago now and Wraysbury's hold on me has never really diminished.

I am one of those anglers who grew up in the late seventies when being an all-round specimen angler was the way to go and I was very lucky in teaming-up with a guy called Mic Foot who has been my fishing companion ever since. Not only is he a brilliant angler but a very funny person to boot and if angling success was measured by laughter then Mic and I would be Drennan Cup winners every season. I have always been more of a predator inclined angler, and where pike were concerned no holds were barred, stroke-pulling became an art form and one way and another we managed to clock up some decent fish including a 30lb beast which tempered my drive somewhat as to that particular species.

At about the same time as the piking blitz was going on the humble eel began to make an appearance in my catches. I think the first was on a little, old estate-water near Odiham in Hampshire in the company of Mic and another mate called Trevor who was a Geordie but had become a southerner by choice! Better fishing down here was his excuse and one that he is still using now over thirty years later. Club waters were fished and eels were caught mostly small but every now and again a huge eel would appear in the papers or specialist magazines and you would think, *Bloody hell, it's huge, what are the chances of ever catching a thing like that?* People like the late John Sidley, Dave Holman and Mick Bowles, to name just three, had some huge eels, even by today's standards and I just dreamed of catching fish like that.

Well, as all big fish anglers are aware, you have to find the right waters that hold the size of fish that you are interested in catching and whilst I was with Mic tench fishing at Frensham Big Pond we were pointed in the direction of just such a water. Well we applied for the tickets and got them, so a recce was in order. I will never forget driving into the car park of the water in question; it was huge by the standards of water we had fished up till then, but as the saying goes, you can only fish what's in front of you and we set about fishing the pit in question. Tench and bream were our intended quarry but talking to one of the locals it appeared that eels were in residence, so I foolishly thought I would get in amongst them. *Oh dear its going to go wrong you're thinking and you're right*, that Summer I blanked night after night, not one run occurred and as the eeling season closed I was left feeling somewhat chastened but vowed to return.

I don't think of myself as a naturally gifted angler but I am stubborn and so next season I once more found myself on the banks of the ball-breaking pit and all of a sudden the cogs started to mesh. A couple of 4lbs [Fig.1] appeared and then a 5lb 12oz eel [Fig.2] which stoked the fires somewhat to say the least! The odd thing about the water was that these eels were not only worm eaters but were very partial to a natural deadbait as well, which meant I had two avenues of attack. Several more fours

turned up and then one night in very early June the gods repaid me in kind. Funny as you may find this I always pay the water god by throwing in a coin, sometimes a penny or two and boy did it work. I found myself in a corner of the pit, with a sunken car in the swim to make life interesting, about 10.30pm the line departs, the clip on the ? drop off and not long afterwards another four graces the net. I sacked the fish and got another bait out as close to the car as I could, half an hour later the line pulls out of the clip again but did not go anywhere; gently taking the braid between my fingers I gave a little tug and something tugged back, I flicked the bail arm over and the fireworks began. Now eels do fight but this was a real tug-of-war but finally I bullied it into the net. Looking into the folds of the catfish net I use I was totally blown away and let out a huge 'Ye-haa' that was heard on the other bank. I had done it! 6lb 8ozs of eel was revealed.[ fig3] What a beast! All those blanks and doubt just vanished. I sat down and spent the rest of the night wide, wide-awake on cloud nine.

Fast forward a couple of years and we are back to the beginning of my story, Wraysbury One. It's now 1999 and I find myself the only non-carp angler there, much to the wry amusement of some of them. I'm at the Douglas Lane point with a large bucket of lobworms and some very scalded bugs. Tackle consisted of 12ft 2/34 pound pike rod built by P. Boote, 30lb braid and 35lb quicksilver hook links. Lobs cut into sections and crammed onto a size 6 or 8 were the bait, the rig was the old JS i.e; the John Sidley rig. Unlike carp anglers eel anglers are not spoiled for choice, or are carp anglers more forward thinking? Answers on a postcard please, but don't post to me.

At about 1.30pm in the morning the buzzer burst into life and another tug-of-war ensued, and after a somewhat furious tussle into the net it went. Now we all know that angling writers tend to wax lyrical concerning fights with fish, but with eel fishing it does not happen; no kiting left or right, no storming runs, just a pulling match and this one I had won! Peering into the net revealed yet another big eel, this one 6lb 2ozs! [fig 4] What a start to the Summer campaign – well after that several fours were caught in quick succession and on two nights a brace of fours followed one after the other.

What I love about Wraysbury is the sense of being alone, even though other anglers are about, people respect your space and for me every swim looked as though it was 'eeley', even though it turned out many were not. As well as the eels I had a couple of biggish tench, both going over eight pounds, [fig 5] caught right in the margins but on eel tackle, it was most unfair on them, no dipping of the porcupine quill! As I spent more time on Wraysbury I did fall in love with the place. It has a special feel about it, even as a non-carp angler I could feel it and it was to work its magic once more. I had found myself in the vicinity of Bryants swim, in fact just up the side of it. There was enough space to throw the brolly up and drop two baits right in the margins, a good dosing of bugs and sit back and wait. Yet again at about 12.45am and we are away, a violent tug-of-war takes place and in the net it goes. Another large eel close, but not quite, 5lb 14oz [fig 6]. It was photographed by a carp angler from Kent who owned a lovely American bulldog, many thanks for the great picture.

Like many good things it could not last and captures started to tail off and my time on that great and atmospheric water came to a end.

In the next ten years I had fished quite a few different waters in pursuit of bigger eels

and had caught quite a few, but nothing to set the world alight and I really felt as though I had been treading water. There had been a possibility of a ticket on a big water up in the Colne Valley which had been producing big eels but competing against other eel anglers is not my cup of tea, call me selfish but that's how it is. As I have said I'm a solitary guy and I like to have my space!

Now some people say you should never return to waters you have done well on in the past but I found myself very early in 2011 thinking about my eeling campaign for the coming season and, as ever, a small list was under consideration, but one name kept cropping up in my mind, Wraysbury! Would it be worth going back? Would it have changed very much? How busy would it now be? All these questions raced round in my mind and after putting my case to my lovely wife, who as ever just sighed and said put the cheque in the post, the deed was done.

It was late May and not long after I was back on the banks of Wraysbury. Driving through the Douglas Lane gate all sorts of emotions were stirred up and I was quite excited as I parked the car.

I got a couple of trips under my belt and the place still seemed the same, apart from the jet traffic which was noisier than ever. So picture the scene, I was just getting set-up and a face appears round the edge of the oval, "Can I see your ticket please?" so tickets were produced and a sense of déjà vu! It was fairly apparent I was not a carp angler but he went through the guessing game of the two or three species I could be fishing for, but when I finally admitted to my quarry, a wry smile appeared on his face. I could tell he thought I was mad to be paying that type of money to fish for them!

Anyway names were exchanged and I was left to my own devices. Earlier on in the year I had finally retired my old eel rods and had purchased three new ones which were Korum specialist 12ft 2/34 lb tc, these had a lovely build quality and a nice action throughout. I was still using braid mainline and qs hooklinks; the old adage if it's not broken it don't need fixing still applied. The only change that had taken place was that I was fishing my baits well off the bottom as the weed seemed worse than ever. The rig in question is well known to pike and eel anglers as the Dyson rig which allows you to fish your baits at any height off the bottom. It's great for presenting baits over weed beds etc., I had made one or two changes to the rig of my own and was interested to see how it would work.

My approach to swim choice on the pit was fairly scientific. If I liked the look of a swim I fished it and as ever there were loads to fish! The only downside of fishing the water was my lack of a boat, so wheelbarrow it was and anyway it keeps you fit! Mind you pushing the barrow round the back of the pit with its head-high greenery where anything could be lurking is no joke!

Late May came and went, as did June and then July and I was beginning to build up an impressive number of blanks! One rod was always fished on the bottom, worms over scalded bugs very close in; the other two were on the Dyson, fished at different heights but never cast too far, so that all angles of attack were covered. Bite indication was Dysons fished off the baitrunner, with the tension set to give them something to pull against and the legdered worms using the rollover system, what a great bit of kit, and no, I have no connection with them at all!

I am very lucky in that my wife was, and is, extremely understanding of my obsession and has put up with a lot from me over the years chasing fish. This season was no different; Friday night home from work, gear in the car, do the night, back home and out again on Saturday night. It was also a big plus living where I do, I could spread myself over the pit like a rash, sometimes doing two nights in a swim, sometimes one, but so far not a bite on the humble lob. On one rod I had been playing about using a variety of baits including cockles, but all to no avail.

So it was now August and I had still not had a bite. All that spring and early summer various eel anglers has posted up their captures on that double-headed monster called the internet. Some captures were really impressive and I was not even off the mark! Late one Saturday afternoon I got the gear packed in the car and off I went once more. Every time I drove through either gate I thought *this could be it* ; loading the barrow off I went and ended up in a swim I had not fished before. The weed was bad as ever but not really a problem as the Dyson solved bait presentation. One of the pleasures of overnights is getting set up and settling down with a cuppa and taking everything in. The evening was warm enough to sit there in a teeshirt and as darkness began to close in I cast the baits in; that night for a change no bugs and all three rods were fished on Dysons and with the buzzers set not too loud I was ready. The bats were flitting about and it must have been about 12.45am when there was a single beep on the right hand rod, next thing I know there is line being given off the baitrunner, picking up the rod all hell broke loose and a serious tug-of-war ensued. Even at that stage it felt good and I gave it all the stick I could; I was beginning to win the battle, every lunge was really keenly felt and scrabbling round I got my long armed net into the water. One final fierce tug and it was in the folds of the net! I carried my landing net to the back of the swim and turning on my head torch I took a look and must have used most of the words in the anglo saxon dictionary, well one in particular! This creature was huge, it was liphooked and despite my shaking hands removing the hook was easy. Covering the eel in the folds of the net, this was the moment of truth. I was shaking as I got the sling and after some wrestling persuaded the eel into being weighed ; 7lb 8ozs! [Fig.7] I was completely stunned, I knew when I first looked at it that it was big , but this was huge! All those long blanks just disappeared like early morning mist, years and years of hard work had all come good. I got the beast into a sack and made sure it was tied so that even Houdini could not have got out. I got another bait out and just sat there totally dumbfounded! I don't know how many cups of tea I had but sleep was not on the agenda! During the night I checked the sack several times and my prize seemed happy hidden in the folds.

Morning came and I soon found myself a then sleeping carp angler. I will be forever grateful for the way he took the photos and for not minding having his carpy slumbers disturbed by a deliriously excited eel angler.

My hunch about going back had paid off, but it's a water that takes hard, hard work and does not give up its gold willingly. Are there bigger eels there? who knows? but I will enjoy my time finding out!

Simon Garrard  
August 2011