

Estate Lake Carp by Rob Gillespie

I carefully worked my way along the ornamental dam wall, reluctantly sticking to the outer flags that ran tight to the waters edge so as not to walk on the crunchy anti-stealth gravel path that had been laid round this section of the pool many years ago, with the distant drone of mowers as background noise as the gardeners made the most of the warm summer day to complete the weekly task of mowing the huge sprawling lawns of this Cheshire estate lake.



I approached my target area, which was a strip of lilies that ran alongside the dam wall for about 10 yards. They were not a thick set of lilies but each pad just touched the next leaving gaps just the right size for an old estate lake carp to fit his shoulders through and absorb the summer rays. Just a few paces from the pads I saw what I was looking for as a black set of shoulders slowly rose through the surface film, the sun glinting brightly off its wet scales. Then to the left a slow motion wallow rocked as the pads absorbed the water's movement created by another fish changing its sunbathing position. I did an about turn and scurried off back to my tackle trying to walk calmly but, with excitement and the adrenalin rush getting the better of me, I moved off with a half walk half run motion looking like some nut that had just found the asylum door open.

Back at my kit, I bit the end tackle off one rod, tied on a size 6 boilie hook, tore the crusts from my sandwiches, flinging what was left of my dinner in the direction of my gear, and grabbed the net all in one movement before hurriedly making my way back round the dam. On closer inspection there were three old warriors amongst the

lilies; an upper double and a couple of twenties. I fumbled about in my pocket for a piece of dried out crust and after three attempts managed to get one piece to stay on the hook. I slowly lowered it in front of the biggest of the three who was clearly not in the mood. Disgusted that a piece of bread had come in and blocked his sun spot, he slowly wafted his pecks and, with as little effort as he could muster, turned slightly and swung himself under the gap right next to where my crust offering was floating. I left it for a bit to see if he would change his mind. The sun grew stronger; it was mid afternoon. Bees buzzed back and forth over my bread and the carp's shoulders as they collected pollen from the large yellow flowers of lilies. Eventually my bread disintegrated and sunk out of sight so I decided to give the middle-sized fish a chance of a bit of Hovis. But with the same result it was now down to the smallest of the three. I slowly lowered it a few inches from his nose, by now desperate to catch. He never even flinched, then after a couple of minutes, as if woken from a daydream by the yeasty aroma, I saw his eyes look up as he rose and gulped down the crust. Half expecting to strike a bare hook skyward I was met with solid resistance. The pads exploded as the hooked fish charged out while the other two spooked and left at speed. The line caught on one of the end pads sending a high-pitched wine reverberating up the line and down the rod as the fish took line out into the pool. Needing no excuse to take a dip, I dropped in off the dam and pinged it off the pad stem and the battle was soon over. As a boy of thirteen years old this was the biggest fish I'd ever seen on the bank; it was 'only' a mid double but was most definitely more than twice my age.

Though it was most probably something that would never have occurred to me at that naive stage of my angling 'career,' this is probably where the real bug began for me and the start of what has evolved into something of an obsession during which I fell in love with estate lake carp and specifically the carp of this particular estate lake.

Although I stopped regularly fishing it when I was sixteen, thirteen years ago, I've always returned for a dabble in an attempt to outwit some of the beautiful old warriors the lake has held. Set in the rolling Cheshire countryside running down the side of a 17th century stately home, the water covers about 7 acres with a large bridge crossing the lake half way up. It has all the classic estate lake features with rhododendrons hung over the waters edge, Lillie beds, large ancient Yew trees that grow out over the water and even a classic old boat house.



With all sorts of exotic evergreens dotted around it never looked bare even in winter. I think the first recorded carp stocking was in the late 50's, with Leneys, and another batch went in from Shropshire in the early seventies. By the eighties it was producing fish of nearly thirty pounds; giants for the North West at the time.



It therefore attracted the best anglers in the region and hence the carp's education in how to dodge rigs started a long time before I arrived at the lake. Being a day-only lake made things especially difficult with the fish being so well conditioned into knowing that, if they held off till dark, they could eat what they wanted without having to worry about getting caught. So it always felt like you were trying to trick them into feeding. Although it is not the toughest lake I've fished it's certainly very challenging in many ways. No other places I fished could you have so many fish milling about around your swim and not catch, but that was the fun, they kept you thinking. I'd always use it as a warm up water. Having a dabble in the winter would always prepare me for the spring so that it would always sharpen me

up for the coming season wherever it would be that would be getting my full attention.

Back when I started fishing at the estate lake most people were still buying base mix to roll their own bait. There were no shortage of companies that sold excellent dry mixes and flavours but not many that sold rolled bait. The rolled bait market, certainly freezer bait, was in its infancy and the market consisted mainly of shelf life ready-mades, which at that time certainly had their place. But to me there was never anything like the satisfaction of rolling up your own little concoction and catching fish on it; to be fair there still isn't!

I soon realized I could knock up base mixes for a quarter of the price I was paying for a kilo bag of branded dry mix. This just added to the fun. Not only could I add my own flavour to my baits but also I could customise my own base mix. At the time I was a big fan of bird foods.

They were different from the fish meals others were using, were highly digestible, offered good leakage making them ideal for short session but were also good for year round use and so simple to knock together.



One of my first attempts couldn't have been simpler and ended up accounting for plenty of fish. A 16oz mix consisted of:

2oz Canary Seed

4oz Red Factor

2oz Lactol (puppy rearing milk)

3oz Soya Flour

5oz Semolina

4ml Chocolate Malt

12ml Minamino

5ml Molasses

I used to add the eggshell to my mix back then too. I'd throw all the eggs in the blender with the additives, give it a quick blast, and then add it all into the bucket with a measured amount of the dry mix. I'm not sure whether it made a great deal of difference adding the shell but it gave the bait an added crunch and, as a lot of a carp's natural diet consisted of creatures that had a shell, I thought it wouldn't do any harm to add it.

Although I use fish meal more nowadays through my summer fishing, I'm still a big fan of bird foods and have taken fish to over fifty pounds on them. It's usually late autumn when I tend to change to a milk/bird food combination nowadays. Bird foods have gone up in price quite a bit since I started using them but they're always worth considering when everybody's steaming the fishmeal in. Some of my favourites are EMP, Nectarblend, Red Factor and Cede Universal.



One thing all estate lakes have in common is silt. I think some people underestimate how deep this stuff can be- and how watery the top part of it can be.

At least one half of this particular lake was horrendously silty. In much of the shallower end of the estate lake you couldn't step into the margins in some spots without being up to your shoulders in what looked like 2ft of water. We'd been out in the boat in the past prodding about in two and half feet of water with a six foot oar and we literally had the whole oar pushed down into the silt before we hit solid ground. The surface layer would usually be made up of a very liquid-like texture.

You could actually put your hand down into it, and clearly see that your hand was in the silt, but it still felt like water. Then the next level down would be more like a milkshake type consistency. When I first realised the extent of such silty areas I not only wondered how I'd every caught from such areas but also realised why perhaps I hadn't caught when I thought I should have. From just lowering 2oz leads into this soft silt I could see they were pulling rigs and hook baits out off sight even if the length of the rig was 10 inches -god knows how far they were being dragged in on a 30 yard cast. I'm sure the fish are more than capable of sniffing them out and finding them as I'd seen them feeding on naturals buried up to there pelvic fins, but it didn't do my confidence any good to know most of the time my hook baits weren't even visible to the naked eye.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to work out that lighter leads, longer rigs and wafers (or criticals as we called them then) were the order of the day. Just to be sure I'd usually use two-foot rigs in these areas with one-ounce leads, but I did experiment with free lining, hooking small mesh bags on for weight. Or, I would mould a handful of fresh mole hill round the swivel, which would add a nice bit of weight before disintegrating on the cast, leaving the bait to slowly sink down lead-free with a nice bit of clouded water to boot. This was a trick I particularly liked to use when stalking with the float. I'd usually be using a small porcupine quill and whenever the fish moved out a bit too far to cast the float I'd just mould the molehill mud round the float. One trick another lad used to great effect to combat this was using solid bags. He'd drop his rig in with a bit of bait and then fill it with mixers it would float on the surface while the bag melted then the rig and bait would softly drop on to the silt. This was a good way of getting a 'light lead' a long way.



Another thing many estate lake carp seem to have in common, certainly the one's I've fished for, is that they stay reasonably active through the winter. This is probably due to most of these types of waters being fairly shallow with a good exchange of water going through them. Nearly all estate lakes I've fished are basically dammed streams with a sluice gate at the dam end whilst being stream fed at the other, usually averaging about six foot at the dam end and shallowing up towards the stream end making most of the lake under six foot. This often meant that if you looked hard enough under the rhododendrons and in the sheltered areas the fish could be found even in the coldest weather. One advantage of the estate lake in question was that it had a bridge crossing it half way down the lake so you could observe them clearly moving from one half to the other at any time of the year.

It was an eye opener to witness how active they could be and I'd even watched them pass under the bridge and head off down the shallow end when the lake was frozen completely solid.

One day I arrived and most of the lake was frozen. We'd had a bit of rain in the night and the water on the ice had created a glass bottom bucket effect meaning you could see through it quite clearly. So, I shinned up a tall tree that gave me a good view of the shallow end. It looked lifeless; I could clearly see nothing was about, but after about fifteen minutes, right in front of the tree I had climbed, a big cloud of silt was kicked up. At first I couldn't understand what had caused it then I saw a mid twenty mirror appear out of the silt. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, I'd heard of fish burying themselves during harsh times in the winter but had always been a bit sceptical; however, right in front of me I was witnessing just that. During the coldest parts of the winter I'd often find them tight under the rhododendron bushes. One in particular was on what used to be an island but the channel between it and the bank had long since silted up to become just a boggy channel. I'd wade over to the old island which was just one big rhododendron bush and literally have to crawl through the tangled mass to reach the water's edge. The bank was almost undercut and, at times, the fish would be right up against the bank in no more than 18 inches of water.

The bushes stretched out about ten feet into the water. Because it was such a tangled mass of branches there wasn't a lot of water space for the carp. I'd often watch them packed in like sardines jostling for space when sometimes some of the big fish would come in almost grounding out over the branches so their backs would again break the surface of the water. The water was so shallow at the back I was always amazed to find them in there in the depths of winter- I'd often lay still and watch them for hours. The big common in the lake at just under thirty used to spend a hell of a lot of time in there. Even in summer when they were fully active he'd spend full days in there only emerging when the light levels dropped.

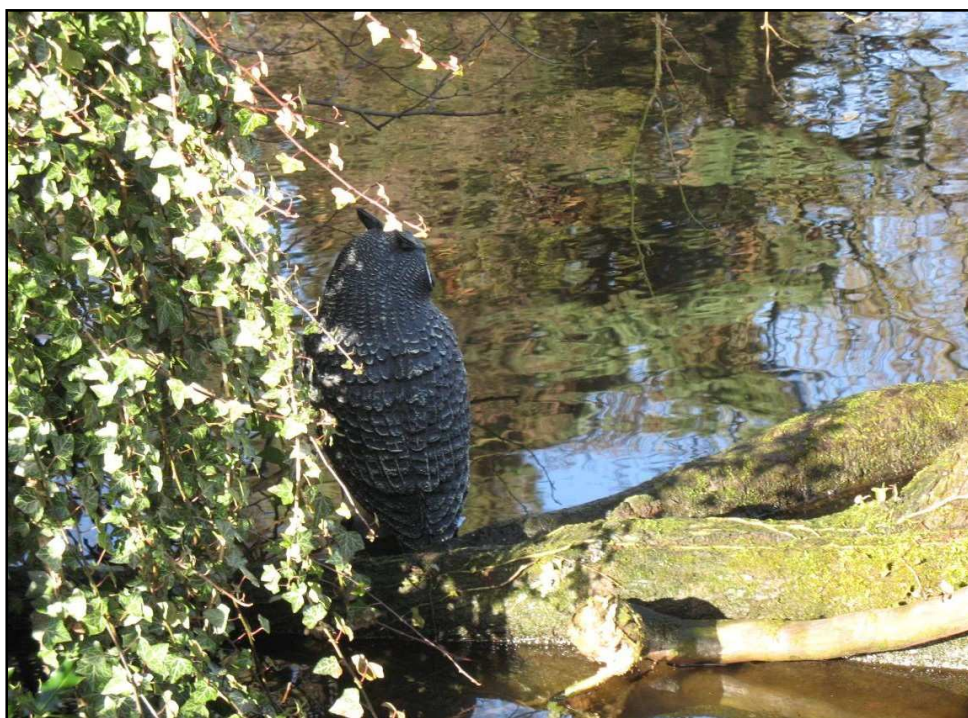
When I first discovered this little haunt I thought it had to be a good place to concentrate on for the winter. There was swim opposite which you could cast over from. It was only about a thirty-yard chuck but, from observing them off the island, it seemed they had a preferred entrance in and an entrance out so I donned the chestys and went for a wade round the front of the rhododendron island. There were indeed only two entrances; one small cave on the left and another tunnel on the right just under the waterline but just big enough for a carp to squeeze in. The rest was an impenetrable mass that had been pushed down into the bottom with the weight of the foliage above it. It was only two feet deep round the front of the bush and there were old twigs, bits of line and plenty of dead leaves. So I brought a rake down and cleaned the entrances up a bit as the last thing I wanted was to lose one on some old line or have my hook point masked by leaves or twigs.

I intended to fish the spot with single hookbaits so as not to attract too much attention from the bird life. The only free offerings I'd given them were in the back of the bush, which was a problem in itself due to the density of bush. If you just threw them in they would bounce off branches at all angles and could end up anywhere so I stashed a couple of old pole sections back there in order to thread this through the branches to whatever spot I chose and then roll the baits down the inside of the pole sections achieving precise accurate baiting. This also came in handy on other bushes on the lake; I'd usually be casting tight to the front of them. I could push the pole through the back of the bush to right above the spot I'd be fishing and roll baits down the pole so they were right on the money every time.



Even more importantly, you could have the pole touching the surface so the baits would be dropping in silently so as not to draw any further unwanted attention from bird life. I'd fish the rhododendron island locked up from my position opposite. As it was quiet during the winter I'd get down to the lake first thing in the morning and cast onto the far bank, wade my hook baits into position and leave them all day. Over a couple of winters I took a few fish from these spots and although unfortunately never any of the lakes big fish they were all welcome in winter.

One thing that did throw a spanner in the works was the moorhen of all things. They'd sneak in and out of the bushes without me noticing them and next minute I'd get a drop back only to see a moorhen skulk off into the rhododendrons. It used to drive me mental, what with the hassle of getting the rods back over there. I watched the mink scare them off one day and thought to myself I really wished that little bugger was over there everyday.



Then I started to think about putting something over there to scare them away, and all of a sudden it hit me! Something I'd seen in the local farm store whilst there buying hemp, "fake birds of prey." They used them to keep pigeons off buildings in towns. I thought if they scare a pigeon they should scare a timid moorhen. So I called in on the way home. All they had there were some fake Kestrels. I could just see all the Bo' Selecta jokes that would come my way for that one! I wanted a Peregrine Falcon preferably. Then I saw a large fake Eagle Owl, so I asked the women behind the counter "what do these keep away?"

"Just about everything" was her reply. Sounds good to me I thought. I couldn't wait to try it out I thought. I'd give it a really good test too as I had nothing to lose.

So a couple of days later I was back at the lake and decided that the best test would be on the two coots that resided down the dam end of the lake in a swim called the snags. In the snags you would basically be fishing the far bank under the tree canopy and these two coots would go back and forth picking up your well-positioned hook baits no matter how much arm waving or catapulting stuff you'd undertake in an attempt to deter them. It was fist light and there were no sign of the Coots -but I knew they'd turn up. I went round to the far bank and put the Owl at the water's edge by a fallen tree. The water was murky so felt totally confident that I could get away with putting him quite close to where my hook bait would be.

I got everything sorted and settled back to see how the experiment played out. I could see the two coots making their way over from wherever they'd roosted for the night. As they approached they got to within about 15 yards and then suddenly clocked the owl. It took them by surprise and they immediately both screeched and flew back the way they came. There were also two moorhens trapped in the small bay to the left of the Owl that wouldn't leave the small rhododendron they had fled to. Every now and again they'd screech at it from deep inside the bush in a vain effort to get rid of it. Brilliant- it couldn't have worked any better even though I did have to question my sanity as I looked over at this big fake Eagle Owl I'd put in my swim.

So that day was fortunately the beginning of the end of my bird problems on the lake. I fished this lake on and off for over 15 years and it's always been an education trying to overcome problems and outwit these many season-wise old carp. Much of what I learnt on this fantastic lake has stood me in good stead for other lakes certainly helping me achieve success on other types of waters.



I could babble on forever about this place in particular, the situations I've faced and the things that I and others have experimented with in an attempt to fool an old carp, but hopefully you can take something from these ramblings for now.

Tight lines

Rob Gillespie