

Using Boilies To Catch Kennet Barbel

By Steve Morgan

I have been using boilies on the River Kennet to catch barbel, with a reasonable degree of success, for many years. I find that boilies are convenient, economical and easy to use – but, most importantly, the barbel seem to love eating them! Perhaps the best way I can explain the approach I use is to describe a “typical” autumn session earlier this season.

I arrived at the river on a mild, overcast October afternoon to find it running a few inches above its normal level and carrying a little colour. The recent rain had clearly had a positive effect and conditions looked extremely promising. I therefore expected the barbel to respond accordingly and when it got dark I felt sure they would soon be actively foraging for food. In favourable conditions and if they haven't recently been unduly pressured, barbel usually obey their instincts to forage and they do so normally by working their way slowly upstream along time-honoured patrol routes. If you can work out where these patrol routes are you then are half way towards catching barbel consistently!

I selected a swim about thirty or forty yards above a known daytime holding area, (an area with several trees in the water and, hence, lots of cover), and where a slight bend in the river deflected the current towards my own bank. Over the years this has created a “gulley” on the near side about five and a half feet deep. This gulley extends to about half way across the river, beyond which the water is open and shallow. This sort of swim is a perfect place to ambush foraging barbel because the patrol route is highly likely to be on the near side in the deeper water, most probably quite close to the near bank itself. Barbel don't like moving through open, shallow water (even at night) unless there is a lot of colour and prefer to have some form of cover (say snags, weeds, the marginal shelf or a steep drop-off) on at least one flank as they move along. In the swim I had chosen over half the river would be “dead water” and a bait presented close in would stand an excellent chance of intercepting a patrolling fish.

With about three hours of daylight remaining I took my time to set up the gear and prepare the swim. In an area about four feet out and in about five feet of water I dropped in two pints of hemp and a few crushed boilies. I also loose fed another twenty boilies, some whole and some halved, in an area ten or twelve feet below the hemp. The plan was to stop patrolling fish dead in their tracks with the hemp and to get them searching for boilies over the area immediately downstream of the hemp. I have found that it is better to scatter the boilies a little bit in order to get fish working to find them. If every free boilie is presented in a very small area the fish can afford to be “picky” as they can take their fill too easily. I would rather have a group of three or four foragers frantically scouring a larger area of river bed and expending energy to find the free boilies. This way, I feel, they are more likely to snaffle the one with hook attached to it without asking too many questions first!

The boilies themselves were CC Moore's “Odyssey XXX” in 14mm size. I have had very consistent results with these over a number of years now and in fact I would rate them as the best barbel boilie I have ever found. I well remember the first time I used them. I was fishing a swim that, in addition to some very large barbel, held a vast population of dace and chublets. As an experiment, I crumbled three or four of the boilies into a dust and flicked it into the margins. The water absolutely sizzled as every dace in the swim immediately launched itself at the crumbs. I don't think a single crumb made it further than six inches below the surface. My confidence soared! The fish, albeit tiddlers, obviously instantly recognised the bait as food and equally obviously thought it was delicious. I could see no reason why barbel wouldn't respond similarly and events since have vindicated that expectation in full.

Anyway, back to our autumnal barbel session. I decided to rest the swim now until it began getting dark. A second helping of hemp went out about half an hour before dusk and a few more free boilies were added to those already lying in wait. Around twenty to thirty boilies is a nice quantity to use in good conditions – use fewer and you risk the barbel not “getting on” to them but use many more and you risk over-feeding what might be only a handful of passing fish. However, be aware that chub, bream and (worst of all) crayfish also like boilies and if it becomes apparent that these bandits are in operation then it is reasonable to top up with a few more. But, and this is extremely important, the biggest danger is *over-feeding* and therefore I seldom take more than fifty boilies with me. If I take more I know I'll be unable to resist the temptation to chuck them in! Odyssey boilies are highly nutritious and very filling; you want to encourage the barbel to go searching for them, not fatten them up for Christmas! (Incidentally, in winter when the going gets tougher I wouldn't use more than twenty per session – and often somewhat fewer).

Darkness eventually came and, with lunch eaten, the crossword finished and rigs tied, I moved into action. I intended to present the bait about fifteen feet downstream of the hemp, in the general area where the free boilies would be scattered about. The rig itself was simple enough – a semi-fixed two ounce lead and a fourteen inch “Camfusion” braided hooklink to a size twelve Talon Tip barbless hook. A single 14mm Odyssey boilie was mounted on a very short hair. The only slight sophistication was that I scratched the boilie on all sides to help release the flavour and to make the size and texture a little bit irregular.



As a boilie stop I used a pellet “Ohm” shaped stop rather than the conventional type since I have discovered that crayfish find these very hard to overcome. (They have learned how to steal boilies when they are secured only by the simpler type of stop). A small split shot about two inches above the hook is a useful way of keeping the uncoated section of braid lying flat on the river bed and a small (quarter ounce) flying back-lead keeps the main line out of harm's way. Otherwise, the rig I used was very simple and straightforward.

Just to give myself a slight edge I tied a few small PVA bags of halibut micro-pellets. (About golf ball size is best). Sometimes, I flavour the pellets with something fishy, (raw halibut oil is good, as is van den Eynde's “Minging Fish”), though on this occasion I used the pellets straight out of the bag. If you are casting any distance it is a good idea to thread the bags onto the hooklink with a baiting needle, but since I was fishing at very close range, I settled for just hooking them a couple of times in the mesh.

A few chub topped below the baited area in the next hour or so – indicating that my baiting programme hadn't gone unnoticed. And the odd nudge on the rod top suggested that they might be munching their way through my free boilies. I allowed myself the indulgence of another ten boilies, leaving fifteen or so in the baitbox for hookbaits. Gradually, everything went quiet and, with a couple of hours of darkness gone, I replenished the hemp with ten more droppers (about a pint). The swim was now about as well prepared as it was ever going to be and it was now "prime time" for a patrolling barbel to put in its appearance.

Out of the blue I got a slow pull on the rod top which immediately dropped back. It had been quite a while since the last of the (presumed) chub bites and I suspected the culprit might be a wary barbel. I left the bait out there and waited expectantly for a better chance. Ten minutes later came another similar indication. Frustrating! In this sort of situation you have to decide whether to sit it out and wait for a hittable chance (which of course might never come) or reel in and modify the rig (and risk spooking a barbel that might be on the verge of hanging itself). I was on the point of reeling in when matters were taken (almost literally!) out of my hands. The rod slammed round like the proverbial blade of grass in a hurricane and the centre pin began screeching in protest.

I grabbed the rod and struck sideways to my right. But the strike was cut short as whatever I was now attached to wrenched the rod round and tore off downstream. I was forced to concede more than a few yards of line before bringing the situation under control by burying the rod top under water and exerting strain from a lower angle. (This usually stops an angry fish that is bolting downstream and out of control). With the rod top now eighteen inches under water I began slowly winching the fish towards me. It is possible to do this with a centre pin because you can reel in without having to "pump" the fish and because you can exert very slow, steady pressure – it is almost impossible to do so with a fixed spool reel. Salmon anglers call this technique "walking the dog" and if you are careful to winch slowly without any sudden movements it is surprisingly easy to draw a heavy fish all the way upstream to beneath the rod tip. However, beware what you wish for! I now had a relatively fresh and very hostile barbel thumping around on a very short line. It was obviously a good fish and seemed determined to keep itself glued to the bottom. I was rather concerned about a fallen tree a few yards to my right and, unsurprisingly, the fish made several serious attempts to bury itself in there. But eventually patient pressure wore the fish down and it came, at last, wallowing to the surface, its fat, white belly gleaming in the moonlight.



I drew the fish slightly upstream of the net and used the current to bring it down neatly into a nettable position. That night the Moon was fairly bright but even on the darkest of nights it is seldom necessary to use the head torch to net a fish – in fact I can think of no better way to spook a beaten fish and precipitate a last minute hook pull. I simply waited until I could see some of the white underside reach the spreader block and then lifted. The fish was mine!

The scales didn't quite give me thirteen pounds but I was perfectly happy. It was a superbly conditioned fish that had fought like a Dervish. I fished on for another hour but everything had gone very quiet and I surmised that it might be a while till another group of foragers came along. So, in the absence of any more passing trade I called it a night. Another success for the Odyssey boilies - which will doubtless please Ian Moore almost as much as me!

Happy Barbellling!

Steve Morgan