

# Stuart courts monster southern Barbel

*By Stuart Court*

*After a couple of years away from Barbel fishing, Stuart Court has returned to the fold this autumn as he attempts to track down some monster Barbel from a sparsely-populated southern river.*

The nights are starting to draw in, the rivers have just had a nice flush through following the recent rains and the temperatures are beginning to drop quite noticeably at night. All of these seasonal factors combined can mean only one thing for the true specimen angler....big Barbel!

Speaking to friends who have been fishing various rivers up and down the country, it seems as though the current season has been pretty good as far as Barbel fishing is concerned. After a bitterly cold and slow end to last season due to the big freeze that seemed to go on forever, it appears that we could be in with a shout of some stunningly big Barbel this time around if only the weather is a little kinder. I've heard of some real monsters being caught the summer just passed, some which have been reported in the press and some which have been kept firmly under wraps. So, if we do get favourable conditions between now and March I'm expecting to see some truly huge Barbel landed.

I've actually spent a few seasons completely away from the whole 'Barbel scene', deterred by the horrendous snobbery and politics that it seems to attract these days. Although the lay-off gave me a great opportunity to get out there and target other species, it was inevitable that I would eventually be drawn back to the banks of my local southern rivers to target what is and always will be my favourite species.

The Barbel rods were duly dusted off back in mid-July and I began my new campaign by fishing a stretch of river that I'd never seen before. Throughout the summer I've fished it hard, spending one or two nights a week on the bank trying to work out feeding patterns, holding areas and an idea of fish numbers present. To me it's very much like piecing a jigsaw together in your mind; you need all the bits to achieve the end result. Along with some success, I've had my fair share of blank sessions so far, but more importantly I've been thoroughly enjoying myself and believe that the time I've spent getting to know the river over the past few months will start to pay dividends as we head into winter.

Over the last few months my approach has been to introduce a bed of hemp, mixed pellets and broken boilies with the bait dropper on arrival. I find a ratio of 12 droppers of hemp, four of pellets and two of boilies is enough to keep a couple of fish rooting around for a while without becoming so preoccupied that they won't come across my hookbait within a reasonable time frame.

The stretch I'm fishing appears to contain a fairly small number of Barbel but their average size is good. In fact, all but one of the fish I've caught this season have been doubles and there is always the possibility of a real monster turning u



***A cracking 14lb 6oz marked the start of a really good run and was followed by this fin-perfect 14lb 12oz beauty.***

I'd like to be catching one Barbel per session, but it has become obvious that one fish per half a dozen visits is a more realistic quota. It's clearly not the kind of place where I need to put in tonnes of bait to keep a large shoal of ravenous Barbel feeding while I haul in fish after fish, so a sensible amount of bait, just enough to attract the nearest fish to my baited spot for a feed, is all that's needed. Of course, my baiting strategy is being changed on a weekly basis as the weather conditions dictate. As soon as it starts to get really cold, I will employ a far more conservative strategy and replace the pellets and hemp with liquid and powdered attractors. These will play a big part in drawing the fish to my swim without actually feeding them. However, between now and the start of winter proper the Barbel will start to put on the bulk of their winter weight by feeding hard, so I can afford to give them some bait without fear of overfeeding.

On my last trip I found the river rising quickly after heavy rain the previous day. The conditions looked the best they had for weeks - a foot of extra water, a tinge of colour and mild overcast skies with a mere waft of a southerly breeze. It was as if I'd made a personal weather request to the Barbel gods and it had been granted in full. This was the first time I'd seen the levels up so I walked the stretch and had a good look at the way the extra water was affecting the flow in each swim. One swim in particular shouted to me in these conditions, a nice steady pace with no 'boilie' water and a big overhanging tree on the downstream side - it looked perfect! The big question now was should I introduce some bait or wait until later in the evening? In the end I decided to cast out only the hookbaits, each with a PVA bag attached, for the first couple of hours at least, because I didn't want the baitdropper to spook any fish that may already be present.

## Bait presentation

With the water pushing through swiftly I also decided to leave the hemp out of my baiting completely and rely totally on my attractive pellet mix. This consists of CC Moore's Pellet Ultramix, which is a mix of different types and sizes of pellet, to which I add some Meteor pellets that perfectly match my Meteor boilies in both flavour and colour, and a good amount of 6mm Elips pellets which no Barbel angler should ever leave home without.



*Simple but effective – this makes life easy and is often the best policy*

Double 14mm hardened hookbaits (unfortunately necessary due to the crayfish) were drilled and attached to the hair, followed by a generous wrap of paste, which again slows the crayfish down but more importantly attracts the Barbel with the constant leakage of flavour.



***Maximise your bait's attraction - but beware of overfeeding at a time when fish feeding activity is slow***

A golf ball-sized PVA bag of pellets is then slid directly onto the hook link, which is attached to the mainline via a loop and a quick clip. The whole lot is then dunked into my pot of bait dip, not only to offer a concentrated zone of attraction for the Barbel to home in on but also to slow the process of the PVA melting so I know that the bag hasn't broken up before its hit the riverbed - something that can be quite important, especially if you have a fair amount weed in the swim as the bag keeps the hook masked perfectly until it dissolves. This treatment was carried out for both rods, meaning I was fishing effectively within 10 minutes and with very little disturbance to the swim.



Having sat happily for a couple of hours watching a hawk impressively work the field opposite, I got to thinking that maybe there weren't any Barbel in my swim - it wouldn't be the first time I've fished a swim which is completely devoid of Barbel that's for sure. Maybe I should get the dropper out and introduce some bait for the night ahead? As I turned to reach for my bait bucket my right hand rod wrenched over with the unmistakable brutal ferocity of a Barbel bite. A powerful fish stripped a fair amount of line from my clutch before I could react - such was the violence of the take. I reached the rod within a couple of seconds but the fish had already run partially under the overhanging tree and was diving powerfully towards the nearside marginal cover.

***Getting to know the stretch you are targeting is essential and will always pay you back in some way.***

After what felt like an age of putting steady pressure on the fish, I finally began to gain a small amount of line. I knew my strong tackle wouldn't let me down so it was just a case of being patient and letting the fish wear itself out. Suddenly, my still unseen adversary decided it'd had enough of holding station under my rod tip and powered off downstream away from the snags that were close to my own bank, this was a breakthrough in the battle as it allowed me to conduct the rest of the fight in the mid river open water.

The fish seemed to know exactly how to use the extra pressure of the floodwater to its advantage, still staying deep and hugging the bottom with apparent ease, eventually though I managed to lead the fish begrudgingly into my waiting net.

Looking down into the mesh of my net I could see straight away that this fish was a bit special, I've been lucky enough to catch quite a few big Barbel over the years so I knew immediately that I was looking at something above 16lb here. When Barbel reach the 15-16lb mark they seem to take on a whole different look, they are truly impressive beasts at that sort of size and this fish was showing those kinds of proportions. It was thick set across the shoulders and hugely deep in the flanks but still maintained the classic sleek Barbel shape. I could barely wait to get the fish on the unhooking mat for a closer look but I left her in the net to recover from the fight while I sorted out my camera and scales.



***17lb 2oz of stunning autumn Barbel; simply beautiful!***

The scales displayed a weight of 17lb 2oz, a huge fish that was slightly bigger than even I had first estimated and every bit as beautiful as I'd expected. A couple of self take snaps were fired off quickly and I returned the bronze flanked monster to its home fighting fit, there's no better feeling in Barbel fishing than seeing a great big fish that you've just caught swimming off strongly.

#### **Stuart's top tips:**

1. Keep your eyes firmly on the weather forecasts at this time of year. Look for heavy rain and get on the banks at the earliest opportunity to take advantage of the Barbel feeding heavily in the high water.
  2. Make use of the Environment Agency's excellent online 'River Levels' service. It's updated daily and helps you to see exactly when your chosen river is carrying extra water.
  3. Attach your rig to your swivel using a loop and a quick clip. This way you can mount your PVA bags directly onto your hooklink before each cast. The bag will then mask the hook completely until it dissolves keeping it free from any weed or debris; it also ensures that the bag can't drift off downstream like it could if you just nick it straight onto the hook.
  4. When the rivers rise, try using a paste wrap on your boilies. Dip your whole rig, PVA bag included, into a liquid dip before each cast. This gives a huge boost of extra attraction without actually feeding the Barbel, it also slows down the melt time of the PVA bag slightly.
- Rather than just using a single kind of pellet, try a mix of different sizes and types in your PVA bags. They will all break down at different rates constantly emitting irresistible food signals down the flow, the Barbel will then come across your hookbait and you're in.