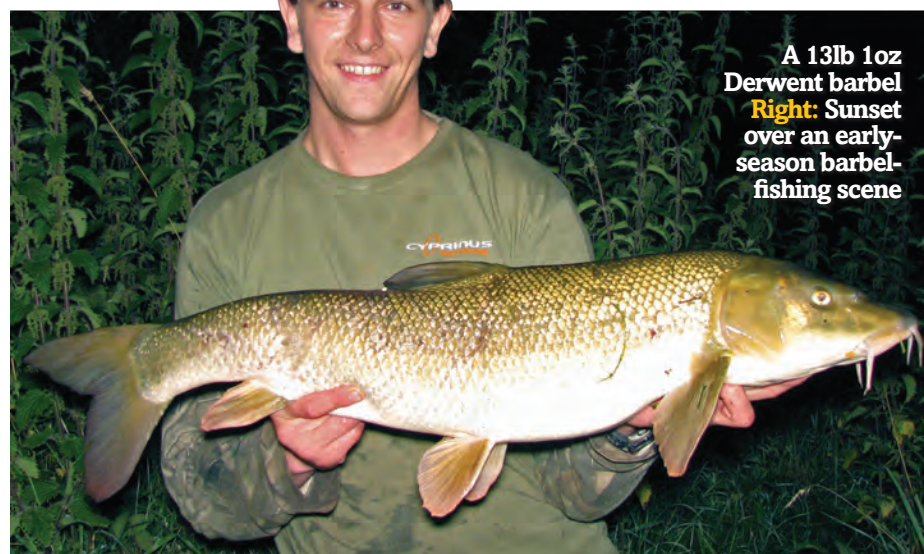


SHORT-SESSION SUMMER BARBEL FISHING



A 13lb 1oz
Derwent barbel
Right: Sunset
over an early-
season barbel-
fishing scene



A shallow gravel run heavy with
streamer weedbeds – a perfect
summer barbel swim

Juggling time between family, work, friends and other commitments can leave little left over for fishing trips, which isn't an ideal basis for targeting specimen fish, but I've worked six-day weeks since I left school and I remain a mad-keen angler. Two years ago I bought my first house with my girlfriend and her daughter, which has further constricted my fishing time, but I have plenty of experience in squeezing short sessions into what little time I have left.

Rivers are my favourite venues, and during the first four months of the season I mainly target barbel, fishing short evening sessions after work. To get the best out of these sessions you have to be prepared, efficient and have your tactics ready to employ quickly and confidently. I shall explain how I do this, which should give you a basis of knowledge to help you get the best from your local rivers.

RIVER AND SWIM SELECTION

First you need a venue within easy driving distance of work/home. I finish work at

Like most anglers, Andrew works full time and has a family to support, so making the most of his time on the bank is crucial.

6pm, so for evening sessions I set myself a limit of 45 minutes driving time each way. Research which local angling clubs offer you the best river fishing to suit your budget. I rarely fish past midnight, but most clubs consider fishing beyond sunset to be night fishing, so a club that allows fishing after dark is a must to get maximum post-work fishing time. Many clubs that don't allow night fishing on their standard ticket offer an additional night permit.

Once you have a club book it is essential to get to know the river as intimately as you can. Walk the stretch before you intend to fish. Try to pick a day when the river is low

and clear and take polarising sunglasses with you, as this will enable you to spot features and swims otherwise hidden, and such knowledge will provide you with a valuable edge when it comes to fishing. The close season is a perfect time to do this, though one downside is that there will be no anglers to speak to, as they can also provide you with beneficial nuggets of information on productive areas, baits and tactics. However, don't be afraid to try areas where nobody else seems to fish – this is usually down to laziness rather than a lack of good swims.

Once you know a bit about the river,

Andrew awaiting
a bite on a late
summer evening
beside a deeper
run – perfect
when the river
is carrying extra
water and colour



The Greys Prodigy Advanced Rig Board is well designed and has many benefits, including the storage of long hooklinks without damage



A selection of large open-end swimfeeders Andrew uses for his barbel fishing

fish as many swims as possible in your first few sessions and keep notes of where and when you've seen fish activity. Over time you'll get an idea where fishes best

in different conditions, which is essential knowledge when the fishing is difficult. Find a variety of swim types that all hold fish and you're on to a winner.

I have three golden types of barbel swim that I like to have at my disposal, so



Andrew keeps everything he needs for a quick barbel session at hand

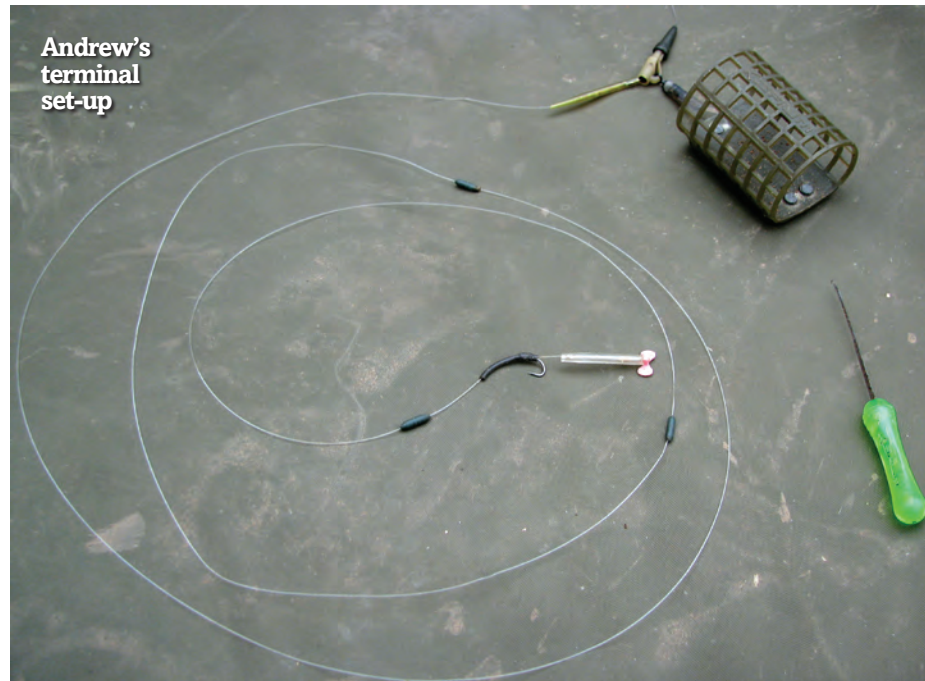


Andrew stores his rigged-up barbel rods and other important items in a lightweight triple rod sleeve

on any given stretch I'll try to find at least a couple of deep swims that are fishable close in during flood conditions, a couple of shallow gravel runs with plenty of streamer weed and also a couple of snag pegs. This gives me plenty of options, allowing me to fish in accordance with the weather and river conditions I'm faced with, even when grabbing a couple of hours' fishing at short notice.

Generally my most productive swims for warm weather and low-water levels are the gravel runs, especially the highly oxygenated runs below rapids, broken water and weir pools. Streamer weed provides both cover and a natural larder for species such as barbel, so baiting and casting to the gaps can be a killer warm-weather tactic, especially in areas where there are clean patches visible on the gravel, betraying spots where barbel have recently fed. A rigid-framed landing net and thigh waders will help you land more fish from such swims in the event that a barbel lodges itself in a weedbed.

If the river is running high and dirty, I'll first head towards known deep holes and undercut banks, allowing me to fish with confidence in the near margin or towards the nearest crease, where there will be less chance of the line picking up flotsam and



Andrew's terminal set-up

debris brought down in the high water. Although barbel will still feed in the faster, shallower spots in such conditions, having to reel in repeatedly and recast will quickly drive you to the edge of sanity and a bait can only catch you fish whilst it's in the water, so time spent picking rubbish off your line is time wasted.

Snag swims such as fallen trees will produce fish in all conditions, so I keep these as my fall-back option when things aren't working elsewhere or if my first-choice swims are taken. My ideal barbel snag would be over a gravel bottom, downstream of some broken water and just slightly off the main flow, so any resident fish have everything they require in terms of cover, oxygen and a regular food source. Though productive, snag swims pose obvious problems, especially as barbel possess such explosive acceleration.

Thought must always be given to the terminal tackle used when fishing near snags to make rigs as fish friendly as possible and lessen the risk of leaving a fish tethered. By applying some careful baiting, barbel can often be drawn upstream away from snags, especially quickly after dark, from where you'll stand a far better chance of landing one once it's hooked.

TACKLE AND RIGS

If I only have a few hours on the bank, I need a method that's dependable, will work in most conditions and be easy to use in the dark. So I usually fish statically with a large, heavy feeder and a hair-rigged hookbait. There's very little messing involved, it ticks all the above boxes and, most importantly, it works. Trotting, stalking and rolling meat are all more enjoyable ways to fish for barbel, but these work best in daylight, which is often in short supply by the time I start to fish.

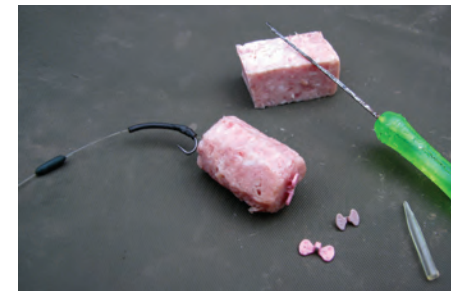
If you have a rig or bait in the water that you have no confidence in, it will cost you fish, so I keep my rigs simple. Barbel don't

require anything too technical, so keep it strong, sharp and pinned down and you won't go far wrong. Many successful barbel anglers advocate the use of backleads to minimise fish spooking off the main line, as I used to, until I began using very long hooklinks of 4ft-plus. These can be used in conjunction with backleads, but I find this combination unwieldy and difficult to cast, so for the past few seasons I have stuck to only using long hooklinks, which has actually improved my catch rates. I do pin them down, though, with the very convenient Korda Sinkers, using at least three on each hooklink and a loading bias towards the hook.

I rig up with strong, short-shank, micro-barbed hooks such as Drennan Super Specialist Barbel. The sizes I use range between 14 and 8, depending on bait size, but in most situations with pellets or boilies, an 11 or 12 is perfect, and with luncheon meat a 10 or an 8 tend to work well. Since adding ready-made line aligners over my hooks, my hook-up ratio has improved. They're easier than shrink tubing and work very well for barbel, pricking most fish in the bottom lip.

I prefer using clear mono hooklinks. This is contrary to many big-fish anglers, but I find the additional stretch in mono is a vital shock absorber in my rig. I previously suffered frequent hooklink breakages within the first few seconds of fights using both braid and fluorocarbon hooklinks. Eventually I realised that the lack of stretch in both materials resulted in insufficient tensile strength to absorb the sudden pressure of a barbel take. I switched to a standard clear mono and I've never looked back. I've found Power Steel in 12lb to be extremely reliable in everything from abrasion resistance to knot strength.

The remainder of my rig is simple: a safety lead clip and tail rubber fished bolt-style to hold my swimfeeder in place. I use a quick-change swivel for easy hooklink



Fox Luncheon Meat Stops in action

changes and an anti-tangle sleeve fits over this swivel to boom the hooklink safely away from the feeder.

BE PREPARED

Time spent unnecessarily rigging up rods on the bank is time wasted when you could be baiting up or actually fishing instead. From June onwards I keep my pair of barbel rods rigged up, stored in a triple rod sleeve that also carries my tripod and banksticks. Neoprene tip and butt protectors hold the rod sections together and help keep them in good condition during transit.

I will often tie up new hooklinks on the bank while waiting for bites, but I never go fishing without a few ready in reserve, stored on a Greys Prodigy Advanced rig board, which holds hooklinks several feet long without damaging them and comes in its own protective case.

Using long hooklinks can make it

difficult to keep rods rigged up, but I have a couple of methods to overcome this. The first and most simple is to add a Pole Hook Keeper to the rod handle as close to the butt as possible. This simple and cheap device creates a handy metal loop to hook into, so a 12ft rod can be stored with a hooklink of almost 6ft and left in situ. For hooklinks longer than 6ft I simply unhook them from the quick-change swivel and store them on the rig board, before fastening my lead clip on to the Hook Keeper. If I target a different species for a session and remove my barbel terminal tackle, feeders and bait from my rucksack, they will all be stored together in a box so I can quickly grab everything when my next barbel session comes around.

Another device of convenience that I use is the Prologic Quick-Release Connector. My barbel tripod, bite alarms, banksticks and rod-rest heads are each fitted with medium-sized connectors and I even fit large ones to my landing net and handle. This not only makes it quick to set up but it comes in handy once a fish is landed, as the net can be disconnected quickly to carry a fish to the unhooking mat.

It doesn't take many sessions before I can set up everything and be ready to cast within little more than a couple of minutes. By September/October I'm well enough practised to set up completely in the dark, only turning my headlamp on to bait the hook. If you keep your tackle organised you'll quickly find a routine and this will buy

you more fishing time.

Angling in the dark hasn't been the same since I purchased a good LED headlamp. For the angler fishing for the odd hour into darkness, many cheap but functional headlamps are available these days. However, if like me you're likely to be fishing after dark most sessions, you will notice a huge difference if you invest in a better headlamp. A few years ago I bought a mid-range Petzl Tactikka XP and for fishing I can't fault it. It's lighter than most cheaper lamps, yet it's very robust and water resistant, but the key feature is the coloured filter that slides over the lens. I use the red filter, but I keep my headlamp use to an absolute minimum when fishing anyway, and wherever possible I turn away from the river when I turn it on – a moment's thoughtlessness with a headlamp can quickly wreck a swim.

One of the appeals of barbel is that they're easy to fish for and feed well into dark, which extends available fishing time considerably after the middle of August. Whether you have dedicated barbel rods, quiver-tips or carp rods, the simple addition of isotopes and/or bite alarms will allow you to fish effectively after dark. I use the Enterprise Tackle Nightlight Adaptors with betalights, which are always reliable. A baitrunner-type reel isn't essential, but the ferocity of a barbel bite can easily lift rods from rests, so you must remain especially vigilant if you're not using one.



A 10lb 7oz short-session barbel



Andrew uses a wide range of different groundbaits in his mix

A couple of items I use which, though not essential, I wouldn't like to fish without on short summer sessions are a barbel tripod and thigh waders. I don't always use a tripod, but in larger, gravelly or uneven swims, tripods offer vastly superior stability over single-rod banksticks and they can actually be set up in a variety of positions, not just rod tips pointing to Jupiter-style. This stability and security can be priceless, especially during a vicious take and on gravel banks where the sound of inserting banksticks can spook fish.

Thigh waders have many benefits, from keeping your legs dry during a summer shower to allowing you to cross a river to access different pegs. Several times each season I'm glad of them, as it means I'm able to position loosefeed and rigs more accurately, enter the river to return a fish or extract one from a snag. Of course, care must always be taken when wading, especially after dark.

BAIT

For short sessions you need a baiting regime that will have an instant impact, drawing as many fish to your rigs as possible. My own approach would take a whole article to explain fully, but I like both my groundbait and hookbait to stand out from the crowd and contain known barbel attractors, but not the same as what 95% of other anglers are using. This is why I favour cocktail baits, with a mixture of different scents to create a unique draw that barbel won't approach with undue caution. I vary my groundbait mixes throughout the summer and into autumn in order to evolve with the changing conditions, providing what I think the barbel will want. My whole groundbait concept revolves around a varying mixture of spicy, fishy and meaty flavours, plus that timeless barbel exciter, hemp.

From the start of the season through to late July, when spawn, fry and invertebrates are in abundance, I put an emphasis on fishy aromas. More than half my mix is made up of fishmeals, shrimp and krill, with the rest a mixture of crushed hemp, a meaty groundbait and something with a little spice, such as The Source. As the summer wears on, I gradually phase in more spicy flavours, which will outweigh the fishy ingredients from early September onwards, because I've seen a better response to spicy flavours in cooler water. I'm not affiliated with any

bait brands, so I pick and mix a bit at the tackle shop. There are, however, a few groundbaits I have faith in as great barbel attractors, especially when mixed with each other. These include The Source and Marine Halibut by Dynamite Baits, Marukyu's SFA 400 Krill, Spicy Meaty Method Mix, and Hemp and Hali Crush by Sonubaits and Bait-Tech's N-Tice Meaty Mix, Voodoo and Halibut Marine Method Mix.

Hookbaits are very much a personal preference and, again, I have had a better response to cocktail baits than single-flavour ones. Early on in the season when the fish have had a lay-off from introduced feed, I might use a single, smaller hookbait, but later I will step up to a double bait such as a squid boilie alongside The Source, or maybe a halibut pellet with a Spicy Sausage pellet. It's worth experimenting with baits, which is how I ended up using cocktail hookbaits in the first place, and I've seen my results improve ever since.

One of the most consistent barbel catchers throughout the seasons continues to be luncheon meat and I always have a tin in my bag, and from September onwards it's usually my 'go-to' bait. I do use it straight from the tin, but usually I'll add some flavours, again to help it stand out from what others are using. Sprinkling powdered spices and other flavours over cubed meat and shaking it all around in a sealed bag is an easy way to experiment with new bait-boosting combinations. For an on-the-bank solution you can't beat injecting oil and liquid flavours directly into luncheon meat hookbaits as you would into deadbaits for pike.

If you have ever hair-rigged luncheon meat you'll know the hair is prone to slice through the bait like a cheese wire. A product that works extremely well at preventing this is Fox Luncheon Meat Stops. These consist of a silicone sleeve that slides over the hair before the bait, which increases the surface area of the hair to stop it slicing,

and a large flat-faced bait stop that doesn't pull through the meat as easily as a boilie stop. I've used these for years and I highly recommend them.

APPROACH

There are two main baiting approaches you can take. A popular approach for barbel is to bait up heavily with a bait dropper, but by far the best way to use one for short sessions is to bait several swims within easy walking distance of each other before starting fishing. Then travel light and drop in on each swim in turn. If nothing happens in 20 minutes or so, try the next swim, likewise if you land one or two fish. If one swim has been especially productive you can always loosefeed again before you vacate it, then return later after resting it for a while. On stretches of river with very few anglers on them, this method can account for captures of multiple fish in an evening.

The second approach is to introduce as much bait as possible with a swimfeeder. I use the largest capacity open-end feeders I can find, usually Korum or Fisky's Fantastic Feeders. I plug either end with groundbait and cram plenty of mixed-sized pellets in between. If the swim contains a good head of barbel then I will cast the feeder every 15 or 20 minutes for the first hour to get plenty of bait down from the outset. Then I'll settle into leaving my baits out for longer as the evening progresses. Usually with this approach I'll stick to fishing only one or two swims per session.

Although not at their largest at this time of year, barbel can produce exciting and consistent sport right through the summer, and even very short sessions can produce multiple good fish. Rivers small and large throughout the country are now regularly producing barbel of previously unthinkable proportions and they fight incredibly well. So a concerted effort to get to know your local stretch could pay off with some truly memorable quick-fire summer action.



This barbel was just short of 10lb