

EXTREME WINTER FISHING

with Shaun Harrison

Have you ever caught a carp from under the ice – by design? Shaun Harrison certainly has!

I had invited Elie Godsi along to 'The Inner Sanctum' for the afternoon to fish as my guest. After the long walk to the pool, we were both disappointed to find it frozen over apart from a small bay in the northwest corner.

Not wanting to make the long walk back to my beloved Land Rover, I suggested that Elie should have a go in the bay while I had a mooch around to see what other chances there were of actually getting a bait in the water.

Soon I had found what I was looking for – a small gap in the ice next to a steep marginal drop-off. I decided to set a rod up and give it a couple of hours.

There was just enough space to wind a rig up to the tip ring of my Free Spirit 10ft Bank 'S' Range Bank Creeper and slide the rod under the ice as far as the reel. I was then able to drop the rig eight feet out into the lake and onto a ledge in around three feet of water. A bright red, critically-balanced whisky boilie was delivered to the lake bed and left in isolation under the ice.

Just an hour later I was playing a carp from under the ice. The size of fish in these conditions is pretty much immaterial but for what it's worth it turned out to be a mid-double. This fish definitely gave me a much bigger sense of achievement

than a lot of the larger carp I have caught over the years, particularly as it came from under the ice.

Time To Think

Back home in front of the fire while filling in a few extra details into my diary, I had started to think about this capture along with my previous 'extreme captures'. It was then that I realised I have now been fortunate enough to hook carp in four different lakes while fishing for them under the ice – as well as catching several others while lakes have been half frozen.

I say 'hook' because one of my biggest winter disappointments was hooking a big common at Patshull Church Pool from under the ice, only to suffer a hook pull in the edge. I was naturally gutted at the time but it was a valuable lesson for me in years to come.

Patshull wasn't an impossible winter water but by no stretch of the imagination could you call it easy. If it was possible to hook a Patshull fish in these conditions, then it was certainly possible to hook any other carp I fished for.

The more I think back, the more I begin to realise that fishing a partially-frozen or, indeed, a fully-frozen lake has actually been more productive per rod hours than in usual cold-water conditions.

I have rarely bothered to fish frozen pools but have actually had a fair few carp when I have done so. In each case I have turned up only to find the various places are frozen and have





This carp had a mouthful of leeches, a common sight in extreme winter conditions. Unfortunately, they're barely visible in this photograph.



Another one from beneath the ice, January, 2004.

simply not fancied the walk, or the drive back. Had I known any of these lakes were frozen before setting off from home, then I am sure I would still be in the position of having never experienced the unshipping of a top section of the rod in order to be able to net a carp.

As I say, I have fished this way rarely but, again, I have rarely blanked doing it! Could it be that the most frustrating times of the year, when the lake surfaces go solid on us, could in fact be one of the best times to actually catch ourselves a winter carp?

This sounds a bit far fetched, doesn't it? I must admit that the thought has only come to me today but the more I have thought about it, the more it seems to make sense. Various instances have cropped up in my mind during the day – so much so that I have returned from work and plonked myself down in front of my article-making machine to hammer out these few words.

Snow Carp

I caught my first carp in 1977. In fact, I caught three during that same day. The ground had been thick with snow, so I had been lucky.

The ambition, it would seem, of many carp anglers is to catch a carp in the snow. I could never see the big deal in this. I have caught quite a few of them over the years and, in fact, I quite rate snowy conditions.

The biggest problem I have in catching carp in the snow is managing to combine my day off with the snow. If my girlfriend Ruth ends up having the same day off then I'm totally knackered because she insists on us going out together and being silly – skidding around in the Land Rover!

Snow generally means that the air temperature isn't going to fall too low. If it gets too cold, it doesn't snow – it's as simple as that. So, although pictures of carp in the snow are often quite spectacular, the actual water condition isn't that bad generally.

I truly believe that carp are well aware of when a long, cold snap is on the way. I think a lot of animals are – a sixth sense I suppose you would call it. I also believe that Stone Age men could probably tell as well.

Wild animals predict the weather far more efficiently than weathermen do on television. It is my belief that we have lost a lot of our natural senses through mollycoddling ourselves in

thick clothes and cocooning ourselves in warm houses.

If we had no windows to look out of from our houses, a lot of us would be totally oblivious to the weather. In fact, a lot of people are only aware of the weather for the short period that they travel to and from work.

Not many of us humans are in tune with the climate because there is little need to be. We do not need to control our diet by the weather. If we are in for a month-long freeze up, then so what! All we suffer is more expensive gas and electricity bills. For the carp, it is a different story altogether; their lives are spent surviving and trying to avoid us.

The Big Freeze

The few times that my fishing has coincided with the last mild day before a massive freeze or the day before the first major frosts of the winter have, on several occasions, resulted in multiple catches of carp.

The first time it happened to me was in 1983 when I caught five carp from a lake, including a new lake record. On this particular venue I had only ever previously managed to catch two. I packed away and an extreme winter well and truly set in. At the time I simply considered myself most fortunate to have caught so many carp 'just in time'.

A couple of similar occurrences over the following seasons changed my mind. Carp feed intensely prior to a long, cold snap. I am positive they know way before we do when the weather is going to change.

Fishing for so many years allows one to ponder past events and many ideas I have had during this time have now altered. Apart from the beginning of the run into a particularly long, cold spell I would have argued with anyone that carp would not feed in water temperatures less than 39 Fahrenheit. In fact, to this day, I am happy to fish in 39 degrees but any lower and I see little point. Then, I go and fish for different species.

Being a natural rebel and not being one to follow trends, I spent so many years trying to prove others wrong. It was well over 20 years ago that Baz Varney came creeping around Fletcher's Pond asking if I had done any good.

"Missed one," was my reply (this was before bolt and hair rigs).

"You can't have done. The water is only 38 degrees," was



Early 1980s – I've never seen it as a big deal to catch carp in the snow.



his reaction. Now that hurt. I had missed a take on my peanut butter paste. In hindsight it may have been a roach bite but at the time this had never occurred to me. Baz was the local hero and it really got to me that he thought I was lying. From that day on I was determined to prove his theory wrong.

Several years and many blanks later, I eventually did that and, would you believe, I was sharing a swim with Baz when I did it. What is even more amazing is that Baz had caught one a few minutes before! We had become regular fishing – and drinking – partners by that stage. The reservoir we were fishing started to freeze over that day and remained frozen for a considerable time.

So, although it is possible to catch carp in less than 39 Fahrenheit, if you want to save yourself an awful lot of blanks, once it drops down to 39, go home!

The Cut-Off Factor

There should be a word of warning here though. I see so few anglers take the water temperature in anything like the correct manner. Most drop a thermometer in the edge and then take a reading. It is essential to take the temperature from a position close to your baits. For example, it is little use dropping your thermometer in two feet of water if your baits are in 12 feet.

On December 17th, 2003, I was sitting in the High Swim on the Mangrove. It had been very cold and foggy throughout the day. The water in the edge was 37 Fahrenheit, yet the water I was fishing in was 40 Fahrenheit. I could so easily have given up. Then again, perhaps I should have done. I blanked.

These days, I only take the temperature at the end of a session or after catching a fish. I don't particularly want to know at the start of a session if it's too cold.

I now believe that the 39 degree cut-off point is actually the cut-off point where most self-hooking rigs fail to be of use. I now know that carp feed in water colder than 39 degrees – as I have since witnessed them. However, being cold blooded they move so slowly that most self-hooking rigs are simply never going to prick the fish. They aren't going to move fast enough!

Ice Angler

Let us get back to ice fishing! Having winter fished for so many years now, I must admit to struggling more during the mild winters than I ever did during the coldest. When fishing between freezes I have always found the carp to be so much more predictable than they are during long, mild spells.

This didn't used to make sense to me, although I guess it is a simple case of the fish switching off for longer periods and feeding heavier when the water temperature allows them to move around again. Remember that fish are cold blooded – the colder the water, the slower their metabolism will be.

At this point, I'm going to quickly sidetrack while a particular subject is in my mind. It is something I have never seen in print or indeed heard commented on by any other angler.

It is the bit about cold blood that has reminded me. You should be very careful when handling carp in extreme weather conditions because your hands will burn them!

The colder the carp feels – because your hands are considerably warmer – the more they tend to kick and writhe around.



The only part of the lake fishable was an inlet stream – and I caught.

I have been very fortunate this January in putting a fair few carp on the bank. I have had to actually resort to cooling my hands down in the water for a few minutes in order to keep the carp in a semi-calm state.

It's not a pleasant thing to have to do but it is a tiny sacrifice to make when you consider what the carp is going through. You really don't want to be removing any of that slime on them at any time of the year – especially in the winter.

Getting It Right

Now, for some reason – be it a safety thing or not – carp are attracted to any band of light/dark water. I have caught so many winter fish over the years on the crease of a constant wind (ripple/calm join), that it is now one of the major things I look for on otherwise barren waters.

Similarly, carp love to have cover over their heads and, again, this gives them a light/dark comfort zone. Yet the



‘Many anglers would have you believe that the carp retreat into the deepest water for the winter period... this is a total nonsense.’

most remarkable aspect I have found is the carp's attraction to the edge of the ice band on a semi-frozen lake. For example, casting as close to the ice as you are able will bring more consistent results than fishing to recognised features.

The first time I experienced this was on December 11th, 1983. My memory isn't that good but I know this as I have just dug the diary out to check a few facts and to jog my memory about what I am about to write about.

There had been a very bad (minus 5°C) frost and the gravel pit in question was actually starting to freeze as I sat there. In fact I had to move pitch and reposition the baits as my lines were getting stuck in the ice.

By the time I had moved position the freezing process had

made it impossible to get a bait back to any of my usual spots. I ended up simply casting to the edge of the ice, working along the lines that my baits were better 20 feet off the mark than 100 feet off the mark.

That day saw me connect with six carp including what was at that time the second largest in the pit. Each recast ended up in a different area due to the continually spreading ice. This area of the pit was very much what I term 'no-man's-land', meaning that it is simply a flat, featureless bottom.

Once the pool had thawed again, I explored this area with a bait many times and never once did I receive a take from it. The carp were there because the ice was there.

Having experienced this a few times since, I know that they will feed in the most unlikely of spots so long as there is a dark band of ice there. Long, cold, freezing nights are usually accompanied by bright, blue-skied days.

If the surface has frozen during the night, you are likely to find the carp in very shallow water indeed. With a weak winter sun shining down, the ice works like a greenhouse inasmuch as it warms up the water underneath. Obviously, the shallower the water, the quicker it will warm.

If you combine this shallow water with a direct, afternoon sun and a little cover, such as overhanging branches etc, then you can be almost certain the carp will be there. This is exaggerated even more if you have old reed stems in the same area. The reeds warm, the water warms and so on.

The Comfort Zone

The fish in my pool at home frequent the three bridges which cross it. The areas around the bridges are the last ones to freeze. The wooden bridges obviously retain any heat longer than the surrounding area. Also, the carp again have this light/dark fascination – obvious safety around the bridges! Carp, quite simply, enjoy the sun and warmth on their backs.

Many anglers would have you believe that the carp retreat into the deepest water for the winter period, emerging the



following spring when the water warms again. This is a total nonsense. Give me shallow water along with a little cover any day.

There is a local pool that I used to fish and I used to struggle to find the carp. The water was very clear and I would try and do a couple of laps a day, yet it was so rare to actually spot a carp. That was the case until it froze.

I remember walking around one winter's day when it was totally frozen over. I got to the top of the lake, which tapers off into a mass of reeds, and poked my way through the reeds to a tiny pool where you could often find a pike stalking the smaller fish.

At the time I was amazed to find the two largest carp, along with a couple of others, in no more than two feet of water under the ice in this tiny pool. What is more, they were feeding. This was to become a major turning point in my future winter fishing.

Those carp were in the shallowest water because they wanted to be there. Angler pressure hadn't put them there.

'That day saw one of the biggest pieces of the winter jigsaw puzzle fall into place.'

The carp were there because it was the most comfortable place for them to be. The other end of the lake had depths down to around 15ft and that would have taken an awful lot of warming through. That day saw one of the biggest pieces of the winter jigsaw puzzle fall into place.

As a final signing-off piece and one which appears to be quite topical at this moment in time, is the issue of using barbed hooks against barbless hooks. I prefer to use barbed hooks but during the coldest months I switch to barbless

hooks as they certainly penetrate that little bit further on the pick-up.

I also try and keep the lead sizes down to 2oz or less. I have been fortunate to be able to watch carp feed in the

winter and a 4oz lead nailed to the bottom doesn't give the fish much of a problem at all. They seem to be able to eject the hook without ever moving the lead. In angler terms, that means that the bobbin isn't going to move. A smaller lead tends to get nudged along, thus bringing indication at the rod end. A little bit to think about perhaps?

Don't ignore the shallows in winter, especially if there are reeds growing there.