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e all have good baits at our disposal and I don't want this series to run along the lines of 'use this, use that', or 'do this, do that' because there are plenty of magazines out there catering for this type of thing. What I do want to try to achieve is to simply put over a few ideas, a little 'food for thought' to get the old grey matter ticking over.

These days, in my own angling, I find myself starting to question everything. Some of the major steps forward I have made in more recent years have been from going against what is normally accepted. After all, if someone says something often enough it will be accepted and eventually taken as gospel. It is very difficult to turn away from something you so believe is right, but the brave ones who do so can find themselves stumbling upon something just that little bit special. There are so many excellent baits currently available to anglers that the days of having to spend hours at home formulating your own concoctions are almost over. Well, that's until we come to the subject of baits for winter fishing.

So many commercially available baits can be far from ideal when it comes to tempting the carp living in a cold-water environment. Just because you have bait which takes waters apart during the warmer months certainly doesn't mean it will do the same during the cold days of winter. It is my humble opinion that the one major factor why so many carp anglers struggle to come to terms with winter carp fishing is that they make it difficult for themselves from the start by offering something with little coldwater attraction. So why is it, then, that an excellent summer bait won't necessarily be so good during the winter?

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My findings come from years of sitting behind rods and having a great interest and willingness to experiment. I also put myself out to actually watch carp at all times of the year, and n<mark>ot</mark> always fish for them

Now, let me put this across right from the very start. I am not a chemist and I haven't studied fish biology. My findings come from years of sitting behind rods and having a great interest and willingness to experiment. I have also put myself out to actually watch carp at all times of the year, and not always fish for them. The natural activity of carp can be very different to their activity once they are aware of rigs and lines in the water. I learn a lot from both scenarios. Waters where you can observe carp subject to angling pressure during the coldest of conditions are extremely few and far between in my experience, but if you visit enough venues you will eventually stumble across a few fish. Not only is this incredibly useful for logging their reaction to different baits and food sources, but it can also show how very inefficient many rigs can be.

The first major shock for me was exactly how slow the carp move around in a natural state in the cold. It is possibly worth reminding everyone here that carp are cold-blooded. The colder it is, the slower their metabolism. If a carp takes a bait and heads back towards the lead with even a shortish six-inch hooklength, that bait can be in the mouth for a very long time before they hit the resistance of a lead - lots of time to eject the rig. Not only that, but the slow motion movements I observe make it most unlikely that the fish will hit the lead hard enough to prick itself. However this is all for another day and another article. Let's get back to bait.

My findings come simply from both observation and bobbin action. They are not armchair theories that 'should' be right. I have lost count of the number of those I have read about. My findingsare based purely on actual angling application.

So, what do I look for when producing a 200ml bait specifically to catch cold-water carp? From my own point of view it comes down to how well I know the water I'm fishing. If I know the carp are in the area I am fishing then I will use a slightly different type of bait than I would use at a venue with which I wasn't familiar. I often mix and match on the same water anyway, rather than have all my eggs in one basket.





wesome – anothe

winter capture at 28lb





First and foremost, and this applies to both types of winter bait, I want a bait that is very highly digestible and contains enough soluble ingredients to allow the natural and added attractors to leak out in cold water – but not leak out so fast that I am left with no taste to the bait. Quite simple really.

The same day I had the 28 (right), I'm

seen here playing a 24lb true winter carp.

I would now like to take a look back at my own winter fishing, simply to illustrate that I have actually caught winter carp for a long period of time from a lot of different venues. My findings aren't based on just one or two waters over a period of a couple of years, as I have been fortunate to have been catching winter carp since the 1970s, from the days when I was a young kid with attitude. Fortunately, punk rock came at the right time and gave me a way of offloading some of my anger without the need to take it out on others. Fish and fishing has always been my wind-down.

So, in the '70s I used to catch them on quite fast-dissolving paste baits simply because this is all I knew and I didn't know how to keep the paste held together for long. I didn't know about binders and gels and other bits like that. Boilies were unheard of where I fished, or I certainly didn't know about them. Paste baits were generally referred to as 'specials' and eventually I started to read about skinned baits, which eventually became known as boilies.

Some of my early paste baits were, in fact, quite effective, and probably would still be today in cold-water conditions. I had no

proper bait ingredients, so used to raid my mother's cupboards. I used to start with a groundbait base, crushed up biscuits and cereals. I would raid the flour tub, nick the cat's food, etc., etc. Anything would be tried and thrown together and my early recipe books got very dog-eared. It was a massive learning curve, but, looking back, some of those very simple baits were, in fact, quite useful cold-water carp-catching baits.

I consider myself most fortunate to have been around at the time many of the wellused ingredients first became available to the angler and I was able to take each one and play around with it

As the '70s turned into the '80s I got myself a job in the tackle trade, at Walkers of Trowell. Here I started to develop the then non-existent carp angling side of the shop.

Soon we had a few bait ingredients from Bait 78, Duncan Kay's Slyme Baits, and then Mick Winterton's Key Angling Supplies. I consider myself most fortunate to have been around at the time many of the well-used ingredients first became available to the angler and I was able to take each one and play around with it, finding out exactly what I could and couldn't do with it. As the years progressed we stocked more and more ingredients, from Rod Hutchinson's Catchum Baits, SBS, and a few more, until suddenly Joe Public no longer wanted individual ingredients. The idle age had arrived, where anglers no longer needed to know what each ingredient did. The suppliers were putting together perfectly good base mixes, and latterly ready-rolled baits.

Those formative years, however, were so very useful for me. I grew, as the bait lists grew. I read everything I possibly could about bait, and actually ended up becoming very sidetracked from my own thoughts because of what was being written by others. I actually suffered two very poor winters, all because I was taking as gospel what others had written.

Like everyone else at the time, I travelled along the high protein, milk protein route. Most anglers would end up with a bait of around 80% protein. I caught fish on them. I caught a lot of fish on them - but not in the winter. People who I had immense respect for kept plugging on about dropping fishmeals off in the winter and changing over to milk protein-type baits. Now, I never used to use fishmeals anyway, but I did start changing over to high proteintype baits in the winter. I caught odd fish but nothing like the number I was used to catching. Two years on and I reverted back to my lowered protein baits, and suddenly I was catching those carp again.

The milk proteins in winter stood for so long, but this type of bait certainly didn't work very well for me, despite all the so-called winter anglers of the day advocating their use. It all became clear in my mind's eye after a chance viewing of some television programme which I wouldn't have usually bothered watching (whilst channel-hopping). The telephone rang and the television continued. Whilst talking on the telephone I heard something along the lines of protein taking a long while to digest and protein binding up people. It was like a bell ringing in my head.

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If my protein baits were taking a long time to digest, and the cold conditions were slowing the carp's metabolism right down, thus binding up the fish, why on earth was I using high protein baits in the winter? In desperation I started to dilute the protein content of my baits by taking just a third of my milk protein base mix then adding two thirds of other ingredients to try to speed up the rate at which the food would pass through the fish. I figured the quicker it came out, the quicker they would be willing to feed again.

Simple logic, but it turned my winter fishing right around. Right from my first lowered protein mixes the bobbins started to bounce around again. The early mixes were along the lines of 50z of my pre-mixed milk protein base mix, 50z wheatgerm and 50z of mixed low-fat soya flour and semolina. I experimented with a lot of different ingredients.

Throughout the 1980s my baits would start off with 50z of my 80-plus per cent milk protein base, then 50z of another ingredient and 50z of something else, things such as Quaker Oats, various different breakfast cereals, biscuit meals, a few low protein milk powders, maize flour, and different bird food mixtures. Some of these baits were quite difficult to roll, but the carp loved them and kept coming back for more.

Most of the ingredients I would add to my original base are ingredients that people would mix together as cheap flavour carriers, and they later became known as 'crap baits'. By retaining a little bit of protein in the bait, not only would it help to hang onto a few of the attractors but it would also give the carp a little something.

To this day I still base my winter baits on the same lines, all thanks to one sentence from a television programme, which started the alarm bells ringing. It just shows that so long as you keep your mind open, inspiration can come from anywhere at any time. I consider this to be a major breakthrough in my starting to understand





Left: My old recipe book from 1977, with many of the recipes still working today! Right: There's some right old secret squirrel stuff here that still catches plenty of carp.

what a carp actually enjoyed feeding upon during the winter. The next massive step was flavour levels.

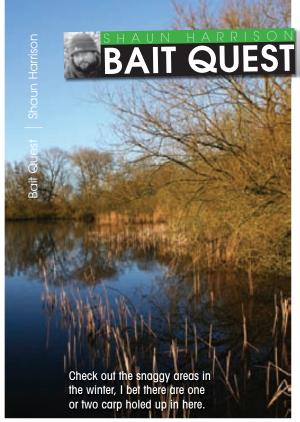
It seems the norm for anglers to glug up their baits for cold water. Fill them with flavour. Make them obvious. In fact it seems to be almost standard practice to completely overdose the baits

This is one that still makes me smile to this day. It seems the norm for anglers to glug up their baits for cold water. Fill them with flavour. Make them obvious. In fact it seems to be almost standard practice to completely overdose the baits. I have done it myself and have caught a lot of carp doing it, but these days I rarely go in with extra flavour on the hookbait. If you don't know the water but you know it has had very little angling pressure then yes, do it. If, however, you know the water well, know where the fish are, and know they get a fair bit of angling pressure, I can assure you that a properly balanced food source with subtle flavour leakage will totally outfish your 'in the face' excessively-flavoured baits.

I have done a lot of visual experimenting in this respect. In fact, as I sit here right now (midwinter), my office window at home looks straight down on my natural (no liner) carp pool in my back garden. As I look down at the water I can just make out the top of the back of one of my fish.







I know full well there will be at least another five fish huddled together around it, seemingly taking comfort from the close presence of the others. Conditions are quite mild at the moment and the fish are relatively active, as the water is a dirty tea colour. If we have a proper cold snap the water clarity will return as the fish stop digging away and disturbing the silt. This is when I can finally observe the fish in their proper winter ways, and every time they are huddled in a tight bunch. It would appear I have three main shoals and each have their own favourite lying-up areas.

My carp love boilies and this is their staple added diet – this gives them an alternative choice from the abundance of natural food present. I take pride in the fact that in the last seven years (since I first stocked my carp) I have not suffered a single fatality. I guess I

have their food requirements sorted. As is the case in most gardens, I have more fish than I really should, so I do need to supplement their natural diet. The problem is, they spawn each year and I just cannot bring myself to part with some of the fish - they are gorgeous-looking fully-scaled mirrors and linears. Not only that, but it is a brave man these days who lets them out in an established lake, for fear of disease. If my fish are carrying anything I could never forgive myself for passing it on to wild fish. It is so frustrating. I rent my own lake, which is full of old warriors all around my age. I would love to see some of my home stock grow on - but I daren't do it. Those old carp deserve to live their lives to the full without risk of disease. My fish are probably okay - but who can be sure?

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I'm digressing a little here. What I was leading on to say (after pointing out that my carp eat as many boilies as any other natural water carp) is that if I put a few subtle flavoured boilies close to them during the non-active, non-feeding periods, they simply ignore them until the time comes when they want/need to feed. Sometimes the bait will be there for two days, just inches away from their mouths, but they are happy for the baits to remain there until they need to feed. If, however, I put even a single, dosed-up bait amongst the carp, they come around from their semi-torpid state and move away from the bait; they get agitated and simply move away. Certainly I have never seen a

fish from any of the other shoals become attracted and drift over to the bait. This, I presume, is what anglers are hoping for when they add extra flavours and glugs to their baits. Certainly I see the reverse happening, a distinctly uncomfortable feeling once heavily-flavoured bait is introduced, and you must bear in mind that my garden fish have never been fished for, so they have no fear of bright baits or dark baits, or any particular sort of flavour. The fact that the pool is quite large and has all the natural food present that I find in the lakes I fish (so the carp always have a choice), shows me that these fish are a fair indication of what happens in the murky depths where we can't quite see what is going on.

During the cold winter months, the familiar twitches and plucks of the line received shortly after casting is just as likely to be fish catching the line by moving out of the way as it is to be fish quickly investigating the bait. So, for me at least, heavily-flavoured winter baits are something I no longer use and I can certainly hold my head high and say I do catch quite a lot of proper winter carp – not carp still behaving in their summer/ autumn ways, but carp in January and February after they have been subjected to lots of frosts and possible ice-overs.

Let's now get down to the nitty-gritty of what I use and what I avoid when making my winter bases. I still keep a little milk protein content, which hasn't ventured far from my earliest experiments of one-third protein to two-thirds bulk. Some of the breakfast cereals can be brilliant bulk ingredients, as can many of the commonly known mixed birdfood ingredients. I like the coarse-textured ones, such as Ce De and Nectarblend from Haith's. There are many other similar alternatives from other suppliers but here I have mentioned two of the most commonly used ones.

A visit to your local pet store to hunt out some of the other alternatives could be well worth your while. This type of mix, being quite loose-textured, helps the attractors to escape without the need to pile a lot of flavour in the bait in the first place. Wheatgerm, oatmeal, crushed biscuits, micronised cereals, bran, the list goes on as far as you want it to go. These few items should give you an idea as to the type of ingredients I use, and mix, as bulk ingredients.



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Carpw





We have all seen what happens to the fat from a freshly fried sausage or burger if left in the pan to cool down. Yes, it turns to a thick solid mass. Oil and fat in a bait does the same in cool water

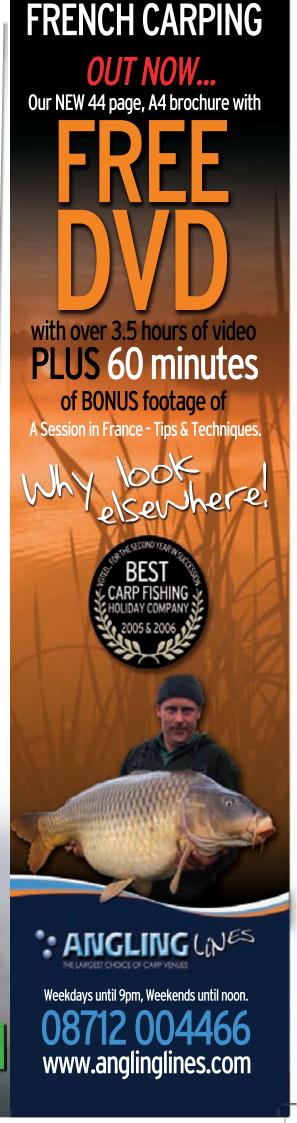
If you don't want to be mixing up base mixes from scratch, then choose one of the commercially available ones. Find a base mix you are happy with then start adding extra ingredients to see if you can improve them for winter use. I am sure, in most cases, you will. Simply change a third and give them a go. By using a standard base mix you at least know it will hold together and roll. The ingredients I avoid in the winter are quite simply high oil/fat content ingredients, and I aim to keep the protein levels quite low.

We have all seen what happens to the fat from a freshly fried sausage or burger if left

in the pan to cool down. Yes, it turns to a thick solid mass. Oil and fat in a bait does the same in cool water. From my own point of view, in my own fishing, I totally avoid using fishmeals during the colder weather. We have all read it... "Fishmeals don't work in the winter"! Then the following week/month someone will come on the counterattack with something along the lines of, "Fishmeals work where I fish in the winter."

Now there is a very big difference between working and being as effective as other alternative baits. Yes, carp will eat fishmeal baits and you will catch the odd one on them, but, and it is a very big BUT, there are many other baits that will work far more effectively than fishmeal baits. So, rather than leave it at that, let's look at why they are nowhere near as effective in the winter as they are in the summer.

Going back to the old frying pan description I've just mentioned. Once the water cools down properly (usually after the first couple of frosts), the oil content of the fishmeal and the bulk oils that are generally used in conjunction with them will start to solidify, and any natural attraction they had in the summer will start to seal inside the bait.









will be a very different type of food to that which was fired out. Slipping back into our easy-to-understand human terms – that lovely warm chip you served earlier is now like a chip left on the plate until the following morning. It tastes nothing like the original fresh chip and it will have a thick lard-type covering on it. Eat it and the fat covering doesn't seem to want to follow the rest of the chip down your throat – and we are warm-blooded! That fishmeal/fish oil bait is like a cold chip to the carp. It can be eaten, but it has very little attraction leaking out of it and, once swallowed, it is going to

take an awful long time for the carp to digest it. Food remaining inside anything for a long time is bad news. It is going to make the carp extremely uncomfortable

and from our own selfish point of view, the longer that food is inside the carp, the longer it is going to be before that carp wants to eat again.

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treated fishmeals available. LT94, I would guess, is the best known of these. It is much more highly digestible than, say, Provimi, which is one of the cheapest fishmeals available, but it still has over 10% oil content in its make-up. The carp will digest this

more quickly than a more cheaply produced fishmeal but it is still going to take it longer than many other baits that can be

produced, and which provide the fish with just as much nutrition.

So, to my mind, by using fishmeals during the winter you won't be doing yourself, your pocket, or indeed the fish, any favours whatsoever. Save them for when they really can come into their own – during the spring and summer when the carp can digest them a little easier.

I have touched upon the bulk fish oils whilst talking about fishmeals. I avoid all bulk oils in the winter. The carp on most waters are subjected to so much fat and oil content in baits throughout the summer they really are overdosed on them anyway. If in doubt, leave them out. Your catches won't suffer – quite the contrary actually. I do, however, like to include natural essential oils in my winter baits. Essential oils are quite different animals to bulk oils. For



Have you tried this yet? Just look at the flavour leaching out of the bait.

a start you are only using them in absolute minute amounts – they are measured by the drop rather than the mil.

Once I get to know a water well and have a very good idea where the carp are, I am

quite happy using baits containing essential oils and no other flavour. This may seem totally alien to anglers used to glugging up their baits. After all, essential oils hardly leak anything from the bait at all.

I first took this approach at Patshull Church Pool in the

late '80s. I had a couple of brilliant winters on there. At the time I was using my everfaithful yellow birdy-type base mix with a blend of essential oils, which I gave to Kevin Nash when he launched Nash Baits. This blend is still available under the Nash Baits label of The Sting Essential Oil Blend. Neither the base mix nor The Sting gave much away in flavour release, but what they did do was offer a very highly digestible and very palatable bait. I was sure I knew where the fish were, but my usual approaches and those of others fishing were not working. I went back to the drawing board, so to speak, and really analysed the situation. The common denominators were big leads, lots of flavour, and single pop-ups, and/or single bottom baits and stringers. No one was catching, so I avoided all these and went back on with small leads, a bait with hardly any smell, and fired quite a few in as well. I never looked back!

I sit here now wondering if the carp were behaving like the ones below me as I write. They were simply drifting off from smells rather than lying near them, tolerating them, I think they were. That was a massive lesson to me. Lots of winter fish on what would appear to be unflavoured baits but with a real nice taste. If I am certain I know where



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Essential oils give a good bait a lasting taste.

Baits

One of the few fishmeals suitable for colder water, LT 94.

the carp are these days, I am still more than happy to fish with baits emitting hardly any smell, particularly in the coldest conditions. You don't need to attract the carp. The carp are already there if you get your location right. Unfortunately, these types of bait would hardly sell commercially. Anglers want to be able to smell the bait. I am sure with most anglers it is the smell that gives the confidence rather than what is actually inside the bait when the carp get around to eating them.

If I am fishing waters I don't know then I try to use baits with subtle smells emitting

rate but retain taste after the bait has been out for a length of time. Many baits resemble little more than unflavoured pasta once they have been out in the water for a few days

from them. As I said at the start of this piece, I often mix and match

The three most successful baits in my Quest Baits range are Fruity Trifle (fruit and cream blend), Irish Cream (smells like Bailey's) and Rahja Spice (Indian spice). All have very attractive angler-friendly smells and all leak off their flavours at a steady

between the non-smelling baits and subtle flavour leak-out baits. Fortunately for me, in the bait game the customers do seem to like these.

I feel this taste left in the bait is one thing that is so often overlooked. During the winter time when baits are likely to be out for long periods before the fish decide to feed (often several days after we return home), then I want them to still taste good. As I said in last month's Paste Baits article, many baits resemble little more than unflavoured pasta once they have been out in the water for a few days.

There Is A World Of Difference **Between Flavour And Taste!**

Flavours are leaking away from the bait. Taste remains. A simple test can be carried out at home to see how much flavour is escaping from your bait and for how long. Simply fill a glass of water and drop a boilie into it. After a period of time, taste the water and see if you can detect the flavour in it. If you can, then the flavour is starting to leak out. Pour the water away and repeat the process. As long as you can still detect the flavour in the water then the flavour is still leaking. If you suddenly find there is no flavour evident then the flavour has finished leaking out. Now, simply break the bait open and see if the boilie has retained any smell. Simple tests you can do with any bait at any time of the year. For proper accurate results you need to be doing these tests with the glass kept outside to simulate the temperature in which you would be fishing.

Hopefully the words in this piece will have once again got the old grey matter ticking over. If something I have written has triggered a few alarm bells then hopefully it will have all been worthwhile.

Until next time, I will leave as usual and wish you all - Best Fishes.

