



SHAUN HARRISON

BAIT QUEST

Seeking Out Those Surface Suckers

With the summer sun warming the backs of basking carp... it's time to tempt one off the top. This month's Bait Quest sees Shaun Harrison investigate the tactical elements of the floater fanatic!



“They don’t count off the top mate!”

“Sorry, run that one by me again?”

I have heard that statement a few too many times now. It’s water off a duck’s back to me, but it does make me smile to myself.

Invariably it is said by an angler who manages to emerge from a bivvy once in a while to set free the previous few downed cans of lager, quite content in his own little world, with self-hooking rigs sitting out in the lake waiting for a carp to come along, slip up, and alert the angler (?) that something has happened by the triggering of the bite alarm. Suddenly magazines are thrown to the side, the can of lager is kicked over, and, taking care not to trip over the television cable, the said angler emerges to do battle.

Mmmm, I see, so catching them in this manner still counts, does it? I’ve obviously got it wrong somewhere along the line. I was brought up on creeping around lakes, treading carefully, slowly, stealthily blending in with my surroundings, trying my hardest not to alert anything to my presence, studying to be quiet. Scaring the birds will only alert the carp. I have always been so fascinated by proper eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations with carp.

Yes, I catch my share by fishing blind, with rigs in place ready to catch an unsuspecting fish, but for sheer heart-pumping excitement nothing comes close, in my book, to stalking visible carp, or floater fishing. Because both these forms of angling are becoming a lost art, it works to my advantage. Creeping up on your quarry, utilising every bit of stealth learned over many years, then actually getting the fish to feed right in front of you (in full view at a time of the day when the

bivvy anglers don’t catch them because they only feed at such and such time), this, to me, is special – very special.

The fish is feeding and then you have to work out how to present your bait in a way that won’t alarm it. Eventually, the bait is in place, the carp continues to feed, and, finally, it is the carp, your hookbait, and you, all in a line and the carp is heading towards you. The mouth opens,

Floater fishing is one of the few forms of carp angling that still relies on basic fishing skills, stealth, baiting, casting, and striking. Yes, striking!

the bait disappears, and all that remains is you and the carp. The rod is slammed around in a slightly panicked strike and the hook is set. The excitement that has built up from the moment the fish was found, then stepped up a gear when the fish started to feed, is now in full flow as the fight begins.

Now tell me they don’t count off the top!

Floater fishing is one of the few forms of carp angling that still relies on basic fishing skills, stealth, baiting, casting, and striking. Yes, striking! You actually have to set the hook yourself if you can’t get away with launching one of those massive self-hooking controllers near the feeding fish without spooking them.

In my opinion, floater fishing is one of the most satisfying and purest forms of catching carp. So, for anyone out there still reading this who doesn’t think I have totally gone off my rocker, I will continue to look into my personal world of floater fishing. My approach seems to differ from that of so many others. So this is a description very much about my own floater beliefs. It is certainly not the definitive guide to catching carp off the top, but is simply the way I personally go about catching carp off the top, a method I have enjoyed since the 1970s when men had funny hair and a woman was running the country.

As in all forms of angling, you can make it as simple or as complicated as you like. For so many anglers, floater fishing basically comprises a bag of Chum Mixers, which was purchased several months before, and which comes out whenever the carp are cruising around aimlessly in the hot weather. The odd fish will slip up in these conditions, but some of the best floater fishing opportunities you will get will be on days when the fish aren’t particularly showing themselves that well – until you feed them, that is.

I prefer to actually ‘go’ floater fishing rather than try to scrape a fish off the top whilst in the middle of a static session. I travel very light, with bait, rod and net, and most of my other bits in pockets and in my unhooking mat/sling. If possible I will stash the mat away somewhere so that I am not bogged down with it. If I catch a fish it is a simple matter to leave it in the landing net in the margins while I go to recover the mat. Unhooking mats and travelling light don’t go hand in hand, but the carp’s safety should never be compromised.



I like to travel really light and can get everything I need for a short session off the top into an old waistcoat.



Pick a range of floating baits in all different sizes, it causes confusion but makes for confident feeding.



Bait

Good old Chum Mixers. Where would we be without good old Chum Mixers? Well, actually the 'old' Chum Mixers were altered several years ago, so I guess that statement is a little inaccurate anyway.

It's strange really. All my floater fishing, after crust, actually involved cat biscuits rather than dog biscuits. Pilchard-flavoured 'Felix Crunch' was by far the best I used, but, as is so often the case, it was discontinued. Meow Mix was another successful one for me. There were three different colours in a box, and my favourite tactic with these was to thread two of each colour over the hook (I was still waiting for someone to invent the Hair Rig) and cast it out with a long hooklink. These days it would be called Zig-rigging, back then it was simply anchoring a floater. Meow Mix was brilliant as long as you didn't get a take straightaway, as you would invariably miss it because the bait was too hard for the hook to break free. It seemed that I used cat biscuits in various types for years before suddenly everyone seemed to be using Chum.

It stood to reason really. A lot of the early specials (we used to refer to them as high-protein baits regardless of how high in protein content they actually were) were made from tinned cat food. I used to use a beef-flavoured dog food at one stage, but that was only me being

me – stubborn and different, and definitely not wanting to conform.

The tinned cat foods were so effective that I guess it was a logical step forward to use cat biscuits on the surface. From memory, I think it was Chris Currie/Keith Rice (same person) who first started to write about the floating cat biscuits. It's the earliest I recollect reading about them. Anyway, the whole of the carp world seemed to agree that a cat's diet suited the carp more than enough. I don't know who first started to pioneer the Chum Mixers but all of a sudden most anglers seemed to think a dog's diet was better for the carp!

The carp certainly enjoy a good old munch on the mixers, and with every supermarket having its own version available these days there is plenty of choice – although most appear to me to be very similar. It's interesting, this dog food for carp scenario; Brook and Bonzo (Bonzo is Brook's eldest), my two Staffordshire bull terriers, much prefer carp pellets to dog biscuits. Each morning sees the ritual of a pile of carp pellets for Brook, a pile for Bonzo, then a pile into the pool for the carp. I have had to float a ring in the pool to stop the carp pellets from drifting into the edge, or the dogs spend forever trying to get every last one and the carp don't get a look in.

Mixers can be dyed and/or flavoured easily, although, to be honest, I rarely bother. Carp like their original taste and eat so many of them between getting hooked that I have never found them to 'blow' anyway. There are, however, many more floating food items available that the carp definitely prefer when given a choice. It is all too easy to become blinkered into thinking floater fishing = mixers.

You might be a little

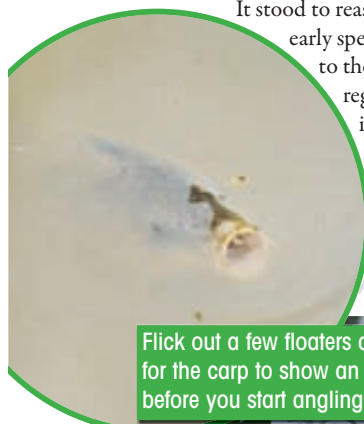
surprised if you look at some of the cat biscuits available. I still feel cat biscuits are more attractive to carp than the more commonly used dog biscuits. Check out some of the ingredients – they aren't too dissimilar to many of the baits you will be buying for carp anyway. I also find the smaller sizes to be more effective for starting a feeding

If the carp aren't co-operating on a floater fishing trip I will start introducing smaller baits and increase the size as they get more confident

response. If the carp aren't co-operating on a floater fishing trip I will start introducing smaller baits and increase the size as they get more confident; the smaller pellets/biscuits will be more easily managed by the nuisance silver fish, but are they really a nuisance?

Personally, I know of no greater feed-inducing stimulant than a fish seeing another fish feeding. The whittling away of manageable sizes of pellet helps release a greater amount of attraction into the water. So, if the carp don't appear to be interested from the start, simply try to get something – anything – feeding and start the ball rolling. All this talk of cat biscuits and dog biscuits and I haven't even mentioned pellets, which are actually manufactured for the dietary needs of fish. The choice of fish pellets available is immense. I never realised how many anglers fished for halibut until I started to sell halibut pellets! Seriously though, there are many different types of trout, coarse, carp, and marine pellets readily available in lots of different sizes, from powdered fry food right up to as big as you want. I stock halibut pellets up to 28mm, but you don't get many per kilo!

The floating pellets generally offered to the angler are trout and coarse pellets. These are available at quite reasonable prices. They are more expensive than mixers but they will do the carp more good. I sell a floating pellet that actually drops a small trail of sinking particle off the pellet as it drifts out. These are brilliant for making fish aware of the bait. This can be so useful for the times when the carp aren't responding to the more commonly used baits. Visit a good koi carp stockist and you will be



Flick out a few floaters and wait for the carp to show an interest before you start angling.



Early years and I was floater fishing crazy!



amazed at some of the pellets available. You might think that trout and general carp pellets are expensive when compared to mixers, but wait until you see the price of some of the better quality koi foods.

I am fortunate in that I only live a mile or so away from a large koi carp centre. Get talking to a proper, successful koi specialist and they will blow you away with their knowledge of the carp's nutritional requirements. I have said it before and I will say it again, their carp are their pride and joy, living in what I consider to be horrible sterile environments, but their carp are in the absolute peak of health. After all, who wants to look at and admire a sick-looking fish? So, where is this all leading? Well, I use some of the koi pellets for those occasions when the carp really need to be persuaded to come up and have a feed. As with all animals, once you get them to sample a few bits of

palatable food then a stronger feeding response soon kicks in. Get the carp interested in a few expensive pellets then start introducing some more affordable ones. The feeding generally continues. Similarly, by increasing the size of the free offerings, when the time eventually comes to risk a cast, then the carp will already be eating easy-to-replicate food items.

Hookbaits

As with the baits I use on the lakebed, I don't bother trying to match my freebies with the hookbait, I see little point. In fact, I would go as far as saying I prefer a different type of hookbait. My main criteria of a floating hookbait is that it is of similar buoyancy to the free baits (much more important on the surface than it is underwater), and I can see which one the hookbait is without having to keep tweaking it along the surface. My preferred floating hookbaits look like floats on

the surface. If I am fishing into dark water into the silhouette of trees, then I use a light-coloured bait; if I am fishing into silver water then I use a dark bait, but one which will also stand out from the free baits. I'm not concerned about the carp, as all surface baits look dark from underneath anyway. It's similar to taking a photograph of someone with a bright sky behind them – all you get is a dark shadow, unless you use a flashgun – but the carp don't have flashguns! Nine times out of ten my hookbaits will be trimmed down and shaped pop-ups. I prefer to free-line floaters wherever possible. I will continue to feed carp and get them as close to me as I can before attempting a cast. So, the size of my hookbait often dictates how far I need to cast.



My dog (which loves cat biscuits) admiring a carp that also took a liking to them!

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Pop-ups can also be trimmed down to represent a coloured mixer.

Once you've got them feeding, tuck yourself away in some cover and pursue your quarry.



Shaun will also use a plastic bait, giving a better visual on the hookbait when it's fished amongst mixers.

I have always been a great lover of plastic/artificial baits. However, the artificial dog biscuits are something I rarely used. I only ever purchased one pack of mixed sizes and found they seemed to go in with a little bit too much of a splash for my liking, and as I very much prefer to have my bait on my hook rather than attached to a Hair, the plastic baits were, in my opinion, a little too hard and caused the loss of a couple of fish.

Having said that, I use a few of the other artificials on the surface, namely the artificial boilies, which again I trim to size and shape. Whilst on the subject of artificials, many years ago I made my own artificial pellets from wood-filler – they worked brilliantly! I started with a block of Plastazote (sold for fly-tying) and drilled

several holes through it. Next step was to place a hookshank as close to the inside of the drilled hole as possible without actually touching the inside. The hook is held in place by inserting the point into the Plastazote. It is then a simple job to fill the hole with wood-filler and leave it to harden. Once the filler has set prise it out of the foam, and, hey presto – perfect floating pellet, very lightly side-hooked. I caught loads of carp on these but they are quite light, so you will need to use them on a fly rod, or with a controller.

Controllers

This is my bone of contention – seemingly everything can now be purchased for carp fishing. The evenings spent in the shed or garage making bits and bobs are almost gone; apart from producing controller floats, that is. I am sure that most people who have designed controller floats over the years have actually done very little controller fishing! It is one of the few items of tackle I still make myself – not because I like doing it, in fact I hate the task, but do it I do, as I still can't find a purpose-made controller that I like.

There are some good bolt rig-type controllers around which are fine for drifting towards fish but not much use for casting amongst them – they cause too much disturbance. The main

My home-made controllers are very simple affairs but still perform better than any of the commercially made ones I have tried

Shaun's Home-Made Hookbait



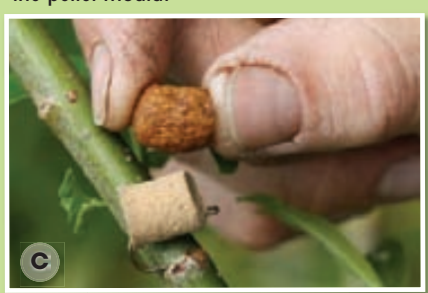
A

Wood-filler can be used to construct a dummy floater bait.



B

Shaun has used a section of Duplon for the pellet mould.



C

Would a carp be able to tell the difference between the two?

problems with the majority of commercially made controllers (in my humble opinion) are that they are made too short and too fat. Not only are they splashy when cast, but they also dig into the surface on the strike, which in turn absorbs the effectiveness of the strike. This also tends to create a carp-spooking noise because the controller digs in rather than lifting clear of the water. My home-made controllers are very simple affairs but still perform better than any of the commercially made ones I have tried. I make them from different diameters of balsa wood, depending on how far I need to cast

them. The bottom of the controller is drilled out and filled with enough shot to cock the float. Lead wire can also be used to weight the bottom, or, indeed, a combination of the two. I make a loop for the top from a spinner-making wire-forming tool, although in the past I simply used to glue in a swivel. The loop system (the same as the eye on a Mepps Aglia spinner), however, with plenty of turns of wire, allows itself to be screwed into the balsa. I find this system lasts much longer than the glued-in swivel.

Once the top eye is in place I lightly sand this end so the top end is finer than the bottom end. This allows me to place different-coloured sight caps on them when fishing in different light conditions.

50

400

300m

200ml



Look at the bend in that old rod; another one falls foul to floater tactics back in the '80s.

The whole lot is then painted with some drab-coloured paint with extra being applied around both ends to help seal everything properly, or you can Araldite them if you wish. Very simple controllers but they work a treat. They cast and land quietly and they lift clean from the water on the strike. In fact, when I miss a take I tend to find myself spending the next five minutes retrieving my controller from the tree or bush behind me.

Rods

Personally I prefer relatively short rods for the type of floater fishing I undertake. I definitely prefer to catch my carp on free-lined baits (no controller), just a hook tied on the end of the line and the bait on the hook. I have used so many different rods over the years for this type of fishing. One that I considered perfect for so long was an old Tricast 11ft 1¼lb test curve chopped down to 9ft from the butt end. It cast a light free-lined bait like a dream and was soft enough to absorb all the lunges of a good fish on a very short line. This rod, although very light in test curve, was a match for everything I hooked on it. Similarly, one of the best longer-range floater rods (with controller) I used was again a Tricast, this time the 12ft LR 3-8 with 1¼lb test curve. It had been designed as a long-range tench rod, but it also made a superb long-range floater rod. This particular model reached cult status around the Nottingham area for one particular water where the carp had unbelievably soft mouths due to the bottom of the pool being permanently covered in soft silkweed. The carp were notorious for shedding the hook. It wasn't until I started to use these long-range tench rods that most of the fish hooked were landed. These, as I said, also made great floater rods,

A soft rod will aid when casting relatively light weights, and you may be surprised how much more accurate your casting becomes as you get a 'proper feel' through a softish rod

Fortunately today, with the likes of Free Spirit Fishing designing rods for a purpose rather than getting hold of blanks and deciding what they could be sold as, the need for chopping up rods and stumbling across something that may do the job are long gone – rods are now specifically designed for the job.

Certainly I have never found the need for a heavy test curve rod for floater fishing – in fact, quite the contrary. A soft rod will aid when casting relatively light weights, and you may be surprised how much more accurate your casting becomes as you get a 'proper feel' through a softish rod. The only time I use a slightly stiffer rod when floater fishing is when using a centre pin. For my styles of casting with a pin, a soft rod doesn't help. I can't cast a long way with a pin so tend to combine it with an 8½ft Margin Creeper; plenty soft enough to play the fish but firm enough in the tip to allow accurate pin casting. In fact my very first carp on these rods was a 30, a lovely christening for any rod – I do so like playing fish on short rods.

Reels

It may surprise a few anglers to find out that I like to use a centre pin for floater fishing. It all started off as a bit of a laugh really when I first started showing Ruth the delights of floater fishing. After one particularly successful afternoon where I caught quite an embarrassing number of carp whilst Ruth struggled, she came out with the words: "Next time I'm going to limit you to a centre pin reel." I liked the idea and duly obliged on our next trip. Amazingly, I caught just as many and found

Shaun's Home-made Controller



Shaun covers the end of his home-made controller with a sleeve of high-visibility tube, allowing him to see it at distance.



Controllers can be made from balsa wood, and with the aid of a lure-making wire bender, an eye can be formed to insert in the end.



The wire bender in action, forming the eye.

that the presentation was so much better, with none of the frustrating coils of line that appear after playing a few fish on the clutch. Oh yes, playing them on the pin was great fun as well. Centre pin reel choice is very much up to the individual; you don't have loads of gearing you need to compare, or slipping clutches or line lay to take into account. As long as your choice has a reasonable diameter (4ins or possibly larger), most centre pin reels are more than up to the job of playing a carp. For what it is worth, I have used a Speedia for years.

Fixed spool reels are a different kettle of fish altogether with thousands to choose from. My only advice here would be to avoid going too large, keep it light, and buy the best you can afford. This way you should be certain that you receive a reel with a reliable clutch mechanism

and decent line lay. I like the 30-40-type size. Some companies sell them as 3000 size, some as 030 size, and so on.

Line

Again, whatever brand you choose is down to personal preference. I prefer my line to float. Some will argue that you should break the surface film with the line, but I have certainly never found this to be the best way. Perhaps it is just the incredible crystal-clear waters I fish, but whenever I sink the hooklength I find the carp seem to detect it easier than when I drape it on the surface. A buoyant line is an absolute must in order to be able to strike the hook home cleanly. I always use nylon monofilament; I don't like braided main lines. There is only one thing that gives when playing a fish on non-stretch braids and that is carp flesh. I prefer the sponge effect of nylon, knowing the hook is more likely to stay embedded and not start ripping out. For years my first choice in floater fishing nylon was Trilene XL, which was always naturally buoyant. Unfortunately, something has changed in its make-up in more recent years. It has changed from a lovely matt colour to a glossy finish and now it sinks – yet another product I wish I had purchased a lifetime's supply of before they altered it. I am still making my way through different types of nylon trying to find one I am happy with for floater work.

Hooks

So many to choose from, and my much-loved Ashima C310s, which get me by in almost every other carp fishing situation, are not used for floater fishing. I like to put my bait on the hook. Not on a Hair – on the hook. For this, a round bend hook and straight eye are essential. For years I have used the Drennan silver pack Specimen hooks. Not the gold pack Super Specialists, the lighter weight silver pack Specimens. Now here is a surprise to a few of you. I tend to use them in a Size 4! So many times have I read that such and such could only catch them off the surface by scaling down to a tiny hook. Well, I have floater fished on some very pressured waters for an awful lot of years now and I would argue I actually hook more with the larger hooks. It is obviously the way I fish (more of which later) but, quite simply, small hooks don't work for me, and if I am lucky enough to set my hook into a big carp I much prefer the thought of playing it with a Size 4 embedded than a Size 12 nicked into its skin.

Hooking Arrangement

I have tried so many different ways over the years, from simple side-hooking, to Hair Rigs of many

types, elastic Hairs, elastic loops, Superglueing baits, and so on. Yet 30 years on and I find myself simply threading the bait onto the hook. Not because I am too idle to do anything else, but because it is the method that works the best in my personal floater fishing. After all, I only have my fishing to worry about.

Scatter floaters along the bank from where the wind is blowing and wait for the carp to show you where they are

By far the most consistent method I have used over the years is to lightly hook the bait using a round bend hook with, preferably, a straight eye and a straight point. The round bend enables a very lightly hooked bait to be gently threaded around the bend of the hook without the bait breaking away from it, as it would with a crystal or sharp-angled bend. Once the bait is on the shank of the hook, I tease it over the eye of the hook then trim off any surplus bait to allow maximum hook gape to come into force.

Dropped into the margin with a 'sensible' sized hook (I use a Size 4 medium wire one for almost all my floater fishing) you will find the point and

bend will up-end the bait, so any fish trying to mouth the bait gets a mouthful of hook before the bait goes in. The big hook may also just trigger a natural reaction with the fish. Carp, like trout, love hatching buzzers, the bend of the hook protruding below the bait does more than resemble a giant buzzer's tail. In the fly-tying trout fishing world you either emulate the natural as closely as possible, or totally exaggerate one particular point. Food for thought perhaps?

Finally

Once again my fingers have got a little carried away and the word count tells me I really should be signing off. There is so much more to floater fishing than first meets the eye. I guess I am rather guilty of over-simplifying it here, but what I hope I have managed to get across is that floater fishing is very much a worthwhile pursuit in its own right, particularly when time is limited. Rather than sit and wait for the fish, you go out and find the fish. Floater feeders are the easiest carp in the world to find. Scatter floaters along the bank from where the wind is blowing and wait for the carp to show you where they are – what could be simpler? Ah yes, I forgot, you then need to master the art of drifting a bait out to the carp allowing for less than ideal wind directions and gusts from the side.

Oh hum – it's all good fun! Until next time – best fishes.

Get out and have some fun with the floater rod and a centre pin.



This is how Shaun likes to ensure the floating bait sits on the water.