

DREAM
SESSION

THE DAY IT ALL CAME RIGHT

WORDS: SHAUN HARRISON
PHOTOGRAPHY: SHAUN HARRISON
AND FRIENDS

WELL, THIS TALE COMES IN TWO PARTS REALLY, WITH THE FIRST PART STARTING ON WEDNESDAY 11TH JULY 2001, BACK IN THE DAYS WHEN THE ONLY PLACE I REALLY WANTED TO BE WAS THE INFAMOUS MANGROVE SWAMP IN DEEPEST, DARKEST, SHROPSHIRE. HOW I LOVED THE PEACE AND SOLITUDE FOUND AT THIS HISTORIC WATER AND TOTALLY TRUE TO FORM I WAS THE ONLY PERSON THERE THAT DAY. JUST ME, THE TACKLE AND ANYTHING THAT NATURE WANTED TO PUSH MY WAY. AS IT HAPPENS NATURE WAS PUSHING A VERY STRONG AND VERY COLD WIND MY WAY, BUT WHAT DID IT MATTER? THERE WASN'T ANOTHER PLACE I WOULD HAVE RATHER BEEN SAT AT DURING THAT PART OF MY LIFE THAN THE LIGHTNING TREE SWIM ON A DESERTED MANGROVE.

It surprises many when I tell them that my fishing for the 25 years I spent selling fishing tackle prior to setting up Quest Baits was only one day at a time. Yes, I used to try and tag a night on both sides of this one day which was usually a Wednesday but in order to be able to do this it meant I used to arrive at the Mangrove at 8pm in the evening and have to leave at 6am in the morning because of work commitments. This obviously meant that for a big part of my season I would be arriving in the dark and leaving in the dark, but you do what you have to do. The Mangrove fished better at night so it made sense to tag a night either side of my day off.

Anyway, back to the story. I had been sat outside the bivvy jotting away in my angling journal when suddenly totally out of the blue at 3.15pm my right-hand alarm chirped into song as the rod tip dragged down to the captive backlead in the margins. I was on it in an instant and soon my line was free from the backlead and tightening up to the 130ft mark I have noted in my diary. The rod pulled right round and soon the reel was giving line off its clutch in a beautiful sounding purr.

The take had come at a really unusual time for the Mangrove but was I complaining? Certainly not by the fight this carp was giving in a desperate bid to get rid of that annoyance in its lip. The gear was more than up to the job required of it and soon the back of a large common broke the surface. It did all the



usual Mangrove carp tricks of trying to get under the stage I was playing it from as well as trying to bury itself each side of the stage in the dense pads.

The E.S. rod did its job admirably though with its soft action; I never once worried about the hook popping out and soon a beautiful common slid into the net. I looked up to the Gods of Sir Isaac and smiled, a huge contented smile.

This was most definitely my largest common from the Mangrove at that stage. I lifted the fish and straightaway knew it was a thirty. On the mat with the hook easily slipped out and I reached around for the scales. Now, I don't know if you ever get the same feeling but suddenly my body froze and could see plainly in my mind's eye, the scales and camera on my kitchen table at home. I couldn't believe it, a big common on the mat and no scales to check the weight and no camera to record the capture!

I lowered the net back into the water with the fish still in it whilst I thought what action I would take. I really wanted a picture of that fish, having written consistently in the angling press since the mid 80's my pictures are really important to me. I didn't want to keep the fish for long so after transferring it to a sack I decided to wind the rods in, boat back across the ancient mere to my Land Rover and then drive the short distance to Birch Grove to see if anyone was there who I could hopefully borrow a set of scales from and, fingers crossed, convince them that they wanted to make a short visit to the Mangrove and picture a 30lb common for me.

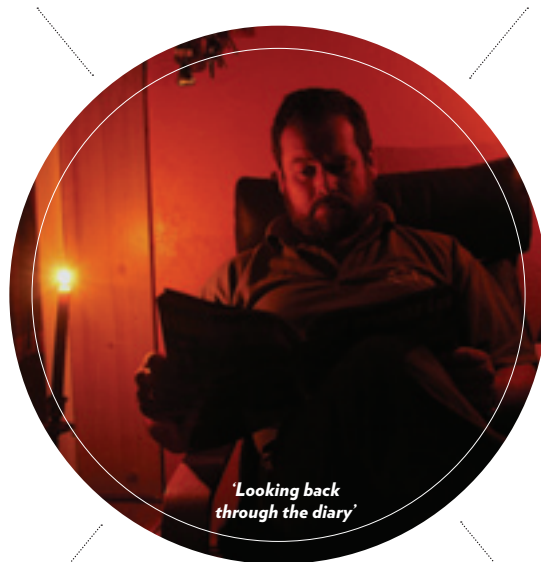
Now this was totally breaking the rules, as we weren't allowed to reveal the whereabouts of the Mangrove but I was a desperate man.

Back on terra firma I jumped into the Land Rover, turned the key and nothing. Noooooo — the battery was as flat as a pancake and I realised I had left my lights on after parking up but not noticed. My big off-road carmobile I drove at the time didn't have luxuries like warning sounds when things were left on.

I was then in a right dilemma. I had a carp sacked up, a dead motor, a job to get back to in the early hours of the following morning and to top it all, I was in the middle of nowhere — in fact, very close to the water (next-door) which Tim Paisley christened and referred to in his early books as Erehwon, which a lot of people didn't realise was 'nowhere' spelt backwards.

I started the trudge up the big hill not really knowing what I was going to do. I would need a jump-start obviously but would struggle with that one at six in the morning so I needed to do something now. I wasn't sure if the RAC would come to me being so far off the main road down tracks.

My brain was an absolute whirl. If I could get a jump-start now, could I risk driving to Birch and risk it cutting out when I pulled up? The problem with Land Rovers is that your average car isn't usually much use for giving a jump-start so you are reliant on big motors with big batteries. It would be just my luck to



“I COULD PLAINLY SEE IN MY MINDS EYE THE SCALES AND CAMERA ON THE TABLE AT HOME. I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT: A BIG COMMON ON THE MAT AND NO SCALES TO CHECK THE WEIGHT.”

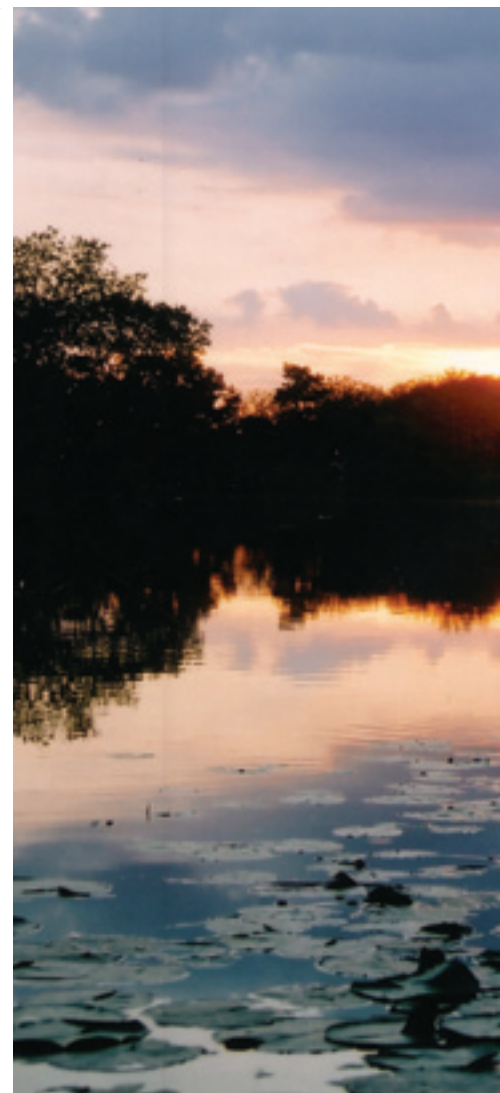


turn up at Birch, have the engine cut out and find either no one there or someone driving a Fiat Panda!

I decided I had no choice. It was unfair to put the carp at risk. The cool conditions and oxygenated water was as good as it gets for sacking carp but I have never been happy retaining them. I decided to walk to the nearest farm and see if I could get someone to come along with a tractor or something to jump-start my carmobile.

Eventually at the Gwilt's mansion, I banged on the huge door and when it was answered I did my very best apology for disturbing-you-act and explained my predicament of being broken down off the road at the bottom of a field. They couldn't have been nicer and offered to come there and then in their Land Rover to help me out. I explained I was on the other side of the lake still set-up and could ideally do with an hour-and-a-half to get back, boat across the lake, quickly pack things away and boat back to meet them. Fortunately this wasn't a problem.

Back in my swim I took the carp from the sack and had one last look at it. It was a beautiful fish and I was really struggling to notice anything that I would recognise it again easily. There wasn't much until I was just about to release it un-weighed and un-photographed. I was laid on my stomach gently supporting this fish in



the edge when I noticed a row of tiny scales down its dorsal fin. Now this was unusual and then a flick of its tail and it was gone.

I spoke to everyone I could about this fish but no-one had ever noticed one with tiny scales down the dorsal.

ROLL ON 8TH OCTOBER 2002

8th October 2002 I had managed to leave work a little earlier and for the last time that year I was just about able to cast before darkness set in. I say just about able. I had lost sight of my marker float by the time I came to cast the last one. I stood there peering into the gloom. My bait, which was on the right-hand side of the marker had landed a little too far to the right. It was fine where it was on the outside edge of the bait, but I wanted to tuck one inside that, between the outside rod and the float. The left-hand rod had practically clipped the left-hand side of the float so I needed to be extra careful not to cross lines. This was how I liked to fish the Mangrove: one baited spot and all the rods on it. I had amassed many multiple captures doing this — not re-casting to the area after a fish as I already had other baits in position.

I stood there staring into the gloom trying to pick out my float. The rod was back and ready to cast when around 30yds out and slightly to the right a big fish lifted out on its tail and hovered in



A big fish showed as the sunset



Familiar scene: boat loaded and just the rods to go



Lightning Tree after photographing the brace



Another trip but in the Lightning Tree swim again

seemingly suspended animation before falling back on its side. I didn't need telling twice. I turned my body, cast way past the showing fish then wound like crazy to drop the lead down on the spot it had shown on with no scary lead splashing on top of it. I pondered what to do about bait. The carp were well up for my bait so I took a gamble of doing the same with a marker rod. I put on a betalight marker float and again overcast the spot to avoid disturbance then wound it back just short of the area and slightly to one side. I hopped into the boat and by making a wide arc was able to get close enough to bait with a small amount of hemp and small boilies.

Back in my swim, it was now pitch-black and I set about tidying my gear up before erecting my house for the night. The mere was quite busy with five of us being on it but with every member being exceptional anglers, it really wasn't a problem. The carp wouldn't be on edge as much as they would on some waters. This is a very important thing in my fishing. I would much rather share any water with decent blokes who have been at it a long while.

Eventually I was sorted and after sitting staring out into the darkness for a while, I decided to relax and read so dropped the bivvy door down to keep the stray light from my filtered head torch

"I WILL NEVER FORGET WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, BUT HERE GOES, I DON'T MIND SHOWING MYSELF UP."



down and laid on my bed reading. After a while I was getting a little neck and arm ache from propping myself up reading. Instead of turning over I turned around so my head was at the foot end of my bed. I will never forget what happened next, but here goes, I don't mind showing myself up.

I was deep into reading when I received a take. Now comes the embarrassing part. I had the door down because I was reading and I had disorientated myself by laying the wrong way round on my bedchair. The alarm was screaming for attention and I did no more than roll over in my bed and try to get out the wrong side only to end up in a heap on the floor trapped between my bivvy wall and my bedchair. I felt like a sheep stuck on my back and unable to get up!

Eventually I dusted myself down and scrambled out to the rods. It was the close range rod where the big fish had

shown itself. The Free Spirit ES took on its impressive fighting curve and the battle commenced. The moment I hooked the fish it felt large. Not a fast scrap, more of a dogged heavy lunging type of fight. The first explosion on the surface made me grin to myself, it was definitely a good fish judging by the deep noise of the boil and the amount of water it shifted. The tackle did its job, the hook remained in place and the net enveloped a good fish. I put the head torch on for a look and said out loud, 'Where have you come from? You're too big to be a Mangrove carp!'

I must explain that statement. At the time the biggest fish we thought we were fishing for in the Mangrove were probably 33lb and hopefully 34lb. This fish looked nearer 40lb than 34lb! I must admit I was a little shell-shocked. I had caught larger carp but definitely wasn't expecting anything like this out of the Mangrove. The scales read 38lb 4oz. I was dumbstruck.

I had stopped carrying sacks with me on the Mangrove preferring to photograph the fish straightaway – even when alone at night. I had got the self-photography off to an art so saw little point in retaining them. I decided I had to tell the other anglers about this fish before returning it. I wanted them to have the chance of weighing it if they

The second part of the brace



No one knew it!



wanted so I picked up the telephone. My memory is a little hazy now and I can't remember who I actually ended up getting through to but I do remember the first two phones were turned off.

I offered the chance to see the fish before I returned it but allowed myself to be talked into sacking it for the rest of the night. It was October and the water was cool with plenty of oxygen so I left the fish in the landing net, draped over the side of the staging and boated over to the Stream Mouth to collect a sack. Word had soon gone round and the three anglers who were on that bank came to offer the genuine Mangrove congratulations and everyone was insistent on me sacking the fish. Soon I was back in my swim and transferring the fish which I certainly didn't recognise into the sack.

I recast all four rods and made an entry into my diary. At the time I must admit to thinking it was a Mangrove record. I had asked the others and they all thought it was 38lb. Not that it really matters one bit. Scaley was the record holder at 38lb 8oz but my first line in my diary reads.

38lb 4oz. YES - 38.04, A NEW MANGROVE RECORD. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT - BIG AND FAT BUT 38.04! I DIDN'T EXPECT A 35 FROM HERE!

Eventually I dozed off with a huge grin on my face. The next thing I knew I was bent into a fast moving fish off the main baited area. This fish fought so strong but my luck was in and soon it was on the mat and in the torchlight I daren't pinch myself in case I was dreaming! I was enjoying myself too much to risk waking up. Here, laying before me, was another big fish by the Mangrove standards of the time. It was a common and as I had done with all of the other commons I had caught since having to return the big one un-photographed, I shone the torch onto the dorsal fin. Yeeeessss! It was that fish, the fish I had returned without weighing. Surely I was in a dream, a fish in the sack larger than anything we thought existed and now the mystery common that no-one had been able to distinguish since my descriptions of it. But here in front of me was that common with the tiny



Caught on that same magical night



"I PUT THE HEAD TORCH ON FOR A LOOK AND SAID OUT LOUD, 'WHERE HAVE YOU COME FROM? YOU'RE TOO BIG TO BE A MANGROVE CARP!'"

scales along its dorsal line, those tiny scales I had described time and time again. I had checked every decent fish after I had caught it and none of them had the tiny scales. Yet here on the mat now was definitely that same fish.

Usually I don't get a massive kick out of a recapture but this time I certainly had. My mystery was solved - the scales read 32lb 12oz. There were two sacks bundled together when I had collected them the night before. It

would be light soon so I decided to retain this one too. I had missed out on the pictures before but really wanted good pictures now. Besides, it was a record Mangrove brace I'd caught. Two carp for 71lb, one mirror and one common.

The 24lb common and big double I caught about an hour later almost faded into insignificance. All four rods had produced as they so often had in the past, fishing my hookbaits so close together, what more could I ask for?

The following morning two boats came paddling over from the far bank. Paul Cooper, Ivan Shipley, Ben Seal and Richard Seal had all wound in to come and take a look at and photograph the big mirror. I didn't tell them about the common and the other two fish until they were in the swim.

I guess with the amount of anglers and helpers I had in my swim I would have been safe enough to have had the brace shots taken but decided against it. We pictured the common first and then the mirror. No-one recognised the mirror at all and after lots of hand shaking and what certainly seemed like a very genuine congratulations from everyone, we were left to chat away as only anglers do. Before we knew it we were close to the pub opening time and the suggestion of popping up for a quick celebratory pint and a meal was met with approval all round.

I won't elaborate but as it started to turn dark, the Fosters was flowing well and just seemed to taste better and better the longer we drunk it. The Admiral Duncan was always a quiet pub but that day I am sure they must have had one of their best midweek takings ever.

Shaun Harrison