



SIMON MANSBRIDGE

LETTER TO A SMALL ISLAND

In the penultimate instalment of his series Simon takes a look at winter fishing and reveals how to carry on catching while other anglers are tucked-up indoors keeping warm.



I have always believed that if you want to catch carp consistently then you have to gain an understanding of their environment and what effect all the factors within this environment have on them. Very little is ever discussed or written about natural food cycles, dissolved oxygen levels, pH values and the effects of temperature and pressure changes. But these factors are actually of huge importance and will dictate where the carp are, what they feed on, when they feed and how much they feed. If you understand what's happening in their environment then it becomes much easier to predict where they will be and make good decisions about how to fish for them. In essence, this is what true angling is all about and much more important than today's endless succession of new tackle, wonder rigs and bait hype. In the end, it boils down to watercraft, it is this that catches carp more than anything else.

So, what happens as autumn slowly slides into winter? Although the days can still be quite warm in late autumn, the nights become much longer and colder and there is a resulting steady reduction in water temperature. Shallow windswept lakes will cool more quickly than deep sheltered lakes. Sometimes there will be a short time where the shallowest parts of the lake cool first, leaving the deeper water slightly warmer. This is usually short lived. If the lake is exposed to wind, or there is a flow of water through it, then the temperatures will roughly even out at all depths faster than if a lake is small, deep, sheltered and has no flow through it.

As the water cools, the amount of dissolved oxygen that it can hold increases. Algae will also quickly die off causing the oxygen levels to become much more constant throughout the 24-hour cycle compared to summer. There will also be less variation in oxygen levels at different depths in winter.

Many carp and other fish species will feed less as the temperature drops, there is less disturbance of the lakebed leading to less suspended sediment in the water. This, combined with the reduced suspended algae, leads to the water becoming much clearer.

Weed beds will partially die back, but their root systems will remain in place and often a significant amount of actual weed will remain at lower levels, even though it may not be visible from the surface as it was in the summer. Lily pads will also die back, but their complete root structure will remain in place ready to send

up new shoots and leaves in the spring. The temperature within these old weed beds or lily root systems will often be a little bit warmer than the surrounding open water. In addition, it is surprising how much natural food these areas can still hold in the depths of winter. Even in January and February, if there are just a couple of bright warmer days, then we regularly see localised hatches of midges from these spots.

During the autumn, there are usually a few weeks where there are some strong winds and, for most of the UK, the prevailing wind direction will be from the south-west. As the trees lose their leaves, any that land on the water will often be blown into the north-east corner of the lake. The leaves will build up at the windward end of the lake, eventually becoming waterlogged and sinking to the lakebed. Due to the reducing water temperatures, the decay process of all this organic matter can take months. Many of the leaves will remain in these areas throughout the winter until spring arrives bringing higher temperatures allowing the breakdown process to accelerate. This build-up of leaves can create localised slight dips in pH levels (acidity) during this period.

Eventually, if the winter is a cold one, the lake will start to freeze over. Although this is not a good thing for fishing, if you can be at the lake during the time that it freezes, a lot can be learnt. If the conditions are still, which they often are as a lake freezes, then the last part to freeze is usually going to be the warmest. Or it may have a certain flow of water in the area that prevents it freezing. Either way, this is very useful information to know. The same applies to watching as a lake just starts to thaw.

What does all this mean for winter carp fishing? Well, the carp will respond to the changing conditions in a number of ways. Firstly, because they are cold blooded, their metabolism will progressively slow down. This in turn means that they need less food and they will become less active. These changes mean that they need less dissolved oxygen. Now combine this with the fact that the water will be carrying increased levels of dissolved oxygen and it's easy to see that in the winter they have more oxygen than they need everywhere in the lake, so this is no longer a factor that influences location. This is the opposite situation compared to summer, when oxygen levels can become the most important factor influencing location.



ABOVE: Freezing, but spectacular dawn on Badgers Holt with the top end of the lake already frozen solid.

RIGHT: A big mirror in the net on a winter night with a temperature of -50C.

BELOW: Stan the carp dog keeping me warm in the depths of winter. Using a broly instead of a bivvy allows you to see and hear so much more. I never zip up in a bivvy.

Temperature now becomes one of the most important factors that dictates where they will be. Most cold-blooded species are masters of finding the warmest places in their environment and carp are no different. They can easily detect temperature differences of less than a degree and it will be the warmest places in the lake that will often be where you find them.

There is a myth in carp fishing that all the fish go to the deepest part of the lake in winter and I hear people say this very often. Over many years of winter fishing on loads of different lakes, I have never found this to be the case. There is sometimes a short time, as temperatures initially drop, where the deeper water will



remain slightly warmer. During this period, which is usually just a couple of weeks at most, the carp may go to this deeper water, but as soon as the temperature distribution evens out throughout the lake, then they will quickly move back to the shallower areas.

They also love cover, more so in winter than any other time of year. This can be in the form of snags, old weed beds and lily pads, overhanging trees, gullies between bars and marginal slopes. Old weed beds are like magnets to carp in winter. I often hear people talking about looking for clean areas and fearing weed and all that goes with fishing in it, but, I would recommend the opposite approach; seek out weed and

learn to love fishing in and around it. It is where the carp will often be found. If I can find the weediest part of the lake then that is most likely where I will be fishing.

On small tree-lined lakes, during winter when the sun's arc from east to west through the day is lower, it can leave much of the lake in shade for most of the day. Usually on the east side of the lake there will be a part of the water that benefits from the full afternoon sun. If this happens to be a shallow area, then on still days, it can be slightly warmed up and become interesting to the carp. If the area has any snags or weed beds that receive this afternoon sun then this will make it even more likely to be one of their favoured areas.

Wind can also have an effect on location. Northerly winds are always cold in winter so any areas that are sheltered from wind from this direction are of interest. If there is a high bank at the north end of the lake, a tree line or an island that causes a calm

area at the back of this type of wind, then these calm areas will be worth looking at.

All these factors will almost always cause the carp to pick just one or two areas where they feel most comfortable. They will then spend very long periods held up in these areas, often tightly grouped up. I have known a couple of lakes where pretty much the whole stock has spent from December to March held up in a tiny area hardly moving away from it.

In these cases, there can be acres of water with no carp at all present and just the smallest area of the lake containing most of them. It's easy to see that location in the winter is more important than ever. In summer, if you get location wrong, then





but only if you are absolutely spot-on with the location. Many times, when I have found one of these winter spots, every single take has come on the one rod on the spot. In that situation, other rods can be a waste of time.

Finding these spots isn't easy, but time invested looking, without the rods in the water, is time very well spent. Most successful winter campaigns for me have been the result of a great deal of walking and looking and not much actual fishing with the rods out during early winter. As soon as they are located then the rest of the winter can be spent harvesting the rewards of this initial effort. Sometimes one show is all that is needed to turn what would have been a blank winter into a

there is still a chance that some carp will move into your area because they are very mobile in the warm conditions. However, in winter, if location is not spot on then it could be months before a carp visits your area. The factors that make the carp choose these comfort areas to spend the winter in are so strong that you can often catch a known carp from one of these spots and return it a considerable distance away. Then, if the fish are visible on the spot, go and have a look an hour or so later and it will often already be back there with the others. I have done this many times, and it always amazes me that they are so good at immediately finding their way back to the comfort zone.

It's easy to see that if you can find them, then you can often catch lots of fish throughout the winter. These comfort spots rarely stop producing throughout one winter and, in fact, they are often the same every winter. In a way, this can make winter fishing easier than summer fishing,



successful one.

To narrow down the search, if you can find shallow water at the northern end of the lake, or on the south-facing side of an island, then these will be interesting areas to start. If the lake is small and sheltered from the wind, then the east bank is also of interest. If there are overhanging trees, snags, weed beds or lily pad root systems, then these are all like magnets to the carp. Silty gullies between bars and, in particular, the south facing slopes of the bars forming any gullies are always of interest, especially at the base of the bar, just into the silt, as long as the gully is not too deep. Gullies that run roughly east to west are often better bets than those that run north to south. Corners, where there is an accumulation of last autumn's leaves on the lakebed, are often best avoided

TOP: This was the last area of the lake to freeze last winter. And it contains an old area of lily pads. It's no surprise that last few fish of 2016 came from here.

ABOVE: A nice 50lb+ mirror caught from a tiny spot that produced many fish that winter. Being even a few feet away from this spot did not produce one carp.

LEFT: Keith Williams with an 81lb Lac Serreire mirror caught in the depths of winter from a regularly baited spot.

RIGHT: My preferred setup for leading around.

BOTTOM: A 58lb mirror in the depths of winter on a fishmeal. One show in December was the key to finding the spot where they spent the whole winter.



because the carp don't like the localised reduced pH that can result.

My preferred method is to walk the lake, looking for any signs of carp; never be in a hurry to set up. A couple of hours spent in the right place is better than days spent in the wrong place. If a carp shows, or if the most likely areas can be narrowed down, then I just use a simple lead on a braided line to have a good feel of the lakebed. Forget echo sounders,

they will never give you the same level of information about thin layers of weed, silt, leaves and polished areas compared to a simple 'leading rod'.

The carp will spend long periods of time in mid-water, off the bottom, in winter. With the clearer water, they can often be seen if you look carefully into snags. The higher the air pressure, the more time that they seem to like spending in the upper water layers. If you can use a boat then

slowly drifting around the most likely areas is a very good way to find them. Of course, a good pair of polarising sunglasses are essential.

They will usually only go down to the bottom to feed for relatively short periods of time and often a pattern can easily be seen. There will be a short period, or sometimes two, every 24 hours when they will feed. The timing of these feeding spells can be remarkably consistent and you can almost set your watch by them sometimes. As soon as they have fed they will often return to their comfort layer mid-water or sometimes just two or three feet below the surface.

Due to their reduced activity, they don't show very often, but there will often be a very short period in every 24 hours when a few fish will roll or head-and-shoulder. I have found that the most common times for this will be either at dusk or during the early hours of the morning between about 1.00 a.m. and 4.00 a.m. I have noticed that these times have been consistent on many different lakes. Watching the water just as it gets dark is vitally important. Then being awake and listening during the early hours can also provide information that can turn around a whole winter campaign. **CW**

