



SIMON MANSBRIDGE

# LETTER TO A SMALL ISLAND

This month, Simon covers the all-important topic of hookbaits, and the pros and cons of different types. He also reveals his views on pellets and their effectiveness, and how to use a bait boat.



**ABOVE LEFT:** The hard hookbait version of my HNV fishmeal bait of choice. Completely different to most commercially available hookbaits, and super-effective.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** Cork granules added to the hard hookbaits for buoyancy. No bright colours or overdosed flavours. Just proper food signals.

**BOTTOM:** A near-60lb mirror caught on a cork granule balanced hookbait in open water.

### Hookbaits

Walk into most tackle shops and look at the array of brightly-coloured hookbaits on sale. There is every colour and flavour imaginable, and anglers buy loads of different pots in a never-ending search for the one that will give them better results. A few get used from each pot and they accumulate over the years. Despite spending loads of money and trying many different flavours, none seem to produce better results than the last. This is because they nearly all have one thing in common; they are usually produced from non-food-based base mixes and are simply carriers for flavours and colourings, and have almost no inherent attraction.

Unfortunately, anglers have become conditioned to believe more in flavours than in food signals from real food sources. Humans can't detect and smell these food signals, so sniffing each pot to decide which ones to buy is of no benefit. The airborne aromas that we smell are nothing like what the carp detects underwater. There are some very effective flavours, but in my opinion, relying on the flavour without the right base mix is never going to be as effective. It seems that nowadays, very few anglers use hookbaits that are the same as the freebies, but it can be an advantage if you understand what is really going on.

Being different to most other anglers is easier than ever. Amino acid-based food signals are generally far more effective as attractors than synthetic flavours. I think this fundamental concept is one of the most important things when it comes to bait, and is the difference between good baits and exceptional baits. They can suddenly make very difficult carp look easy to catch. After all, carp don't want a chemically-coloured and flavoured ball of inedible nothingness, do they?

I personally place a great deal of importance on using the best HNV food bait that I can. Where possible, I apply this on every campaign, and during each single session. This provides me with total confidence, and if I can find the right spot

to apply it, the carp will eat it. It is one part of the jigsaw puzzle that I know is always in place. For this reason, I keep my hookbaits as close as possible to my freebies. I rarely like the idea of fishing a bright fluoro hookbait over a nice patch of the HNV bait I have spent so much effort getting established.

When the trend of fishing these types of hookbaits started, it was maybe an edge because the carp weren't used to it. The fluoro, being bright and over-flavoured, stood out from the freebies, and was often taken by the carp quite soon after they started feeding on the baited area. This method became so popular that on many lakes, the carp were caught on it time and time again. By design, these hookbaits stand out as being different from the rest, which makes it easy for the carp to associate them with danger. I think this method now works against anglers on the busier waters.

In the old days, we simply took a boilie straight from the bag of freebies and used it on the rig. Very few anglers do this now, and it seems that people don't feel confident unless they do something different with the hookbaits. I have always used hookbaits that are pretty much identical to my freebies, and they have never let me down. I prefer that the carp can't tell the difference between

the hookbait and the freebies. Why show them the one that's dangerous? Like many things, watch what everyone else is doing and be different. Are the bright colours and strong smells catching the angler or the carp?

There are a couple of things that I like to do with my hookbaits. Firstly, I prefer them to be harder than the freebies. I like to leave rigs out for long periods of time, and on the trickier waters this can often be essential. Harder baits provide greater confidence that the bait is still on the rig, even after long periods. To achieve harder baits, I use about 5% egg albumen in the base mix and make my own hookbaits, or the two bait companies I work with are both happy to do it for me.

Another tip is to sieve the base mix prior to making the hookbaits. This removes any larger pieces from the mix, and means a tighter and less porous skin is created during the boiling process. Another ingredient good for hardening baits is blood haemoglobin powder, which is also very attractive to carp. Air-drying or using salt to dry and harden hookbaits isn't very effective, because once immersed in water, they quickly soften again.

The other thing I like to do is make my hookbaits heavier or lighter than the freebies. Going either way makes the baits harder for the carp to handle, and they make more mistakes. Making the baits on the rig heavier is easy; just use double bottom baits and these provide excellent hookholds. Making baits lighter is best achieved by using either cork granules or cork balls. This keeps the base mix almost the same as the freebies.

For pop-ups, I like to use cork balls. A 12mm cork ball makes a perfect 16mm pop-up. Again, it is important to sieve the mix before rolling the baits, and add egg albumen or a similar ingredient. Cork ball pop-ups, made from the right mix, remain





**RIGHT:** My bait boat of choice. Simple, ultra-reliable, and quiet.

**BELOW:** Dawn on Lac Serreire. One of the best times of day to see where the carp are showing.

nutritional intake, then the carp gain weight rapidly based on fat deposits, but the life expectancy is seriously reduced. The other problem with these high-oil pellets is that unless the water is warm enough, the carp have trouble digesting all the fat. This causes them to become lethargic with reduced appetites for long periods of time, especially in cold conditions. This is the exact opposite of what we want to achieve with bait.

Finally, be very careful to make sure that only fresh pellets are purchased. Because of the oil content of pellets, they have a short shelf life before the oils start to oxidise and go rancid. Storing them correctly is also important, as in a cool, dry and dark environment. Never leave them in the sun or anywhere very warm. Once the oils oxidise, they are unsafe for the carp and not effective as bait. The best pellets on the market aren't cheap; they should come with a use-by date on the sack. If the date has expired, don't use them.

### Bait Boats

Closely related to last month's topic of bait application is the subject of bait boats. Love them or hate them, they are here to stay, and as each year passes, more anglers are using them. This is especially the case for fishing in France. Like many things in carp fishing, bait boats have their pros and cons. There are some situations where using a bait boat offers significant advantages. For example, on many of the shallow silty French lakes, if fishing at long range, a heavy lead and low-diameter line is needed to hit the required distances. A bait boat, on the other hand, allows the use of lighter leads and thick lines, while still hitting the same spots.

The lighter leads offer advantages when fishing in soft silt, and thick line is often essential to safely land the big fish being



targeted. Bait boats allow rigs to be placed with 100% confidence that they are not tangled, and this can be important when fishing the harder big-fish waters, where it's common to leave rods out for a couple of days at a time. There are also times when a small tight cluster of bait around the hookbait is very effective, although this is becoming less and less the case as more anglers use boats.

Like many aspects of carp fishing, getting the most out of a bait boat requires practice. It pays to do some research and pick the boat most suitable for the lakes you fish. Some boats on the market are really fast, but very noisy. Unless you are fishing one of the vast European waters at extreme ranges, I recommend using a boat that's as quiet as possible, and it doesn't need to be fast. A boat that travels slowly creates less disturbance, and if it takes an extra couple of minutes to drop a rig and get the boat back, does it really matter?

I usually slow the boat down around 30yds from the spot, and creep in very slowly for the last few yards before the drop. If there is a crosswind, it's a good idea to take the boat slightly upwind and a bit further out and stop it. Then let the boat drift downwind until it's approaching the area just behind but a little upwind of the spot. At that point, tighten the line and gently drag the boat back until it is over the spot. Let the line go totally slack and immediately drop the rig. Now let the boat drift further downwind until it's well clear of the area, and then drive it back to the swim. There is almost no disturbance over the spot because you only drift over it.

I always drop the rig from the bait boat on a totally slack line. If the line is tight, the rig swings back towards the swim and the free bait drops straight down. The rig ends up back towards the angler and off the baited spot. The deeper the water, the greater distance the rig ends up short of the spot. On a totally slack line, the rig sinks almost straight down along with the bait. This effect can be an advantage if you want to fish just off the baited spot.

It's best to put the lead right at the back of the bait boat's hopper, and then place the hooklink in a straight line towards the front of the boat. If using a bare hook without any PVA system and soft or chopped baits, it's a good idea to place the baits forward of the rig in the hopper. This prevents the hook from impaling a bait as it drops when the hopper opens.

If the boat has two hoppers that open independently, a good tactic is to place the rig and some bait in one hopper and more bait in the other. Drive the boat to the spot, slacken the line, and drop the rig,



then move the boat a further few feet and open the second hopper. This extends the baited area behind the rig and away from the line. Another tactic is to drop the rig with no bait at all from one hopper, and then drop a cluster of bait a few feet past it from the other hopper. Fishing just off the baited cluster is very effective, especially if bait boats have been used a lot on the lake.

It's also a good idea to make a few runs with the bait boat and drop some clusters of bait, without any rigs, near the spot you are actually fishing, but not on it. This gives plenty of safe clusters of bait, and the

marker knot comes off the reel before the spot is reached; in extreme conditions, you have to compensate for this. With practice, you can get the rig extremely close to the original position every time.

At night, line up the rear lights of the boat with the same horizon feature – it's just as accurate. It's a good idea to eliminate all other light sources for a couple of minutes prior to sending the boat out. This gives your night vision time to adjust, and even on the darkest of nights, it's easy to see the far-bank horizon features. Torches don't help, they simply make things worse, annoy

sounder that they stop looking at the water, and so miss seeing the signs that would have shown them the best spots.

In my opinion, fish-finders catch more anglers than they do fish. People try to use them on Lac Serreire in shallow water, which is useless. The best fish-finders on the average lakes are your eyes and ears. The fish always show some sort of signs. In recent years, it seems there has become increasing reliance on technology, but it's a very poor substitute for good old-fashioned watercraft. I recommend buying a basic boat with two hoppers,



carp become more confident before they encounter the one with the rig. Another tip, especially when dropping light baits such as hemp or chopped-up boilies, is to drop the bait while the boat is moving forwards. The wake from the propellers or jets helps disperse the bait over a wider area behind the boat.

To fish accurately with a bait boat, especially at range in open water, my preferred method is to use pole elastic as a distance marker. Once the spot is identified, take the boat out to the spot and drop the rig. Tighten up the line just enough to take out any bow, and tie a pole elastic marker knot just in front of the bite alarm. Line up the spot with a feature on the horizon of the far bank, and then it's a simple case of driving the boat out towards the far-bank feature until the marker knot comes off the reel.

As soon as this happens, stop the boat, make sure the line is slack, and drop the rig. Keep the rod tip under the water while the boat travels out to the spot. In crosswind conditions, reduce the amount of bow in the line. This eliminates the need to sink the line through the surface tension later. A significant bow in the line means that the

other anglers, and spook fish. If the boat has the facility, dim the lights because the rear lights are sometimes too bright and prevent you seeing the directional feature. I prefer this method to the GPS facility that some boats offer. There is nothing to go wrong with a marker knot, and despite what many believe, GPS is not as accurate as the pole elastic method once it's mastered.

The downside of using a bait boat when everyone is using them is that the carp become cautious of small clusters of bait with a hookbait in the middle. They see this time and time again. In this case, still use the boat to drop the rig, but with almost no bait, and then use a throwing stick to get a wider spread of bait around the rig.

Some boats have optional fish-finders and echo sounders. On the large and deep European lakes, echo sounders are a useful feature and save a lot of time, but on the types of waters that the majority of anglers fish, let the carp show you the spots where they want to feed and then count the lead down to judge the depth. This allows you to feel for the drop and gain a lot of information about the lakebed. Some people get so hung up on using the echo

one that's slow and quiet, and simply drops rigs and bait. The more complex options and features on some of the newer boats are mainly to entice the anglers, and not the fish.

One final note about bait boats. Think carefully about where you place baits with them. There is the potential to drop rigs in very dangerous places; for example, deep under overhanging trees in snags, inches from lily pads, round corners behind islands, etc. If you aren't 100% sure that you can land every fish hooked, then don't place a rig there. It is far better for the angler and the carp to get less takes but land them all. There is a tendency these days for some anglers to play the numbers game. They think that if they hook enough carp from a dangerous spot, then sooner or later they will land one of them. But what about the lost carp which are left trailing rigs, potentially tethered, or with ripped mouths? Please be sensible with rig placement, and respect other anglers by sticking to your own water.

Next month I will move on to the topic of presentation, and my preference to keep things simple but effective. **CW**

**ABOVE:** A stunning Badgers Holt half-linear.