

SIMON MANSBRIDGE

# LETTER TO A SMALL ISLAND

Simon looks at the small spots that produce bites and how to fish them. He also talks rigs, and blows some of the latest carp-fishing myths, the difference between good and bad silt, and how to locate feeding carp.

If you fish a lake for some time, then you start to build up more of a picture of the features and types of lakebeds that are present in each area of the lake. There will be spots where the fish show on a regular basis, and in certain weather conditions. Patterns often emerge, and this makes it easier to start to predict where they will be. There are spots in some swims where fish regularly feed, and bites are possible anywhere on or around these areas. And then there is often one particular place that produces a lot more bites than the surrounding area.

Often, if you have found one of the spots where the fish feed, and plumb the depth or use an echo sounder, the whole area appears to be the same; the same depth and the same type of lakebed. But sometimes, if you feel the bottom by leading around, one small part of the spot will feel slightly different.

An example of this was last December; I kept seeing fish show on a spot at the northern end of the lake. I had a feel of the bottom with a lead, and the whole area felt quite choddy with leaves and small sticks that had accumulated during autumn. The prevailing southerly winds had predictably pushed all the autumn leaves to that end of the lake. After maybe 20 casts, I found a small area that felt totally different. If I over-casted the spot and pulled the lead back through, it was choddy at the back of the spot and then suddenly smooth. It was so smooth that it felt like I was sliding the lead over glass.

After feeling it from a few angles, I thought that the spot was maybe 3m long by about 1m wide. Based on the flat ground all around it, which was covered in leaf matter, it could only have been created by the carp. This is what I think of as a polished spot. When carp feed, they suck up everything from the bottom, filter out the food items, and then blow the rest back out. Over a period of time, they can completely clear an area of bottom debris and move it all to the sides. These polished spots can only be found by leading and feeling the bottom. This particular spot went on to produce two 50s and a couple of smaller ones the first time I fished it. Rigs presented in the same area, but off this polished spot, produced no bites at all.

If the area where the fish are showing has any small stones or gravel, and you can see the bottom, especially from a boat or looking down from a tree close to the water surface, then study the small stones. Naturally, they usually have a slight green tinge to the colour, caused by a thin coating of algae. When the carp feed heavily on a spot, they suck all these small stones in and out lots



of times as they filter out the food items. This cleans the algae off them. Sometimes, a spot like this literally looks polished and glowing, and noticeably different to the surrounding area.

These polished spots come and go over time. When all the natural food has been depleted, the carp start feeding in the next area, often almost next to the first one. This can make it look like the polished spot is moving around. The trick is to identify the polished area when it is still new and not yet depleted. When it becomes bigger and obvious, it's often too late.

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*“Often, things out in the lake are very different compared to how we visualise them from the swim.”*

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There are other reasons why spots within spots sometimes produce a lot more bites. Although the carp are often happy to feed over the wider area, certain positions for the rig within the area can create problems with how the rig presents, or the way that the line passes through the area immediately before the rig. Due to the topography of the lakebed and location of any weedbeds, some rig positions may provide much better line lay into the area than others. If the lakebed is heavily featured, very small changes in rig position can make big differences in the final effectiveness of the presentation.

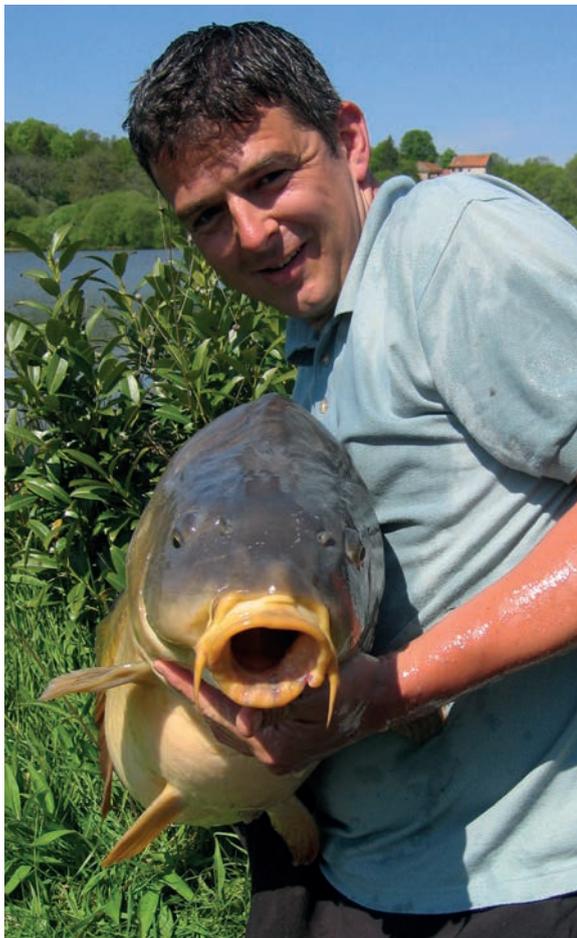
About 30 years ago, I started fishing a couple of crystal-clear weedy gravel pits where boats were allowed. This was long before aquascopes were available in carp fishing, so I cut the bottom out of a bucket and silicone-sealed a piece of glass in its place. I got myself a little inflatable dingy, and over the next few years, spent literally hundreds of hours looking at the lakebed and how rigs presented in many different situations. It was truly eye-opening. Often, things out in the lake are very different compared to how we visualise them from the swim.

Unless you are fishing over a very flat lakebed made up of soft silt, with no high spots or weed between the swim and the rig, then in most cases, the presentation is much more obvious than most people think. For example, if you fish into a gully behind a gravel bar, the line usually passes over the bar and runs directly down to the rig. The final section of line is often well off the lakebed. The steeper the sides of the bar, or the further into the gully that the rig is fished, the worse this situation becomes.

This means that a feeding carp right next to the hookbait has a high chance of touching the line where it passes through the water down to the lead. This may not matter on less-pressured waters, but on high-pressured waters, carp are often very nervous when they touch line. The same effect can be caused by fishing over weedbeds into clear spots, into a crater produced by the carp, or even into a deep margin.

In an effort to overcome these problems, anglers commonly use slack lines, heavy leaders, blobs of putty, and either flying or conventional backleads to try to conceal the line near to the rig. There are also all the different-coloured leaders and tubing

**ABOVE: A 53lb 8oz English mirror caught from the base of the slope down from an island. The slope was firm clay, but the productive spot was just into thin silt where the bottom levelled off. I had watched this fish upend on the spot numerous times in the days leading up to the capture. Observation and feeling the bottom with a lead were the keys to success.**



**ABOVE:** A big French mirror caught from an area of aerobic silt rich in bloodworm. Watching the birds feeding on the fly hatches and the obvious signs of fizzing gave this spot away. A few casts with a lead confirmed the type of lakebed, and, in fact, it was occasionally possible to bring back bloodworm from this area on the lead or a bare hook.

**RIGHT:** When it all comes together. The result of watching the water and letting the carp show where the spots were. These fish were caught at long range in deep silt, where plumbing and prodding would have spooked them and ruined the chances.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Anthony Poolman with a truly massive Lac Serreire mirror, caught last autumn.

the line between the rod and the first high spot will have been slackened. This is due to friction between the line and the high spot or weed not allowing the line nearest to the rig to be slackened. This leaves the line, leader, tubing and blobs of putty all coming up off the bottom from the lead right next to the hookbait. It's far from what most people think is happening out there in the lake. In most cases it probably doesn't matter, but in some it definitely does.

There are ways to overcome these problems. First of all, in these situations, the blobs of putty and any form of backleads are a waste of time, and, in fact, they work against the angler by reducing the effectiveness of the bite indication. Backleads especially can be disastrous when fishing over high spots down into the rig area. Secondly, when fishing over a bar or high spot into a gully, it pays to fish the slope directly behind the bar, and not into the middle of the gully or the near slope of the next bar. If you fish on the slope behind the bar, before the lakebed levels out at the base of it, the line has a better chance of hugging the bottom all the way down the slope in the area leading up to the rig. If you venture out onto the flat area at the base of the gully, then the line starts to come up off the slope of the

bar and runs directly to the lead, right where you don't want it. The base of the slope, just before the lakebed levels out, is very often a good bet for bites anyway. Carp are feature-oriented, which means they like to spend time tucked up against the slopes of bars, islands, or the margins.

If fishing into a clear spot amongst weed, avoid the centre of the spot. Firstly, if it's an obvious clear spot, it's usually where everyone places their rig, so the fish are more cautious in the middle of these areas. Secondly, the line passes over the weed on the nearside of the spot and cuts down through the water directly to the lead, making it obvious. I have found that if it's possible to fish to the left or right side of the spot, as close to the side walls of the weed as possible, then the line cutting through the water is right up against the weed where the fish are used to touching things midwater.

Bites are possible anywhere around a spot where fish show. If you can find the polished spots, or the spots that provide the best line lay into the area, these are what I think of as the 'spots within the spots', which will produce far more takes. Many anglers don't realise how important it is to find these spots, especially on the smaller high-pressured waters.

Another thing to consider is maximising the number of carp which can be caught when there are a group of fish showing in an area. Often on our lakes, anglers find a group of fish and immediately drop a rig right in the middle of them. Of course it's tempting, and we have all done it at some time. What usually happens is that one or two fish are caught very quickly, but this spooks the rest of the group out of the area. A lively hooked carp in the middle of a group of fish is a good way to spook them all. Combine this with the casting or bait boat activity, and it's easy to see why the fish quickly leave the area.



on the market which are supposed to help. Having tried all these things myself over many years, and studied them all underwater from the boat, I can say that in many cases they don't work as expected, except maybe when fishing really close in the margins.

If you are fishing at any sort of range and there are high spots on the lakebed, or any weed between the swim and the rig, then over time, the line tightens up. This is due to wind, undertow, and all the line slowly sinking as far as it can. As the line tightens, many anglers slacken it off at the rod end to keep it looking nice and slack, imagining that the line near to the rig is just as slack. What actually happens is that the line between the highest spot and the rig remains tight. When slackening off from the rod end, only



A far better way is to find a spot on the edge of where the fish are showing, or even just a short distance away. For example, if they are showing in a bay, then fish the mouth of the bay and not right into it. In this way, the bulk of the fish are left in peace, and fish can be picked off the edge of the group for several days before the group moves. The first take might take slightly longer in coming, but the total number of carp during the session is often higher. Again, this is part of thinking about the best spot within the bigger spot for the rig to be presented.

Last month I wrote about anaerobic and aerobic silt. Anaerobic silt is characterised by the lack of free oxygen, and is therefore devoid of natural food. It can also be more acidic than the rest of the lake. For these reasons, carp don't usually feed much in anaerobic silt. It is easy to identify because it is usually choddy, and contains only partially broken-down organic matter, black and foul-smelling. Despite all this, there are times when you will find fish showing in these areas. These aren't usually feeding fish, so looking elsewhere for the feeding areas is usually the best option.

If fish are regularly seen in these areas, and you decide to fish for them there, the best approach is to use a single hookbait. Sometimes, an attractor-type bait, light in colour, and no freebies at all can provoke a pickup, even from a carp which isn't feeding. Many people can't resist the temptation to put a kilo or two of boilies in these areas when they see fish, and then fish over the top of the bait. This very often doesn't work. It's difficult to get the carp to feed properly in anaerobic silt, and putting out free baits detracts from the chance of a pickup from a single hookbait. Sometimes, if there is just one attractive hookbait, they will pick it up, probably more out of curiosity than as food. In this situation, less is more. Next month I'll cover the difference between attractor baits and food baits.

As discussed last month, it has become almost standard practice for anglers to look for hard spots and gravel. I guess this is because there have been so many videos and articles that promote this, and there are certainly times when this makes sense, but there are many waters where it makes no sense at all. This is especially the case on the very old, shallow, flat-bottomed, dammed lakes that are common in France. Lac Serreire is a typical example of this. These lakes are often hundreds of years old, and were created by damming small rivers. Over time, the silt builds up and the lakebed becomes almost totally flat and uniform. The majority of the lakebed is soft aerobic silt, rich in natural food and life. These lakes were not created



**ABOVE:** Never ignore the margins. Keep quiet and it's surprising how close you frequently see the fish. Very often, anglers fish all their rods at long range when there are catchable fish much closer.

**LEFT:** A near-60lb carp which came soon after a move on to showing fish. Cut down the gear and move every time that you think you should. Hesitation and too much gear costs many anglers a lot of fish.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** A lovely mirror caught after casting a single hookbait to showing fish.

**ABOVE:** A lovely UK 40 caught from amongst the weed. The obvious clear spots in the swim were fished by everyone and rarely produced anything.

**RIGHT:** My friend Paul Smith with a 58lb mirror, one of several 50s and a 70 which he caught after moving swims to get on to showing fish. No markers, no prodding, just a couple of stealthy casts to where the fish had shown, and the bites came almost immediately.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** A lovely UK 40 caught from amongst the weed. The obvious clear spots in the swim were fished by everyone and rarely produced anything.



deal. In fact, carp spend lots of their time well up off the lakebed. This vertical movement is driven by a combination of temperature, dissolved oxygen levels, and pressure. For example, there are times when the oxygen levels are very high in the upper layers and lower deeper down. This is especially so on deep weedy lakes, or when algae are present during bright sunny afternoons. The oxygen levels in the upper layers significantly change through the 24hr diurnal cycle, and this can cause the fish to move up and down to the most comfortable levels throughout this time.

On deep lakes, with almost no shallow areas except the margins, the carp are forced to leave their comfort depth to feed on the bottom from time to time. In lakes with a

by gravel extraction, but anglers frequently look for gravel and gravel bars, and then lose confidence if they can't find any.

This is another example of things that become habitual in carp angling, and people don't really think in detail about why they are doing what they are doing. Anglers frequently spend hours, or even days, in a boat with a prodding pole, feeling the bottom and looking for a hard spot. In the process, they spook any fish in the area because the water is shallow and the boat makes so much disturbance. Often a session is ruined before the first rod is even out fishing.

If you think about it, why would a hard area of gravel even be of interest to the carp in these silty lakes? The silt contains all the



natural food that the carp could ever need. They have spent their entire lives feeding in the silt, and if any hard spots exist, they are usually barren and hold little food and potential for the carp to avoid them. If there are any really big and easy-to-find hard areas, then usually they are fished week in, week out, and the carp have learned that they are dangerous, so they avoid them too.

Finding the feeding spots in silt is simple. Forget the prodding, marker floats, echo sounders and fish-finders. Just sit down, keep the rods out of the water, and watch during the first day of a session. Carp can't help but give themselves away when they feed in deep silt. They almost always cause a certain amount of fizzing, they always cloud up the water, and they often head and shoulder to clear their gills periodically if they are feeding heavily. The carp show you everything you need to know, and no technology is a substitute for using your eyes and ears to find the spots in these conditions.

I have mentioned comfort depths in the past, and it's important to visualise the lake as a three-dimensional environment. The carp not only move around the lake, they also move up and down in the water a great

variety of features, such as islands, gravel bars, gradually sloping margins, gullies and humps, there are nearly always areas of the lakebed at the comfort depth. When the comfort depth is not known, it pays to fish different rods at different depths.

If you are fishing on the slope behind a bar or on the slope coming off an island, then fish each rod at a different distance down the slope, and therefore at different depths. This is where it is important to know the approximate depth at which each rod is fishing by counting the lead down. When a take happens, it's good to note the time of day, conditions and depth. Many fish all over the lake will be comfortable to feed at that depth, at that time, and in those conditions. Often the comfort depth is a narrow band because the factors that influence the carp can change significantly, even with quite small depth changes. This is why the successful depths for Zigs change during a session, and a foot up or down can make all the difference.

For example, if you have a bite on the slope of a bar in 6ft of water, and you have another rod fishing to the slope down from an island in 10ft of water, it pays to



immediately move the rod up the slope to the same 6ft-depth as the productive rod. Takes can then come surprisingly quickly. As time goes on, patterns can be seen, and it becomes easier to predict the comfort depth based on the conditions.

When you stand in many swims, there are some obvious spots that look well worth fishing, such as the end of an island, the tip of a set of lily pads, or a big overhanging tree on the far bank. If there is a prominent far-bank feature like an electricity pylon or a single tall tree standing on its own, these can be used as far-bank markers. There is often a clear spot in the weed directly towards these obvious far-bank features.

On really busy pressured waters, these obvious spots get fished week in, week out. They still produce an occasional fish, but in the main, the carp have learned to steer clear of them. If you fish the same spots in the same way as 90% of anglers, then you will catch the same as 90% of anglers.

I generally avoid these obvious spots. Again, spend time watching and you will eventually see fish show in much less obvious areas. Have a quick lead around, and if you can find a spot where a rig can be presented, bites can come surprisingly quickly.

Like most things in carp fishing, look at the common themes, and then avoid doing the same things yourself. Being different takes a certain mindset, but it's part of the learning curve, and you will quickly gain confidence.

Next month I will talk about the next important factor for success. It's the subject of bait choice, and how critical it is for consistent success. **CW**

**BELOW:** A lovely 48lb mirror caught from the spot where a single fish showed the day before. Lining up the spot with a shadow on the water, and dropping a rig on it with no other disturbance was the key.

**BOTTOM:** A lovely 53lb mirror caught from one of the siltiest parts of the lake while writing this article. Healthy rich aerobic silt is often a far better option than clean gravel or hard areas, which are usually quite barren.



- \* The original and best selling particle range
- \* 100% natural - nothing added NO PRESERVATIVES
- \* Our cooking process retains all the natural goodness



.....Always use the best particles