

LETTER TO A SMALL ISLAND

Simon Mansbridge is a long-time carp angler who has tackled iconic waters like Johnson's, Larkfield, Harefield, Savay, Vinnetrov, Stoneacres, Welly, and many more. He moved to France after he and his wife purchased the Lac Serreire complex. His knowledge and experience put him in the unique position to comment on what he feels are some of the most important things when it comes to carp fishing.

SIMON MANSBRIDGE



Fishing has been an obsession for most of my life. At the age of 5, my grandad took me fishing for the first time, and even at that age, I became addicted from the very first trip. I remember that even then, I spent almost every moment thinking about fishing, dreaming about fishing, and convincing my grandad to take me at every opportunity. Nothing else seemed important at the time. We spent weeks working out how to fine-down the line and hooks, and fish at the right depths to tempt roach, perch and gudgeon. I was absolutely fascinated about this new underwater world and the creatures which lived in there.

We occasionally saw huge dark shapes cruising about on the surface on hot days, and learned that they were the mystical and elusive carp, but at the time, in the mid-'70s, we considered them impossible to catch. Then, a few years later, I met a man who was fishing for them. He had gear that was beyond my wildest imagination, including a home-made alarm that told him if he had a bite. He showed me his secret bait, which was actually luncheon meat, and how to free-line it by pushing the hook through a cube, out the other side, and then pull it back on a piece of thick grass to stop it coming off. All very high-tech back in those days.

I was about to enter a whole new world that would change my life forever. Over the next few days, I managed to get hold of the parts required to build myself a bite alarm; electrical contacts out of an old relay, some wire, a battery, a buzzer, and a little help from a kind man in Tandy's. It's hard to believe that back in those

ABOVE: A UK 40, caught fishing over the top of thick weed, which was the only place that seemed to produce takes during that session.

LEFT: They are catchable even when it's freezing. The night before this photo was taken, two 40s were caught by fishing to an area of decaying lilies, which was a fraction warmer than the open water. The only signs were the odd movements of the old lily stems.

RIGHT: A UK upper-30 caught halfway down a steep slope from an island, at the comfort depth on that particular day.

BELOW: A UK early-spring mid-40, caught at long range over silkweed in very cold water conditions. A move the day before, after seeing a single show, paid off. Being mobile can be so important.

BOTTOM: When it all comes together. A very big carp indeed.

days, almost no carp gear was available, and everything had to be invented and home-built. I was so excited in the days leading up to the next fishing trip that I couldn't sleep. All I could think about were those massive dark shapes which I had spent weeks watching. I was about 10 years old at that time, and the big day finally arrived. I put a cube of luncheon meat on, as I had been shown, flicked it out a few feet from the bank, and put the line between the electrical contacts of my DIY alarm. The battery was then connected and I was finally carp fishing.

Maybe an hour or so later, the buzzer sounded and all hell let loose. The reel started churning backwards at an alarming speed before I could even get to the rod!



I picked up the rod and the power of the fish was totally different to anything I had felt before. After a tussle and a bit of help, I got the fish in, and there was my first-ever carp – a common of probably around 5lb. A new carp angler was born!

That was 37 years ago, and carp angling has dominated my life ever since. I progressed from water to water in search of more and more carp. From a very early time in my carp fishing, I didn't want to catch loads of fish, just the special ones. Back in those days, we were often fishing for just a handful of carp in many acres of water. I was happy to go months between bites, working things out slowly but surely on each water. The challenge and the journey to each fish was what made it so special.

I grew up in Hastings, East Sussex, and as soon as I reached the age where I could travel, I ventured into Kent, which was a whole new adventure. As time went on, I thought nothing of travelling anywhere in the UK when I heard a whisper about big carp. Years were spent chasing some very special carp in waters such as Johnsons' Railway, Larkfield, Harefield, Savay, Vinnetrow, Stoneacres, Wellington Country

Park, Chad, and many more. Later came the first trips to France, and a whole new world of even bigger fish.

From a very early age, my dream was to own and develop my own carp fishery. Finally, in 2013, my wife and I took the plunge and purchased the Lac Serreire and Badgers Holt fishing complex in France. The lakes needed a lot of work and had been neglected during the previous years, but I knew that both lakes had the potential to hold a lot of very big carp. And this is where we are now, 3 years later.

Owning a fishery has put me in the fairly unique position of seeing and talking to many different anglers every week. It becomes easy to see the common themes that lead to success, and those that don't. Recently, Steve Broad and I were chatting, and the idea to write a monthly piece in *Carpworld* came about. For my whole fishing life, up until now, I have chosen to stay quietly under the radar. However, after all these years, with fairly free rein to write about a multitude of subjects, based on my own experience and the patterns we see on our complex, it sounded really interesting.

I would like to point out that I am not affiliated to, or sponsored by, any tackle or bait company at all. I have always wanted to remain neutral, fish on my own terms, and select the tackle and baits that I truly believe are best for the job. So here goes...

The Key to Catching Carp

In my opinion, the three most important factors to consistently catch carp are, in order of priority:

1. Location.
2. Bait.
3. Presentation.



Many years ago, early in my carp life, I used to worry about these aspects of my fishing in the reverse order. I can now clearly see that this was a mistake. In the beginning, with less experience, rigs and presentation are paramount. You can buy all the components to make the rigs, and there is so much written about them that it's natural to focus on them. However, location is based on experience and, sometimes, just gut feeling. You can't buy it, and much less has been written about it over the years, and this mistake is something I see regularly these days.

If someone is struggling, very often the first thing they do is change rigs, sometimes multiple times, and they get lost in a spiral of reducing confidence. Next, they start to wonder if the bait is OK and doubts start to creep in, which again leads to changes and reduces confidence. They finally realise that the rig and bait are fine, but actually they're not on the fish and a move is the best solution. The problem is, the thought of packing down and moving a ton of gear to the other end of the lake is often not very appealing. The temptation is to then wait another day or so, thinking the fish will turn up, and it's only on the drive home that it becomes clear that a move would have probably saved the day. We have all been there. Many times, during tough sessions years ago, I have gone through those same thoughts.

How many times have we doubted our rigs and/or bait after days of blanking, and then finally moved to a new swim, on to showing fish, and caught one almost immediately. There was, in fact, nothing wrong with the way we were fishing, just that the location was wrong. As the years go by, we gain experience, and with experience comes confidence.

Every successful long-time angler I know has a limited number of simple rigs that they know work, and a bait or two in which they have total confidence. This state of mind leaves them free to focus all their efforts on what really matters while on the bank – location.

Over the next months, I will write in detail about each of these main factors for success. Once these key aspects of carp fishing are understood in detail, and experience allows us to prioritise them in the right way, then confidence spirals upwards instead of downwards. Gradually, very difficult carp seem much easier to catch. In the end, I realised, after decades of fishing for big carp, that it really is a mind game above all else.



ABOVE: Attached to an upper-40 mirror, fishing very shallow water after a bright sunny day in the winter. A few shows the week before, in similar conditions, helped to pinpoint the spot.

LEFT: A 62lb Badgers Holt common, caught in cold conditions from a tiny spot. It was only identified because I was lucky enough to see one fish show there early that winter. The spot went on to produce 12 fish over 50lb. A rod-length or more off the spot produced nothing. Location was absolutely key.

Location, Location, Location

Location is by far the most important factor in carp fishing. It's obvious that if you're not fishing where the carp are, then you can't catch them, even if you have the best rig and bait in the world. But location is a bigger subject than that. Imagine walking round a big windswept lake and seeing a fish poke its head out at long range in the middle of open water. The ripples it left are soon gone. Yes, you have located at least one carp, but location is a lot more than this. Why did the fish show there? What is down there? Was that fish feeding? Was it travelling? Was it alone or with other carp? Where on earth should a rig be presented in the open expanse of water?

Location of the exact spot to place the rig is a massive subject and, in my opinion, is the single most important factor that separates success from failure.

With this in mind, I think people would have to agree that an hour spent with a rig on exactly the right spot, with a feeding carp right on top of it, is better than 24

hours spent in the wrong place with no feeding carp on the spot. So why the rush to get the rods out as quickly as possible after arrival? I know that people feel under pressure because fishing time is limited for most of us, but this surely makes it even more important to make certain that location is absolutely spot on.

Some years ago, I realised that during a session, it's not important to have the rods out all the time. Time spent with the



BELOW: A 58lb mirror from the exact same spot as the 62lb common.

rods wound in, walking around, sitting and studying the water is still fishing. In fact, it's probably the most valuable part of the fishing.

Getting into the mindset to be able to move quickly is also very important. I sorted out all my gear a long time ago, so only the absolute essentials come from the car to my swim. I laid everything out in my garage and asked myself how often I really needed each item. I was carrying far more than I really needed, so I set a rule that if I couldn't easily move in one

- Air pressure
- Depths and topography of the lakebed
- Inlets, outlets and areas of water flow
- Distribution and types of weed and algae present
- Time of day
- Time of year

These factors are interrelated, and some are also quite theoretical. It pays to gain a basic understanding of the theory because that's a good starting point when it comes to locating the carp, or predicting where

which are driven mainly by temperature.

In later autumn, winter and early spring, the water is cooler and will typically carry more oxygen; the carp need less, so the influence of oxygen on their location is not so great.

However, in the warmer months, the oxygen levels drop and the carp's needs increase. Due to effects of weed distribution, algae, depth, and any flow of the water, the oxygen levels can be quite varied throughout the lake in the warmer months. It is at these times that



ABOVE: Winter on Lac Serreire.

RIGHT: Summer on Badgers Holt.

BOTTOM: A group of carp in the upper layers on a hot afternoon, with at least half of them being over 50lb. Watching them can be even more important than having the rods out.

barrowload, without hesitation, then I had too much gear with me. If you make it easy to move, then the mental challenge of doing it disappears, and it becomes quite addictive. After each move you feel refreshed; it's like starting a new session again, and the all-important confidence is always high. High confidence leads to good angling.

Learn to be mobile, and don't hesitate to move if you know deep down that you should. Take as long as it needs to find the fish before even thinking about getting the rods out. Become obsessed about the spot more than the rig or bait, and I guarantee that results will improve. This applies both to fishing in France and in England. After all, carp are carp.

Location can be broken down into three steps: 1) Finding the general area where the fish are. 2) Find the spots they are prepared to feed on in that area. 3) Decide on the spot within the spot for the rig to be placed that offers the best chance of a pickup.

Factors that Influence Where the Carp are:

- Dissolved oxygen variations
- Temperature variations
- Natural food availability
- Angling pressure
- Wind direction and speed

they will end up during a session.

Carp instinctively seek out water with healthy levels of dissolved oxygen, higher temperatures, availability of food, and the least possible stress. If you can find an area that provides all these things in one place, then it's very likely that it is a good starting point in the location process.

Dissolved Oxygen Levels

This is much more important than many people imagine. Carp are super-sensitive to oxygen, and masters of seeking out healthy levels. Physics tells us that colder water carries more oxygen than warm water, and carp require more oxygen in warm conditions than they do in cold. This is due to their metabolism and activity levels,

oxygen has a significant effect on where the carp will be.

So, where will the higher oxygen areas be? The biggest influences on oxygen are weed and algae. During the hours of daylight, photosynthesis causes weed to pump oxygen into the water, but in darkness, the reverse happens and weed takes oxygen out of the water. In areas with a lot of weed, the oxygen levels are highest towards the end of a sunny day, and lowest in the night just before dawn.

This effect is called diurnal variation and it can be really extreme, especially if algae is present. Because it is dependent on light, the effect gets less as the water gets deeper. In weedy lakes this is very significant, and it's one of the factors,



combined with temperature and pressure, which causes carp to have certain comfort depths at different times of day, especially in deeper lakes. I'll write more about 'comfort depths' in the future, as it's something I often think about when deciding on the most likely spots.

So, in general, a weedy area in shallow water, on a sunny day, has good oxygen levels in the afternoon. Combine this with the fact that weed often holds high levels of natural food, and it becomes easy to see why these are the areas where carp are usually found on sunny afternoons.

Once darkness arrives, the oxygen levels start to drop in the weed, and at a certain point, especially in very warm water, the area becomes less attractive to the carp. They often move out into less weedy areas which have the higher oxygen, so it's not difficult to understand why those open-water areas, which look dead in the day, often produce a bite in the early hours of the morning.

One point worth noting is that mature lily pads on the surface actually exchange oxygen with the air, and not the water, so lily pads are the exception because they have little effect on oxygen.

Another point worth noting is that because diurnal variation has less effect deep down, compared to the upper layers, oxygen at depth is more constant. It can happen that in the afternoon, the oxygen in the upper layers is much higher than deeper down, but, in darkness, the oxygen gradually reduces in the upper layers and eventually becomes less than deeper down. The situation reverses, so the carp sometimes show a preference for deeper water during those times. This is a 24-hour cycle, and you start to see why so much has been written about Zig fishing, finding the depth that produces bites at any given time, and why this productive depth will keep changing.

Temperature

Because carp are cold-blooded, water temperature has a massive influence on them. Their metabolism is directly linked to temperature, so the warmer the water, the more they need to eat, the more active they become, and the more oxygen they need. They are extremely good at seeking out warmer water, but only if the oxygen levels are sufficient as well. Oxygen is always a higher priority to them than temperature.

Several factors influence water temperature. Radiant heat from the sun passes through the water and heats up

the lakebed, which in turn heats the water. Convection then causes this warm water to rise, gradually warming the whole water column. It stands to reason that shallow, clear water, where the sun can quickly warm the lakebed, warms up faster than deep or murky water.

Weed also produces warmth. In the late autumn, winter and early spring, when the water is relatively cold, a sunny day quickly starts to warm the shallowest areas, and these are the places to look. If weed is present, this makes them even more attractive.

In early winter, old weedbeds, when the weed is decaying, are also generators of warmth and still harbour natural food. These are like magnets to carp at this time of year. Conversely, in high summer, when

temperature and oxygen distribution is the wind. In general, the stronger the wind, the bigger and more exposed the lake's surface area; the shallower the lake and flatter the lakebed, the more the wind causes the water to be mixed. This effect evens out the temperature and oxygen variations. In calmer conditions, or on small, sheltered or deep lakes, the factors can significantly influence the carp's location.

Next month, I'll move away from the theory. I'll cover, in practical terms, how to put these factors together when at the lake, to have the best chance of locating the fish and deciding on the best area to start. It's the all-important decision that often defines the success or failure of the session. **CW**

BELOW: Dawn – one of the best times to spot showing fish, and my favourite time of day.

BOTTOM: Daily life – running a fishery and helping people.



the water is very warm, it cannot hold as much oxygen. In these conditions, the carp may start to seek out areas of cooler water which hold more oxygen.

For example, an inlet stream may be a source of cooler water. The water under trees or lilies, where the lakebed is shaded and doesn't warm up as much as the exposed main lake, is often cooler and attractive during a hot summer afternoon. One word of caution; some lakes have natural springs which feed directly through certain spots on the lakebed. This spring water is often cooler than the lake, and you would think it should be attractive to the carp in hot conditions, but very often, this water hasn't been exposed to air and is almost completely devoid of oxygen. Therefore, these areas are often totally avoided by the carp.

Another factor that influences both

