



JOHN BAILEY the thinking angler

NEW
WEEKLY
SERIES

THIS WEEK: John's fully focussed on a classic river fish, the barbel. They're flashing in the water – but how to catch them?

The flashing barbel CONUNDRUM



SEEING them is one thing... what about catching them?

IT'S the most tantalizing sight in UK fishing. A clear river running over the gravels. A glowing flash on the bottom that sizzles through the swim like a bolt of lightning.

This is a barbel grinding its body

against the stones. It's one fish but there could be two, 22 or on some rivers, 222 in the shoal, and the flashing can be like cameras exploding at the Oscars.

This is a river exhibition of such

exhilaration that catching fish is almost secondary. A good job, too.

Catching flashing barbel can often be as difficult as angling gets.

Barbel don't talk English, so until they learn to I can only interpret

these signals as best I can.

This is what I think I know from my years of experience, of watching boggle-eyed in rivers from the Wye to the Wensum, from the Avon to the Aire.

As you read this, in early summer, the barbel have just finished spawning on the shallows and could be flashing in water less than two feet deep.

Tradition has it that they are cleaning themselves after the protracted spawning act, and perhaps that's right because they're certainly only feeding intermittently.

Catching these fish is hit and miss at best and here's my tip. Go natural.

Lob. Dead minnows. A bunch of caddis grubs – surely the most underestimated barbel bait in the country. Fish light. Let the bait bounce, hold the bottom and bounce on again.

Through the rest of the summer and into the autumn, barbel continue to flash.

Sometimes, I think they're trying to wrench off parasites, especially those ghastly little louse, *Argulus argulus*. This critter looks like a sinister jelly fish the size of a child's little fingernail.



John has seen it all with barbel, trying to catch them himself and for other anglers, like this happy fella.

They cause serious bleeding and irritation if they get hold and you can understand why the barbel are desperate to rid themselves.

Male barbel often indulge in what I call the aggressive flash. You will see your coral-finned fellow flash up to a dozen times consecutively over a twenty to thirty yard beat.

I guess they're marking territory, proclaiming their manhood or just loving their day. Whatever the reason, it makes them untargetable. I move on from fish like these.

When a shoal of barbel has steadied down after spawning and dropped back to its usual home, you will still see flashing, especially when the fish are feeding.

This flashing, unlike any of the above, has a pattern. Shoal members are taking turns to flash and by doing so they disturb the gravels and release food for the barbel behind them.

This is shoaling at its best and most effective. These are barbel working for the team, playing their own individual part. Fish for them however you want but sensitively please!

So, we're looking at four different types of flash or at least that's what I think.

But hurry up, *Barbus barbus*. Get yourself to school and learn the rudiments of English!

Putting barbel in a keepnet? Think again.



John's keepnet rant

DO NOT keep post-spawning barbel (or any barbel, unless in a match) in a net. They suffer big time in mid-June. They are just physically and mentally not up to the added stress. You could be signing a fish's death warrant. I've seen this happen on more occasions than I want to mention but one memory will never be forgotten. Eight guys opposite having a match... 20-odd barbel caught and retained. At least eleven of those floating downstream, helpless, belly-up upon return to the water. This happened. I have a couple of mates who mention it still.

JOHN BAILEY'S EARLY SEASON BARBEL TIPS

1 AU NATURELLE. Think natural and have faith in baits that aren't shop-bought. Naturals work tremendously well at certain times of the year if you give them a chance.

2 ON THE MOVE. Moving baits are always good. We spend too long with baits tethered. Maggots in particular can crack open a shoal of flashing barbel.

3 FLASH SUSSING. Flashing gives you the opportunity to assess the fish in your river. When it happens in slow-mo, you really can work out the length and the potential of the fish you're seeing once you get experience.

4 LINE OF SIGHT. To see flashers at their best, you need Polaroid sunglasses, clear water, the sun behind you, and preferably position on a high bank.



When 80 fish "would not feed"

IT'S a decade ago, 2001, and I'm guiding on the Wye. I've got a good angler with me and we're on a swim called The Snags. We begin at 8.30 and it's now 6 pm.

We've been watching a shoal of 80 or 90 fish flashing almost continually through the day. We've tried half a dozen different baits without even the suspicion of a bite.

Then, when the fat lady is truly clearing her throat, a dead gudgeon floats past. On a size 4 it goes.

Wham! 11 lb 1 oz of barbel wolfs it down. A ten-second success story after ten hours fishless.



A dead gudgeon worked when nothing else would catch!