



WILTSHIRE FISHERY
ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2023



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NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

1030 25TH FEBRUARY 2023

**AT ENFORD VILLAGE HALL
SN9 6DD**

AGENDA

- 1 Apologies for absence
- 2 Approval of the minutes of the 2022 AGM
- 3 Matters arising from the 2022 AGM minutes
- 4 Financial report on accounts for 2022/2023
- 5 Chairman's and Officers' reports
- 6 Swans and piscivorous birds
- 7 Election of Officers and Committee
- 8 Water Quality Group report
- 9 Any other business

FOLLOWING THE FORMAL AGM, AT APPROXIMATELY 1200 THERE WILL BE A TALK ON RIVER WATER QUALITY ISSUES BY FEARGAL SHARKEY.

As well as being a famous musician and music manager, Fergal is a keen fly fisherman and is chairman of the Amwell Magna Fishery on the river Lea. He is well known for raising the public profile of water quality issues and other environmental stresses faced by our rivers: especially the chalk streams for which he has a particular passion.

A FINGER LUNCH WILL THEN BE SERVED Please advise the Hon Sec, Martin Brown on wfa.honsec@gmail.com of your intention to attend the AGM, for catering numbers. Drinks will also be available for a small donation.

IN THE AFTERNOON THERE WILL BE A GUIDED RIVER WALK ON THE NEARBY RIVER AVON VISITING THE SITE ONE OF THE SDCFA'S FORMER RESTORATION PROJECTS. You are advised to bring wellington boots and warm, dry clothing.

BEAVERS AND THE WFA'S POSITION

The subject of the re-introduction of the European Beaver to rivers in this country draws quite a lot of passion at both ends of the debate. Some anglers and angling organisations are vociferously against, while others take a more equivocal view. What seems clear however is that there is broadening public support for their reintroduction – call it furry factor environmentalism, if you like. Whether we like it or not, it is an inevitability that further reintroductions will take place, and it is probably better that it happens in a controlled manner with fishery interests able to raise concerns where they have them and being fully involved in decision making.

This is not just something which exists far away on the freestone rivers of the South West England and Scotland. Beavers are already present close to home, on the upper Wylfe, albeit in an enclosed environment.

The subject has been discussed at length within the WFA committee. We have written to the DEFRA Secretary raising our concerns for the unique nature of the chalkstreams, and have been reassured that full assessment of the impact of reintroductions will be made. We supported the call for a national beaver strategy by the Angling trust and other national organisations and participated in a DEFRA consultation on beaver reintroductions in 2021.



Beaver dam on a tributary of the River Otter

The WFA's position is that, as would be expected, we are first and foremost pro-fish. This does not necessarily mean that we are anti-beaver. For example, we recognise that there are some circumstances where the presence of beavers (and the dams they build) may be beneficial, such as holding back flood water in the headwaters of river catchments. We believe that there must be full and proper assessment of the potential impacts on fishery interests *before* applications for reintroductions are considered. We also feel that the ability to remove beavers or otherwise retrospectively manage them where unforeseen impacts on fisheries do occur is needed, and resources will have to be put aside for this. We have expressed our concerns for the unique nature of the chalk streams as highly managed and engineered river systems, and that the implications of this need to be fully understood. Above all we believe that fishery interests must have a seat at the table. This will not happen if we simply hunker down and categorically oppose all beaver reintroductions.

Committee members and keepers have made two visits to the Rivers Otter and Tamar where beavers have been reintroduced. Both visits proved to be highly informative and reassuring. The situation on the River Otter, where they were introduced without consent, has been extremely well managed between Clinton Devon Estates and the Devon Wildlife Trust. The project manager from the Devon Wildlife Trust has since transferred to Natural England as their national lead on beavers.

3 WATER QUALITY SUB-GROUP REPORT – AVON CATCHMENT

Key actions 2022

1. Presentations of SmartRivers data and Cyril's reports to Wylde and Nadder farmers groups. One Wylde has funded and added an additional site on his land. Presentations were delivered with Wildfish and Wessex River Trust.
2. Participations to local schools farm/environment workshop day – Delivered with support from the Environment Agency (EA).
3. Sewage fungus raised as an incident report with EA on the Nadder above Tisbury. Incident investigated by EA and Farmer has now repaired drainage system from stock yard.
4. Survey of Till and impact of Shrewton STW by Cyril Bennet leading to conflation of an illegal discharge, exceeding permitted consents. Wildfish solicitors currently in correspondence with the EA and WxW. Also considering OFWAT's position. This is still work in progress.
5. Stakeholder engagement and PR
 - a. David Holroyd interviewed by BBC Radio Wiltshire – impact of farmers muck spreading on river life.

- b. Wildfish, Wessex River Trust and WFA had unsuccessfully tried to engage with local interest groups through a questionnaire and proposed workshop – little or no response. New approach being developed – ‘roadshow’ format and presentations with the view of taking the message to the stakeholders and the public. Event is Salisbury being considered communicating the importance of the Avon Salmon the fact that they spawn in the town and the story of the declining water quality. Other outputs being considered are Web site development to add the issues of water quality to WFA site, Wildfish site and Wessex Rivers Trust.
- c. Tom Putnam has collated a dossier of data for each of the three rivers in the catchment producing very valuable source material for the stakeholder/PR presentations
- d. Initial discussion taking place with River Action to see if they can add any value to creating a national campaign. Either as part of the promotion of the Chalk Stream Strategy or the importance of the Avon catchment on its own. It is seen as important that they don’t work outside of the current PR strategy.
- e. WFA/Wildfish – David Holroyd and Nick Measham filmed and interviewed by BBC News for a feature on the impact of dairy farming on water quality. Key points – Importance of invertebrate monitoring especially SmartRiver, Importance of the Nadder for salmon spawning, the fact that invertebrate numbers have plummeted in recent years and little or no action being taken by the EA to enforce farming standards. Expecting broadcast on National News in five weeks time.

6. Engagement of local MPs

Tom Putnam continues to develop relationship with MP Danny Kruger. Discussions currently taking place with the view of him chairing an annual review meeting with Wessex Water and the EA to ensure their plans and obligations to improving water quality are met.

We presently do not have any dialogue with the other two MPs within the catchment. This has not been pushed, but there has been little interest in water quality issues in the past.

7. Engagement with EA.

Joint meetings in collaboration with Wildfish, principally using SmartRiver data to create a call for action.

EA are currently installing ‘Chem Catchers’ on key sites on the Avon around West Amesbury and the Upper Wylfe. This work is being funded by the EA and is using Portsmouth Uni to undertake the work. These absorb chemicals in the water column which can then be analysed for when the blocks are removed; we are looking for a wide range of more novel chemicals, like pesticides, pharmaceutical products etc. Wildfish

have undertaken some very similar work recently on the Test and Itchen with Portsmouth Uni.

The sites are:

The S&DAC sites

- Ham Hatches
- Queensbury Bridge
- Stonehenge (Durrington)
- Sutton Veny (Wyllye)

The Piscatorial Society site

- Longbridge Deverill

The EA have also informed us that their team of 3 farm inspectors is being increased to 11, these are permanent posts. They cover the whole of Wessex – 9500 farms. Their inspections are targeted around post incident reports.

Discussions regarding Shrewton sewage treatment works (STW) ongoing through Wildfish Solicitor.

The EA have shared with us the current “Water Company Improvement Programme”. The new bid will be made available to the EA by 30th November and can be shared with us in March 2023.

8. SmartRiver – Spring samples taken, analysed and reported. Autumn samples taken first week in September. SADAC Avon sites now available. Reports distributed to WFA Club coordinators and EA

Issues: Cyril’s format is not the same as Aquascience. As we push this data into a wider audience will this be a distraction.

Reporting format and summary if dependant of Cyril’s goodwill which is very much valued however this needs to be generated automatically, preferably by Wildfish or Aquascience as the data becomes available. If this is not an option, we need to explore alternatives and the funding implications.

WFA’s funding of the SmartRivers programme (30 sites) may have to be reviewed in the light of future funding.

Wessex River Trust initiating a meeting to look at expanding the programme to the upper Avon. It is proposed that this would be funded by the farmers. Consideration needs to be given as to how this can be integrated into our reporting process so that whole catchment is viewed as one.

9. Meeting and visit to Ratfin STW pending.

FLY FISHING FOR CHALKSTREAM PIKE



Adrian Simmons' (former Wilton Club keeper) smiling face says it all really. The trout season may be over for another year but there's still good fly-fishing to be had on the chalkstreams for grayling and particularly for pike, right through to mid-March if your fishery allows.

When I first joined the Wilton Club one of the things which attracted me was the ability to continue fly-fishing through the winter, since at the time my work was taking me away overseas quite a lot and I just wasn't getting enough fishing done in the short six months of the trout season. Initially grayling were my prime target and I was fortunate enough to find some pretty good ones in the Wylfe. But then I discovered pike!

It was helping with the annual electrofishing for predator removal (happily, we stopped doing this at the Wilton Club and I believe that remains the case, although I'm no longer involved), that initially drew my attention to the potential for sport with pike. Despite best efforts we were pretty inept at electrofishing, and quite a number of pike escaped through the net, so to speak, every year. Meanwhile from time to time we would find large wild brownies downstream, with horrid electrofishing injuries. This made us question whether this was really a sensible practice. We subsequently decided to cease electrofishing altogether; but that's another story for another time.

At about the same time we had a Danish member who used to quiz us as to where we had, or rather hadn't, been electrofishing and then hurry off with huge parrot like creations from his tying vice attached to his leader, in search of pike. It seemed like Carsten was more interested in the pike than the wonderful wild brown trout fishing that the Wilton water offers, and he regularly badgered the committee to let him start pike fishing earlier in the season.

Over the years I have learned quite a bit about chalkstream pike and developed my approach to fishing for them accordingly. I've been fortunate enough to land (and carefully return) a reasonable number of them. The majority have been in the 4lb to 10lb bracket (interestingly, rarely any smaller), but there have been a few others to 15lb and one exceptional fish of 19lb 14oz. Try as I might, I just couldn't get the scales to go to 20lb.....and no, I wasn't going to stuff mud into its mouth to make it do so!

Tackle

From the start I recognised that a somewhat heavier rod and line set-up was necessary to handle pike flies: really big lures of sorts, representative of prey fish. I started with an 11ft 8/9wt switch rod that I had for small river salmon fishing. However, with the big flies I found it to be very heavy on the wrist and I simply couldn't fish with it for very long. Reading around the subject I learned that the extra stress on the wrist was a function of the greater leverage from a longer rod, and that with flies of this size one shouldn't really go much longer than 9ft. Following advice from a good friend at Veals Tackle shop in Bristol, I opted for a 9ft 9wt saltwater fly rod, and I've been happy with that ever since.

Line wise I've found a 9wt weight forward to be best, especially if it has a short head. I've tried using sinking and intermediate lines but concluded that a floating line is easiest to fish with and, in these rivers, one is rarely fishing at any significant depth. Nowadays there are quite a number of suitable predator lines available from various manufacturers. My favourite is one I was given at the Fly Fair by the guys at SKB Fly Fishing when they were trying to promote their new tackle range a few years ago. It's a supple line of sensible colour and sufficiently front loaded to punch out a sizeable pike fly. I believe it's still available from them at a pretty reasonable price.

I generally use a fairly short leader of just 4ft of level 15lb or 20lb fluorocarbon. Pike have



notoriously sharp teeth, so some sort of cut-resistant trace is necessary between the end of the leader and the fly. I've tried many different trace set-ups including conventional pike trace wire: both crimped and knotted; with and without swivels and clip links. Unfortunately, it has a tendency to kink and weaken with the action of fly casting. Crimps fail and swivel links come adrift so I've since abandoned the lot of them. Some people swear by a length of ordinary monofilament of sufficient thickness (30-40lb?). Personally, I've found something called Iron Claw Authanic Wire to be the best. I believe it's a form of braided aramid fibre (like Mylar or Kevlar), with very fine and flexible strands of micro

steel wire. It's fine and supple like a piece of very thin string and it's easy to tie knots with. I generally use a length of around 30cm: loop one end to the fluorocarbon leader and tie the other end to the hook with an ordinary tucked blood knot, or Rapala knot. It's a German product and I buy it on-line, usually from a dealer in Scotland. It's fairly pricey but it lasts along time, and I've found nothing yet to beat it.



As for flies I tried various patterns but have settled on one which I now use pretty well exclusively. It's called a Tinsel Town. It comprises a silver tinsel wrap on the hook shank and a three-inch long body of black hair, over rainbow tinsel and then

silver tinsel; all tied in close behind the head, with a fish-shaped taper towards the tail. The head itself is built up with black hair with large black/holographic silver eyes and a short gill of bright red tinsel tied in immediately behind. I generally use 2/0 or 3/0 wide gape hooks which I de-barb to enable the best possible penetration into the pike's bony mouth. These flies can be obtained from Fulling Mill, though I have tied some up myself with equal success. Fished in a jerky manner, I think it makes a pretty good imitation of a wounded grayling. Key trigger factors are I believe: the pulsing movement of the hair and tinsel body/tail, the big eyes and the red of the gills, suggestive of an injured fish. Another advantage of this pattern is that once lifted off it doesn't hold water in the way that some other patterns do, rendering them tiresome to cast.



Other key items of kit include a good-sized landing net of relatively fine mesh to avoid injury to fish. Mine is a triangular one with an aperture of 70cm. It has an extending handle which is useful. When landing pike, I generally don't attempt to lift the fish out with the net but, rather like handling a salmon unhook it in the net in the water or, alternatively, lift it out onto the bank by cradling the pike. If doing the latter an unhooking mat, as used by carp fisherman is useful and it helps protect the fish. Lay the pike on its back on the mat and, like a trout, it will usually lie pretty still. Please do not use a pike gag. They are the invention of the devil and can do an awful damage to the pike. Instead a pair of fingers inserted into the underside of the gill covers and lifted will usually result in the mouth gently opening giving access to remove the fly. A gardening glove will protect the hand against injury from the fish's teeth and a pair of stout forceps obviates the need

to put fingers inside the pike's mouth. Having said all that, I often find that the fish is less 'hooked' than the fly simply 'clamped' by the pike's strong and unrelenting jaws and it often falls out when the jaws are opened.

I generally carry all of this in a small backpack (illustrated) with scales, a camera, headtorch and spare tackle. The unhooking mat is rolled up and attached to the base of the bag.

The last and most essential item I carry is eye protection (for me that is, not the pike!). I tend to use Polaroids in bright daylight and plain safety glasses for the twilight. Those are big hooks being flung about and having only one good eye, I intend to look after it!

Fishing technique

Pike and their muscle architecture are adapted for rapid acceleration in short bursts to grab their prey. They are not adapted to hold station in flowing water for any length of time, in the way that trout and grayling are. For this reason, river pike will typically lie and await their prey in areas of still water just off the flow, usually in the margins of the river. In just the same way that one might approach fishing for wild brownies or salmon, river-craft is key. That is thinking about the physical needs of the pike, and then putting your fly into likely places where you think he/she might lie.

I tend to fish for pike casting down and across, or directly downstream if fishing my own bank. Generally, that's acceptable on chalkstreams outside of the trout season, I think! Having chosen a likely lie such as a lens of stiller water close to the far bank, I will cast my fly at an angle across the river as close as I can get to the edge of the river. I'll allow a brief moment for the line to form a slight bow in the stream, then start working my fly out into the stream in a series of short jerks. I'll generally work my way down the lens one step at a time, as one might when salmon fishing. Often, I'll fish down a likely lie like this several times. The first time might arouse the pike, then he/she takes the second or third time down. Make as much noise with the fly as you can! Unlike trout fishing, the splashier our fly lands, the better, since it's this which arouses the pike's attention. If I'm fishing my own bank, I'll generally cast directly downstream working the fly back upstream parallel to the bank, moving downstream step by step in the same way.

When the pike takes, it's fast and furious. About 50% fall off within seconds, just like salmon. Often, it's the smaller fish that fight the hardest. The near twenty-pounder simply lolled around close under my bank until I felt she seemed ready and then I put my net from downstream and drew her in.

If you hook a small jack pike, put your fly back in the same place after you've released him. Often, you'll find that there are two or three jacks accompanying a much larger female, and she might just take it second time around.

Fishing conditions

Traditionally one thinks of pike fishing on crisp, cold winter days. While I have caught pike in such conditions and it's a real delight to be by the river at such a time, I would say that I've had more success on the fly in milder conditions.

High flows inevitably mean fewer areas of still or slow water for the pike to lie in. In such conditions I'll generally head for places immediately upstream of hatches or weirs where I

think the pike might have migrated to. In lower flows they'll tend to be more dispersed in my view.

Although I have caught pike on the fly through the day, my experience is that the last hour of daylight is far and away the most productive. I've never tried fishing the first hour of daylight, but I wouldn't mind betting that much the same applies.

Tight lines!

Well that's about it. Do get out there and enjoy another aspect of fishing our wonderful chalk streams.

5 A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

We hope you've enjoyed reading this newsletter. I am aware that given the shortage of resources and the fact that we are all volunteers means that we tend to focus our time and efforts more on the technical and delivery side of what we do, than talking or writing about it. As a consequence, members may not be as aware as they ought to of what we have been doing for their fisheries and fishing, be that related to weed cutting and removal, working to improve water quality and quantity, control of swans and piscivorous birds, liaising with the government agencies, reviewing planning applications and a host of other activities. We need to communicate better; and newsletters like this are a valuable way of doing this.

2022 has certainly been a year of extremes in terms of river levels and flow, and in terms of temperatures. I am reminded of the predictions made in the late 1990s that climate change would coincide with an increased frequency of extreme events – wettest/driest, coldest/hottest etc. When was the last time we experienced something similar to 2022? Well, if my memory serves me correctly it was 2012. Remember that?

I do hope you will be able to attend the AGM on 25th February. This will be the first 'physical' AGM we've been able to hold since the start of Covid, and with Feargal Sharkey coming to talk to us about the campaign to clean up our rivers, it should be an interesting day. Please make sure that you let Martin Browne know on wfa.honsec@gmail.com that you plan to attend, so that we know the numbers for catering.

Finally, this will be my last AGM as Chairman of the WFA as I will be standing down. I believe I've done something like 17 years on the WFA Committee, with the last 8 as Chairman. So, it's high time for some new blood!

Tight lines!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tom".

Tom Davis