

# OH WHAT A YEAR THAT WAS!

by John Horsey

**M**y travels around the country as Organiser of the Lexus European Flyfishing Championships made me realise that last season was one of the hardest on record. Most anglers and fishery managers alike were scratching their heads for a solution to why the fishing was so difficult. Back home at Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes, the scenario was no different and it was not just the air temperatures that were soaring! Bob and Kim's blood pressures must have reached an all time high, as more and more fish were stocked into the lakes, with no apparent increase in catch rates. Chew maintained high water levels all season, whereas Blagdon dropped significantly, but neither responded well until the back end. October was far and away my best month of the season and we caught scores of fin perfect rainbows and browns using dry fly tactics. It was truly fantastic!

## Weather to blame

So why was the rest of the season so dour? I have given this a lot of thought and I now conclude that it was mainly due to the weather. We had extremes of weather throughout the season, with no smooth transition from one cycle to another – this is undeniably the kiss-of-death for fly fishing. Trout hate sudden changes in weather and the thing they seem to hate the most is wind! Being situated so close to the Bristol Channel, we get more than our fair share, but last year it never dropped.

In 14 years of Pro Guiding on the Bristol waters, March and April were the coldest I have ever witnessed. I actually recommended clients rearranging trips to times when the air temperatures were warmer.

Opening Day on both Chew and Blagdon were cold and hard. The trout were lying deep, which is understandable, as that is where the water is at its warmest. I tried in vain to find any consistent areas at Chew from the boat. At Blagdon, Butcombe Bay was the best area, although mainly in the deeper water which was only accessible by boat.

The poor old bank anglers on both lakes had a torrid time. However, the previous season the levels had dropped to the lowest in almost 20 years, exposing the marginal bank areas for several months. In my experience the bank fishing is never particularly good following prolonged low levels. I feel that it must take a long time for the insects to re-colonise these margins, so they stay further out and out of reach for the bank anglers.

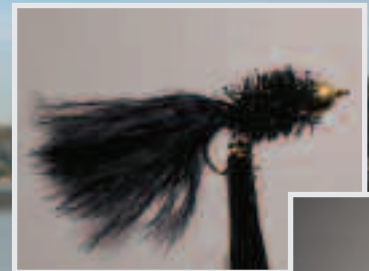
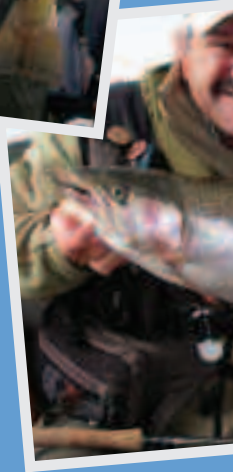
May came and the temperatures stayed low, although we did have the odd good fishing day and hopes were high that things - and more importantly the trout - were on the "up"! But we were wrong.

Torrential rain hit the West Country with a vengeance - together with the obligatory strong winds. Both lakes rose alarmingly and boats were cancelled due to the strong south westerlies.

I remember getting so wet one day that I left my waterproofs home to dry and started the following day wearing a new, dry set. By lunchtime I was so hot I had dispensed with my wet weather gear, shed my fleece and was slapping on the factor 30 sunscreen! That was the way the weather remained throughout the remainder of the summer months.

September brought with it some cooler weather and lighter winds and the fishing picked-up immediately. By the time October arrived, we were greeted by near flat calms or the lightest of winds, warm air temperatures and cloudy skies. The buzzers hatched in profusion on Chew and the trout fed on the surface in droves.

During three memorable days in Villice Bay, my client Barry Hawyes and myself landed an amazing 57 trout - all on dry flies. These fish were a mix of browns and rainbows and all were in peak condition. I had expected them to be long, lean fish; in need of a good meal. But they were all full of buzzer, bloodworm and snail. They had obviously been feeding well throughout the previous months and due to the better weather, had responded to the hatching buzzers by feeding on the surface.



## Tactics to combat these conditions

When the water temperature is very low, a trout's metabolism drops and therefore it does not need so much food to maintain or increase its body weight. As the water warms, the trout get more active and they feed harder.

So during cold weather, expect the fishing to be hard. My advice is to dispense with imitative patterns in favour of larger, lure type patterns. A trout is far more likely to make the effort to take a large offering rather than a tiny offering. Gold Head Taddy patterns in Black, Black and Green, Olive, White and even Orange will be effective, but remember to keep retrieve speeds low and target depths of around 10 to 15 feet deep.

As the water and air temperatures increase, then more imitative patterns such as Diawl Bach, Pheasant Tail, Superglue Buzzers and Hares Ear Nymphs will become more effective. This is because the warmth will trigger the bloodworm and buzzer pupae into activity and the trout should start feeding on them in earnest.

Depth will still be crucial and much of the feeding activity will be on or near the bottom. On soft, spring days, you might even be lucky to witness early buzzer hatches and keep a close eye on whether there are any rising trout. If so, don't be afraid to switch quickly to dries, such as Bob's Bits, Hoppers and Carrot Flies. Dark colours such as Black, Claret and Fiery brown are good dry fly colours during the early season. These hatches are generally short lived, so make the change to

dries quickly and be prepared to change back to nymphs once the surface activity stops.

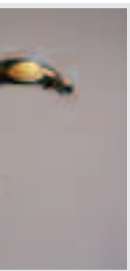
Sun and wind have always been the worst conditions on the Bristol waters and I have never seen a buzzer hatch during these conditions. Forget any surface activity and concentrate on nymphs or lures - or a combination of both. Intermediate and sinking lines will be crucial at times like these and try to explore all the depths until you get some takes. Then try to target that area as much as possible in subsequent casts.

During periods of intense heat target the deeper water, particularly in the aerator vicinity. This is the coolest water on both lakes and I guarantee there will be trout here. In recent years very few anglers seem to target the aerators, whereas years ago all the boats fished here during the so called "dog days"! Sinking lines with teams of Boobies and Nymphs fished slow and deep will often account for some superb conditioned trout, which fight like the proverbial clappers in this highly oxygenated water.

Something I feel many anglers now miss out on at both Chew and Blagdon is fishing the "Evening Rise". There is still some fantastic evening fishing for rising trout on both lakes, but most anglers are already off the water. On hot days in mid-summer, it is almost a sin to leave before the trout start feeding - you can fish until an hour after sunset, so I heartily recommend staying and experiencing some scintillating fishing.

Global warming has certainly altered our seasons nowadays - how often have we seen snow in recent years. It is the most influential element that affects our fishing and we have to accept that we need to change our tactics to suit the conditions.

Seeing those robust, fin perfect trout at the end of last season convinced me that the trout were alive and well - and feeding - throughout the summer months on Chew and Blagdon. This season I intend altering my normal tactics and catching them much earlier!



## JOHN HORSEY FLY FISHING

### "Fish with the England Team Captain"



John Horsey is England's highest capped International fly fisher and has been the Resident Professional Guide at Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes for the past 15 years. He is the only angler to have been appointed Captain of England at all four disciplines; World Team, European Team, Loch Style and Rivers.

A visit to Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes can be a challenging, if not daunting prospect at times. Both are huge expanses of open water that contain plenty of hidden features, such as sunken islands, secluded bays and miles of tree-lined banks.

Knowing where to fish, what flies to use and which tactics to employ, are three of the essential ingredients for success. A day with John can also help you to improve existing skills, learn the latest techniques and thereby achieve more consistent results!

John uses top of the range Hardy & Greys tackle, all of which is available for use on the day. So why not enlist the services of England's Team Captain and let him show you the best way to fish Chew Valley and Blagdon Lakes.

### PIKE ON THE FLY!

During the past few years, John has fished extensively for pike using modified fly fishing tackle. He has now extended his Guiding Services to include pike fishing and he can

supply all the necessary equipment to cope with these wild and sometimes huge "toothy critters"!

John and clients with a cracking Chew Valley pike.



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