

Brittany M

The monthly trips abroad to write this series have been, when mentioned in the same breath, both tiring and rewarding. Many miles have been covered, indeed so many, that my clapped out fishing van is on her last legs. I thought I was going to lose her as the garage doors slammed behind the rust bucket for a recent MOT. I was overjoyed when the van doctor rang and told me that she (the vehicle – not the van doctor!) is ill, but can be saved at a cost of £334, “with the best treatment that money can buy.” Still, the old dear is worth it – trout pellet smell and all.





Mill Lakes

However, this left me in a bit of a dilemma, as I had every intention of fishing a commercial venue in France over the said period. Not wanting a miniscule problem such as having no transport, to stand in the way, an all-inclusive trip would need to be arranged. A long hard scour through the pages of the Angling Publications magazines was essential to narrow the search.

I was tired of driving and

yearned for something diverse and somewhat special as a welcome distraction for you, the reader, over the change of year period. I was looking to write an article that would keep you on the edge of your seat, a bit like a good book that you cannot put down, however I don't have the ability for that; therefore I'll write in the same manner that I do every month. The chosen lake needs no introduction, as it has been on the European carp scene for a number of years. However, the complex has had a face-lift, with the stock, aesthetics, and holiday packages being vastly improved. Andrea was keen to show me the before and after photographs, and I must say that the new owners have made some major improvements in all areas.

The package I chose could be described as a 'fly, pick up, and provide' service: i.e. the flight is arranged, you are collected by the lake owner at Dinard airport, driven to the lake where the bivvy is pre-assembled and all of the other tackle placed for you. All I needed to take were three reels, three

Main picture: The reflection of the morning sun shimmers on the beautiful mirrored surface; you need to be out of bed early to catch these sights. At the same period of the day, you may even see a fish or two feeding.

Left: The majority of the takes came to small hookbaits fished close to the dam wall. Returning one of 16 over 30lb.





Left: A selection of the equipment that was awaiting us on arrival. Everything except the kitchen sink.



Left: Note the rod! Not all of my fishing is done behind buzzers; a creeping session often produces the goods.

buzzers, three bobbins, a sleeping bag, rig bag, and a change of camouflage, with everything else already onsite. Apart from the body and hand luggage search, the flight went with minimum delay; however the forceps in my hand luggage were on the verge of being confiscated, and I thought I was going to lose them as the airport inspectors quizzed me as to why I was carrying such a 'lethal' weapon. Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit and I shouldn't jest in this day and age, it's just good to see that security is so on the ball.

Air travel has to be the way forward to visit lakes in France: for the first time ever, I wasn't fatigued on arrival. I didn't need a couple of days to recover from the road journey, resulting in more energy to locate the fish! In addition, I felt fresh at the end of the session when landing back in good old Blighty.

Swims and features

Due to the lake being over 300 years old, it has had ample time to mature and is surrounded by dense mixed forest with lots of the trees of the sweet chestnut and conifer variety. Many extend beyond the margins, dropping their fruits into the water. On several occasions, carp were seen disturbing the bottom nearby. Maybe the carp were feasting on the fruits of the fall, i.e. sweet chestnuts and pine seeds?

The dog-bone-shaped lake is said to be 12 acres, and somewhat larger than some venues that I have fished of a comparable stated acreage. In my opinion, I would say that this lake owner has his lake estimations correct.

The 12 comfortable swims are well positioned, each being strategically located to give the angler plenty of water and features

to fish, without encroaching on each other. There are many spots between swims that lend themselves to the cautious stalking approach.

A quiet country road passes by the mill house and facilities, and along the eastern dam embankment, this being the deepest part of the lake. The channel that parallels is one of many interesting features; it was from this gully that I enticed a number of 30- and 40-pound carp. A bait placed near to the 'bend in the rod' sign brought many takes; a cryptic clue but easily seen and deciphered on arrival.

The middle swims overlook an area of numerous features, from rich brown silt to large gravel patches along the far margin. Don't neglect the overhanging bushes as I spooked several carp whilst passing in the boat.

The shallower top end has a number of hard-bottomed areas near to the lilybeds. A trap was placed on these during the first few nights before moving to the dam swims. I was averaging a couple of mid-30s per 24 hours. Many fish can be seen from the branches of the old oak tree; the ladder that is leant against it enables easy climbing to gain a good vantage point.

4 x 40s, Monster Moggy and Mervin the Sturgeon (aka Fight Night)

Throughout the series, I have worked hard to find the approach to suit the chosen venue, and Brittany Mill was no different.

Below: There is no substitute for location! The best bait, method or rigs will not produce if you have not got your location right.





When the approach and location are correct, results will come: I was averaging 2 x 30s per 24-hour period whilst at the shallower, top end, of the lake, but could not help thinking that I could be doing better. Two days into the session my mind kept wandering to past stalking sessions: the creeping amongst the undergrowth with a lobworm impaled on the hook – oh how I enjoy this approach. Swim hopping and stalking has several advantages: it helps in

location, due to visiting a number of swims; it is probably the most exciting of methods, and it can be extremely productive both in the UK and on mainland Europe.

So there I am with the prospect of a stalk on the brain, the tribal was adorned and two rods prepared, I was off in the boat to the first of several areas that had been pre-noted, those areas that lend themselves to such tactics. The delicate, deliberate approach was adopted, laying low, creeping

with finesse like a sniper approaching the enemy. As I crawled into position, I peered through the bankside foliage and noticed several carp uprooting the rich brown silt. Not wanting to move for fear of spooking them, the worm was gently lowered into position. The carp's tails dimpled the surface as they buried their heads in search of food items, whilst slowly nearing my hookbait. The bait was too succulent to be ignored, the float slid across the surface, my heart felt like it was in my mouth as the beats increased... and then I struck into nothing – what a wasted chance! I had messed up, pulling the hook from the carp's mouth.

After giving myself a dig in the ribs through my failed effort, I retired to the safe haven of a spot under the bushes, awaiting their return. And that they did, this time closer to the lilies to the right, slightly out of reach of the float. A slightly different approach consisted of crushed Maple-8 in a bag with a small maple boilie on the Hair. This was lobbed to the edge of the decaying pads and fished with a slack line. As I sat out of sight, out of mind, in the side brush, the baitrunner churned as a carp bow-waved towards the security of the lilies, and the rod duly took on its battle curve. Eventually the sling was hoisted and the scales registered 36lb 2oz of pristine mirror, and a fish I would not have caught if I had not taken the opportunity to stalk was mine.

There seemed to be more fish in this area than in the area in which we were bivvied up, so after a quick gathering of the gear, Shep and I were in position with three rods each. Within an hour of arrival the left alarm signalled a slow laborious take, the signs of a good fish, the powerful fight that ensued tested the supplied rods. As the carp was engulfed in the net I estimated it to be around the mid-40lb mark. However, the scales told a different story as the big-framed mirror settled the needle at 41lb 4oz, not as big as estimated but my first forty of the session.

Whilst I had disturbed the swim, it was an opportunity to re-cast to the carp that were shouldering within 10 metres of the dam embankment. Thirty

A stalked mid-40 – sitting behind a three-rod setup is not the only method of catching carp in France; think about your approach, the rewards will come.



A 41lb 4oz mirror caught close to the pads at Brittany Mill, one of 6 x 40s in the last couple of months. This particular fish was located, and then caught, by adopting a roving approach.

Rod Simpson The Travelling Guide



minutes passed before Andrea, the lady of the lake, and onsite owner's wife, delivered lunch. Within minutes of her leaving the swim another take was struck into, lady luck was on my side as I netted a 44lb mirror. Although the fish took some time to land, the story has been cut short due to wanting to get the remainder of the day's results into this short article.

As the sun began to set, I was able to land the fourth good fish of the day, the capture in question being a 33lb 6oz mirror. The sun glistened its final rays of the day; my gut feeling indicated a night of arm-aching action. As I sat contemplating the day's events, one of the dam rods let out a single bleep, eyes focused on the LED as it gave a second and third bleep. Rather strange, I thought, as most of the takes had been slow, ponderous but hittable – this was different. As I lifted the rod it was almost wrenched from my hands, the clutch was slipping as the creature on the other end decided to strip over 100 yards of line. I felt powerless and was losing control; my suspicions were now gearing towards a catfish; it seemed too beefy to be a carp.

At times it sulked on

the bottom, (what a stubborn immovable creature it was), and it seemed only maximum pressure would get it mobile. I was not going to let it regain energy by allowing a stationary breather. Each time I got it moving it would power off up the lake taking half a spool of line with it. After fifty minutes I was wondering how much longer the size 6 barbless hook would hold. After what seemed like a decade, the catfish was seen within 10 yards of the bank, maximum load was applied and the moggy neared the 50-inch net. There was no engulfing this beast; it was more of a slide and scoop to fold its body in the mesh.

As we unhooked it, the lake owner arrived to lend a helping hand. None of us possessed big enough scales to weigh the fish; therefore he suggested that we use his bathroom scales. A long shot but it just might work! The idea being for me to stand alone on the scales then again with the catfish in my arms, whereupon we could subtract my body weight from the weight when I was cradling the fish! As I stood on the scales the crowd hoisted the monster into my arms, as the weight of the catfish was slowly released, my legs started to buckle under the strain. The

One of the big commons landed to a lady angler a few weeks before my arrival. What is it that draws big fish to women? Whatever it is, I wish I had some in my boilies! Are you putting the mystery ingredient in Maple-8, Kev?



A big-30 that preferred to feed at first light.



Mervin the sturgeon nearly won the battle, but I won the war – the fish towed the boat about the lake for nearly two hours. Approximate weight is 72lb.

Below left: 87lb of Monster Moggy that took a liking to a CC Moore Pineapple over crumbed Maple-8 on a size 6 hook – hardly catfish gear!



such power was a cow, but that's another story. At this point I could see the silver of the spool base and had no choice but to clamber into the boat and clamp down solid. The fish towed the 12-foot rigid boat to the top of the lake before turning and heading towards the fibreglass dinghy, causing me to frantically wind to regain control. 50 minutes passed, my body was trembling due to the catfish, the numerous big carp, and now almost an hour of this beast! I had no choice but to hand the rod over to Shep, I needed to regain energy. During the next hour we passed the rod between each other until

weight was read, I expected the helpers to immediately take the fish from my grasp. No such luck, as they insisted on some happy snaps of a potential hernia and me! We settled for a weight of 87lb, a personal best catfish caught on carp rods and methods.

Within half an hour of the monster moggy, line started to leave the baitrunner at a rapid rate of knots. This time I was connected to a rather large carp which also took some time to beat; the scales settled at 45lb 12oz, the third 40lb+ carp within several hours.

Due to fatigue, I was silently

hoping that I could now relax into the soothing properties of my sleeping bag and have a recuperating nap. I had just started to watch the carp crash on the back of my eyelids when the buzzer had me up and into another fish, though this one didn't feel too big. The fish was only 20 yards from the bank when all hell broke loose, and it turned to take over 150 yards of line from the reel, this was whilst applying maximum pressure. I stood in awe, there was nothing I could do but glare at the spool in disbelief, the only other animal I had ever hooked with



The second showing of the week of Mervin the 72lb sturgeon as he takes the boat on the second lakeside tour. Note the lake averages a depth of 3-feet but we still wear buoyancy aids under the real tree.

the huge head of a mighty sturgeon, named Mervin, slid head first into the long mesh of the net. The battle had lasted close to two hours and the fish was landed in a swim 200 yards from where it had been hooked. Again, the fish was too heavy to be weighed, however, the lake owner informed us that it had been stocked at 72lb! I wasn't going to climb on the bathroom scales again! Now you can see why I named it 'Fight Night!' Within the space of a few hours we had several mid-30s, three carp over 40lb, a moggy of 87lb and a sturgeon of approximately 70lb!

Two days later Shep had a take from an open water rod, as he struck, 70lb of sheer muscle cleared the surface, and Mervin the sturgeon had put in a second appearance. The fight was pretty similar to our first encounter, but not quite as long. After an hour and fifteen-minute lakeside tour, the head slid towards the bottom of the net, what a creature! Due to having caught him 48 hours previous, I took the opportunity to acquire some day



shots.

Baits & tactics

My normal choice of crumbed Maple-8 with a matching pop-up or CC Moore Pineapple enticed

the majority of takes, this combination accounting for at least 100 carp in the preceding eight weeks, with approximately 35 of them being over 30lb and 6 x 40s. When conditions and feeding intensity improved, loose feed was increased, and when feeding activity reduced, I experimented with pastes and some of the onsite carp pellets. The latter is a rounded pellet that I have not come across: they look the business and do not dissolve in water but go soft and retain their shape. Similar in appearance to an 8mm boilie, they are different and effective! They are introduced in large quantities during the winter months and are therefore a known food source to the carp.

Since the release of Korda Hybrid I have used it in the majority of my fishing and believe it is a leap forward in rig-length material. The flourocarbon stiff outer naturally forces the hookbait away from the lead and makes the lead and rigging less obtrusive. In addition to the distancing effect, an inch

Above: Belachan is a pure shrimp paste that is very strong, and a secret edge in my groundbaits and pastes. The only reason I have named it within this article is because CC Moore told me he was going to make it available to all.

Above left: When the feeding slowed, different methods were tried, to pick up a bonus fish. This paste around a small maple boilie has worked on a number of occasions. The paste contains belachan, a pure shrimp paste that stinks like nothing I have come across.



A golden mid-30 that was enticed by 12ins of Korda Hybrid, a brilliant material that also protects the carp's mouth due to the length of flouro outer left near to the hook.



This 45lb 12oz specimen was landed in a short period between the big catfish and sturgeon. Something happened that night that made the big fish feed – the moon was small and conditions were reasonable.



or two of the flouro can be peeled back to the braided inner. Quarter of an inch of this flouro is left to form a bend-effect at the hook. This not only presents better hooking properties but also protects the carp's mouth against sharp braid. I have seen cut mouths and flanks so many times that I no longer use fine braided hooklengths or braided main line without employing a protective sheath, i.e. tubing.

Although bait boats are allowed, I opted not to use one, preferring to cast the small PVA

meshed parcels to showing fish or features. A scan of the entire lake with sonar, early on in the session, helped build a picture of the lake's topography in most areas. The idea being, that if the carp moved, I would be aware of the features in the area that they moved to, this eradicates the need to row over showing fish. Occasionally, the onsite boat was used to place baits, but the time on the water was kept to a minimum, for I have noticed that when boats are used in shallow water, the fish often spook.

Fish Stock

In addition to the large amount of big carp present, there have been recent stockings of 30/40lb+ fish, and Mervin the sturgeon. There are a number of catfish present with at least two of them surpassing the 100lb mark.

There are few venues that can boast an average size of over 30lb, in fact, I managed to subdue 16 fish over 30lb of which four were good 40s to 45lb 12oz, and my average was calculated to be 36lb!!

The lake record for both common and mirror carp is over 50lb. The lake record common is an immaculate fish, and one I would love to cradle. During the last two days of the session I switched tactics to using boilies



over hemp, in an attempt to focus on the large commons, but failed in the quest; maybe next time.

Facilities

The food package on offer is included in the fly/provide package, and I must say that it is more suited to a high-class restaurant! My mouth was watering every evening as I took my seat at 5.45 p.m. for the coming delights. The starter was brilliant, the main meal was awesome, and the pudding was out of this world – without doubt, some of the best food I have ever tasted. I have always classed my good lady wife to be first-class in the kitchen, (cooking I mean), but her culinary delights are more than matched by what is on offer at Brittany Mill Lakes.

The onsite toilets and showers are situated within a modernised block; they are spotless and suitable for the other half. Steve, and family, have achieved their aim of developing what is truly a carp fishing holiday venue rather than just a week's fishing, I take my real tree cap off to them.

Top: Breakfast is delivered to the swim and will satisfy the most hearty of appetites. Bacon, sausage, egg, and beans all crammed into the hungry-man baguette.

Above: Steve, Andrea and Ricky, and daughter (who was in hospital during my visit – hope you get well soon), have worked hard to improve the fishing and packages on offer.

Left: The onsite tackle shop has an ample supply of quality baits.



Creating your own chances involves these key elements: location, rigs, baits & methods. Get them right & carp like this will eventually come your way! Even if I had blanked at this venue, my session would have still been rewarding. It's not all about catching carp; success is about enjoying your trip.

Conclusion

As stated in the first article of this series, I will endeavour to constructively criticise all venues, however, making constructive criticism of this lake/package is nigh on impossible. I will say, though, that I came back a few kilograms heavier due to the gourmet food. Having informed Andrea of my criticism, she promptly told me that she does make specialist provision for specific dietary requirements.

When Steve set about achieving his dream of purchasing lakes in France, he asked himself one question: "What would he (Steve) like from a fishing holiday?" He then set about his aim with the all-inclusive fly and provide package. From an outsider's point of view, the package sets a definite precedent!

If the approach that I have outlined above is followed, the majority of anglers visiting this lake should catch – put the effort in and the rewards will come. I wish to return to Brittany Mill Lakes when the second lake is opened, but, in the meantime, I am searching for other venues to visit, therefore, if you believe your lake is worthy of inclusion in my approach to commercial venues series, don't hesitate to get in touch, but bear in mind, if it's not up to scratch, I will say so, but in a constructive manner!

Coming soon! Etang Neuilly, a down to earth approach on a carp and coarse fishing holidays venue. ●