

Pike Anglers Club of Great Britain



My Fenland approach: by Mike Webster



The variety of waters in the Fens makes for interesting fishing, from the huge River Great Ouse fishery to the very picturesque tree lined, small Fen rivers to the tiny, bleak, windswept land drains. In short, plenty of waters for most anglers to enjoy and most importantly catch good pike from.

Over the last six years my pike fishing in the Fens has become more intense, making up around 80% of my predator angling. This is made easy as I live in Newmarket which is right on the border of the Cambridgeshire Fens.

Available fishing time is very limited to me over the winter season due to work and other commitments so I made a conscious decision four years ago to maximise my results from the one session a week (about five hours apiece). To

do this I like to catch as many fish as possible in such a short period of time and of those pike a good percentage of doubles.

To achieve these multiple catches a good, sound knowledge of waters is essential. Now I am only 33 (I have had a hard life, so that explains the wrinkles!) which in reality is a bit too young to have a comprehensive understanding of the Fenland area. Luckily, over the years I have met and gained valuable tip-offs from some senior Fen predator anglers. One such piker has had over forty years experience of fishing Fen rivers and drains. He has had some great results during this time. In the last ten years he usually only fished with one rod, wobbling dead-baits. Interestingly enough, using a technique I have not seen anybody else use, a method I will not go into detail on as I owe him too many favours already!

The list of waters with past 'form' is growing thanks to these veteran pikers which ultimately means I can get onto some good fishing.

The other method to find potential venues is the tried and trusted Ordnance Survey method. For those unfamiliar it is quite simple. Buy an OS Landranger map of the target area and check out all the blue bits! With rivers and drains, the most important bit is finding access by the nearest roads and tracks. This is where these maps are priceless. Before a section of river or drain is chosen, always run through a mental checklist. The fishery must be remote and away from easy accessibility. Not visible from any main road and most importantly no sign of angling, beaten down vegetation etc. These sort of venues will tend not to get visits from passing anglers having a go on the off chance of some action.

Once a drain or river has been chosen I like to pick a sunny spring or summer day to do some pre pike season reconnaissance. This involves dusting off the polarising sunglasses and walking along the chosen stretch. During summer most drains and land drains will not be pumping out so the water is quite deep and often gin clear. This enables the spotting of prey fish, features, weed beds, pike and the odd decent carp! All this pre season searching gets me fired up for the start of the winter. I commence fishing the Fens around mid November. By then most of the weed will have died back and the drains will be pumping off to keep the land well drained. This shifts the weed and debris and also colours the water.

Tackling the Fens

Tackling the Fens is something I like to keep as simple as possible. Due to the long walks involved the equipment I carry is kept to the bare essentials. Usually I carry just a rod quiver and rucksack with only a chair when fishing larger drains and rivers. To be honest, I quite enjoy the long 'yomps' to remote swims. The exercise comes in very handy and there is no greater motivation than the thought of some untapped predator action!

On the small land drains I dispense with a chair opting to sit down the bank side slope with my rucksack as a backrest. The beauty of this lightweight approach is the ease of leapfrogging the drain or river. This mobile approach is so important for locating fish and holding areas. I see so many anglers catching nothing and only moving once or twice as the mountains of kit cause too much hassle transporting everything to the next swim.

On the bait front I very rarely live-bait because of the hassle involved catching them, storing them and most importantly carrying buckets of water which after a few hundred yards feel like concrete! Dead-baits are so effective in winter on most Fen waterways that I do not worry about not having live-baits.

The rigs that I use are very simple, straight leger rigs on land drains and rivers that are carrying extra water. With sunk-float paternosters sometimes used for larger drains and rivers. On the rare occasions that do livebait the sunk-float paternoster is without equal, being sure to use an up-trace of course. The waters that I fish do not cause me problems rig wise as the pike are relatively un-pressured and any dropped runs are usually zander. When a water develops rig shy pike I am long gone anyway!

Fen Rivers

The contrast between the main artery of the Fens and the smaller Fen rivers is huge. The Ouse is a great fishery and my own favourite river in England, mainly because of its huge diversity. Its upper reaches equal any barbel river in the Country.

When the Ouse enters the Fens it becomes very deep, wide and open. It is a very daunting river to fish as its vastness means location and luck are important.

In 1985 I did a weeks work experience with the Fisheries Department of what was then called the Anglian Water Authority. During the week we spent a couple of days netting the Ouse downstream of Ely. This was carried out with a trawler type net towed beneath a boat. Large areas of the river were devoid of fish with just the odd ruffe or zander but certain areas had stacks of fish including roach, bream and pike. These were in very localised areas so unless an angler had good prior knowledge the chances of dropping on some fish was not good!

Today the Ouse has become better stocked. Why? I don't know, but I do know that there are still long sparsely populated stretches. This is where I like to talk to match anglers who know about current productive areas. The Ouse could quite easily occupy all my fishing time for the rest of my life, but I do enjoy the prettier tree lined feeder rivers such as the Lark, Little Ouse and the Wissey.

These rivers are a lot narrower and relatively shallow but are home to some great stocks of all species. The River Lark a couple of years ago produced many big pike to over thirty pounds. Needless to say since this has become common knowledge the river has received lots of angling pressure and the inevitable downturn has materialised.

My own approach on the Lark is to avoid the areas where there is competition from other anglers and concentrate on the quiet areas. For the last few seasons this has been quite hard going with just a fish or two per trip. That was until I discovered a good holding area where every time a morning session was fished I had a multiple catch. Looking back at my log for last season I fished five mornings for four pike then found the productive spot and fished seven mornings for thirty nine fish! I really thought I had hit the jackpot when my second fish from this new area was eighteen pounds, but this was not to be as amongst the thirty nine pike there were only three doubles! The future could be bright again for the River Lark if it retains its pollution free status and the angling pressure is not too great. Time will tell.

Land drains

These are my favourite Fenland venues. Unlike the major drains such as the Middle Level drain. One Hundred Foot etc., these are generally tiny and un-pressured.

Land drains are exactly that. They drain the land in winter and can be used to aid irrigation in summer. The farmers who work the land around these drains are often paid by the Environment Agency to keep the reeds trimmed back and the banks clear. This ensures a very unattractive fishery which can also be quite dangerous to fish. Not many angling clubs lease such waters so permission must be granted by the respective farmer or land-owner to gain access and fishing permission. They can and do tow or move vehicles if required!

During the winter period the land drains are pumped regularly into the nearby river or drain. This ensures the water levels are often very low. One of my favourite drains pumps down to eighteen inches most days in winter, but I catch many pike from there with a good percentage of doubles. Last season, one trip it pumped down to twelve inches deep and I really did think it was the end of the fishing. Half heartedly I cast out my dead-baits and two hours later I had a brace of tens and one about eight pounds!

When these drains are pumping hard I only ever dead-bait. normally with nice smelly sea baits such as half mackerel, herring or headless sardine. The terminal tackle is just a straight leger 1.5 - 2 oz flattened lead which hold bottom really well. If these still move it is probably due to too much line in the water. This is cured simply by moving the rods up the bank and raising the rod tips so that very little line is in the water.

Throughout the last few years I have come to the conclusion that this type of fishery is best tackled early in the morning or at dusk. I will often turn up before first light and get into position on the drain to be ready to cast out at dawn. This keeps disturbance down to a minimum. Normally I would fish for about three hours covering a few swims and then move onto a larger drain or river. This is a great way of raising the catch rate and is good exercise!

This is an insight into my Fenland approach which has developed out of many failures and disappointments. The Fen waters offer so much for predator anglers. have a proven track record and produce pike to over thirty pounds most seasons. It amazes me that huge parts of it are under very little or no angling pressure. So it will come as little surprise that I shall be resuming my quest for Fenland pike, big and small. The search continues...!

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