

BRITISH WILDLIFE

Go fishwatching

Many wildlife-lovers overlook the inhabitants of our lakes, rivers and streams. But with a little patience, you can discover the graceful, mysterious and enthralling world of freshwater fish, says **CHRIS YATES**.

Photos by Michel Roggo





*Alive without breath,
As cold as death;
Never thirsty, ever drinking,
All in mail never clinking.*

Gollum's fish riddle from *The Hobbit* by JRR Tolkien alludes to the strange and beautiful creatures that live beneath the water's surface. Here a common carp cruises below tendrils of duckweed.

THE EXPERT

CHRIS YATES is one of Britain's foremost anglers. When not fishing, he is a writer, photographer and occasional radio and tv presenter. He is currently working on two books, one about the sea, the other about the night.



WATER HAS A MYSTERIOUS irresistible quality that, given the right conditions, will always draw you to it. Whether it's a bridge over a stream, a high bank above a weirpool or an unexpected view of a lake, something about it will make you stop. This is because water not only looks picturesque, but also seems to promise something, though it never tells you quite what. It's usually enough to let the movement of the ripples or the slowly shifting reflections lull you into a brief but happy trance. Yet look beneath the surface and you might see something that will jolt you back into focus and even make you gasp.

On a warm, clear evening last month, I took a couple of friends on a walk through a south Wiltshire wood where, according to local reports, there was a pair of nesting hobbies. The path we followed skirted the edge of a quiet, three-acre pool – a favourite haunt of mine – and as we approached the water I told my companions to go very quietly. They

readied their binoculars and scanned the nearby trees, but there was something other than a hobby that I wanted them to see.

"There!" I whispered. "Look at that!" I pointed across the water to where, 20 yards away, a large, dark form lurked just beneath the surface. My friends stared in the right direction, but they couldn't see anything – simply because they didn't really know what they were looking for. I explained more carefully: "Just in front of that bed of floating weed is a greyish shape maybe a yard below the surface. Only its fins – its pectorals – near the head – are moving."

It began to move, drifting towards the weeds.
"Wow! It's enormous! What is it?"

Still they couldn't see it, and it remained invisible to them until it gradually began to move, turning slowly and drifting towards the weeds.

"Wow! It's enormous! What is it?" It was a carp, and it must have been almost a metre in length and at least 30 pounds in weight. My friends couldn't believe that such a giant could live in such a small pool, but I assured them that it wasn't unusual to find even bigger carp in ponds

like this across the country.

For the rest of the evening, we forgot about the hobbies and spent our time creeping around the water's edge, fish-spotting. We didn't see the big one again, but there were half a dozen other fish – all carp – on display. Once my pals learnt to identify the vague smudges, details began to come clear. Suddenly, they could recognise the long dorsal fins, gracefully swaying tails and even scale patterns on the fish cruising past.

ALL KINDS OF MARVELS

Like most fish species, carp are more active in the evening and early morning, but on sunny days you can often see them basking at the surface, sometimes with their backs out of the water, like hippos. But they are incredibly sensitive to vibrations and movement. One misplaced footfall on the bank and every fish in the vicinity becomes aware of your presence and sinks away.


If a big carp in a still pond can be hard to spot, then an average-sized fish in a swirling river will often be even more inconspicuous. But a watchful walk down a riverbank in summer and autumn, when the water is low and clear, can reveal all kinds of marvels if you look in the right places.

Everyone enjoys standing on a bridge, watching the slow sweep of water below. A bridge is a good place to begin your river walk, because fishwatching is all about focus and you need to adjust your eyes to the subtle but often confusing effects of

A pike sunbathes in the shallows of a lowland river. Even seasoned anglers and naturalists get a thrill – and even a chill – from seeing such a large predatory fish.



Stephen Dalton/NHPA/Claire Haichler



Timing is the key to fishwatching, and a sudden spate in autumn after a long, dry period is a guarantee of spectacular aquabatics.

Urged on by the need to spawn, a sea trout uses every ounce of muscle to fling itself up and over a weir in a swollen autumn river.

FISHWATCHING FIELDCRAFT

To make the most of fishwatching, you need to master a few basic skills:

KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

- » Fish skulk around sunken trees, reeds and weedbeds. Pike use these locations to launch attacks.
- » Bridges and landing stages will often harbour shoals of fish such as chub and roach.
- » Look in back eddies and slack water away from the main flow of the river.

AVOID SUDDEN MOVEMENT

- » Fish are less likely to be startled by smooth, restrained movement. Try to keep below the tree line on the bank.

TREAD SOFTLY

- » Fish are extremely sensitive to vibration and will be able to hear you coming. They can even feel the vibration of voices.

WEAR MUTED CLOTHING

- » Try to blend into your surroundings by dressing in dark greens and greys. Wear soft-soled shoes.

USE POLARISING SUNGLASSES

- » Normal sunglasses decrease the intensity of everything by the same amount. Polarising sunglasses selectively eliminate glare from light bouncing off the water's surface to reveal fish invisible to the naked eye.
- » To buy a pair, visit www.sunglasses-shop.co.uk/polarised-sunglasses.asp



Who is watching whom? A bridge makes an ideal vantage point for spotting the denizens of the deep.

light, refraction and constant motion. Fish are superbly camouflaged against predators, both aquatic and aerial, and in deep water they are virtually impossible to detect unless you're wearing polarising glasses, which cut out reflection and glare almost completely. But looking straight down from a bridge, you have the advantage of a heron's-eye view, with or without glasses.

DARK FORMS IN THE FLOW

Once you've got into the rhythm of the swaying streamer-weed and ripples, you will probably notice a dark, streamlined form poised in the flow. Keep watching and the fish will eventually slide sideways, snatch something that was drifting towards it and then return to its former position. This will probably be a brown trout. Look for its square rather than forked tail and diagnostic spots (see box, p56).

Chub, especially big chub, often behave in a similar way to trout, but from above, even if you can't see whether an individual has spots or not, you can differentiate between the species by looking for the chub's black, forked tail, thicker body and blunter head. Grayling and dace also

inhabit the same stream environment as trout, but both have a more delicate, graceful shape. The grayling is also recognisable by its long, sail-like dorsal fin. From above, all these fish appear uniformly grey, yet the grayling is one of the most beautifully coloured of all freshwater fish. It has a lovely, purplish sheen along its silver flanks, metallic green

Pike are the river's true monsters. They can grow large enough to swallow an adult duck in one gulp.

across its back and almost the whole spectrum in its fins, especially in the rays of its dorsal.

The easiest fish to distinguish are Britain's two main predators, the pike and the perch. The pike is recognisable by its long, lean shape, crocodile-like jaw, eyes near the top of its head and dorsal fin set back towards its tail for instant acceleration. Pike are the river's true

monsters. Even in a small stream they can grow to a colossal size – over a metre in length and big enough to swallow an adult duck in one gulp.

Perch, on the other hand, are the river's pirates: flamboyant, colourful, bold and aggressive. They cruise around in shoals and whenever they spot the opportunity for an easy kill, such as a passing fleet of innocent minnows, they raise their large, spinous dorsal fins as if hoisting the Jolly Roger and launch themselves at their prey with a kind of fierce joy. Their insignia is their barred flanks – five black verticals along both sides. Even when looking from above, you can see the stripes and sometimes the rich crimson in their tails and lower fins.

LEAPERS AND JUMPERS

Salmon are, unfortunately, far less common in England and Wales than they were a generation ago, their sad decline caused by industrial-scale commercial netting, pollution and mild winters affecting fry survival. But you still have a good chance of spotting a salmon from bridges over southern and south-western rivers, such as the Hampshire Avon and

Shallow, fast-flowing upland streams can hold large salmon and trout (pictured) during the spawning season.



the lower reaches of the Test, Itchen and Frome. Nowadays, however, you are more likely to see a sea trout than a salmon, as the former have suffered less from commercial netting. The two species are difficult to tell apart in the water (salmon have forked tails, sea trout square) and most people, even anglers, cannot differentiate between them unless the river is low and clear.

Both salmon and sea trout are the famous high-jumpers of the river and, last autumn, after water levels across the country had fallen dangerously low, it was a relief when the rains finally arrived. At weirpools such as the one on the River Avon at Christchurch, it was possible to watch dozens of sea trout and a few salmon leaping through the rising, foaming water on their way upstream to spawn.

Scotland is still the best place to go if you want to watch salmon leaping the falls of a mountain river. Timing again is the key, and a sudden spate in autumn after a long, dry period is almost a guarantee of spectacular aquabatics.

Further along the riverbank, away from the vantage points of weirs and bridges, are opportunities for much more intimate

Simply watching a shoal of minnows playing in the river flow is calming for the soul.

encounters. Remember that fish are never evenly distributed and you can walk a mile without seeing so much as a minnow if you miss the river's often inconspicuous fish-friendly spots. These include natural features that offer cover from aerial predators, such as leaning branches or half-drowned trees, areas where the current slows on the inside of a bend, sections where the water deepens and places where the speed of the current is increased between two weedbeds, thereby freighting all the drifting riverbugs down one channel.

Different species of fish prefer different areas of the river. For example, look out for pike waiting in ambush at the fringe of an underbank lilybed where the current is slow. If you creep up on your target very quietly on your hands and knees, you may

be able to see the marvellous camouflaging markings along its flanks and the murderous glint in its eyes.

BALM FOR THE SOUL

Lying on a bank on a sunny day with your head over the water is, without doubt, the best and most pleasurable way to fishwatch. The water obviously has to be clear and not too deep, but if you choose your spot carefully and keep very still, it's amazing what jewels you'll discover. Simply watching a shoal of silvery minnows playing in the river flow is calming for the soul, and it's always exciting when a large, mysterious shadow suddenly materialises from the depths and rises towards you. Furthermore, even when you've identified it as, say, an elegant barbel or a handsome roach, the creature still seems to retail its otherworldly magic, if only because it inhabits the genuine other world of water.

Finally, a few words of caution: never tease a pike. I once dangled my toes in front of a 15-pounder just to see what would happen and nearly lost them. Also, never fall in unless there's someone with you to appreciate it.