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 of the best river,  
 lake and canal  
 fishing that  
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 to offer

# Take a chance on trotting

Adam Fisher recounts a memorable day spent floatfishing the river, when it all came together after he lost a huge fish early on...

Words Adam Fisher Photography Dougal Ziegler

**T**HE transition period between autumn and winter is a truly fabulous time of the year to be an angler.

The stark beauty of the surrounding landscape aside, it is the fact that most species are approaching the peak condition that can make it such a time of plenty for us fishermen.

Barbel, chub and carp are feeding hard and packing on weight, and only a swift drop in air and water temperature will knock them off their stride.

Other species will continue to gorge no matter how cold it gets over the next

few months, among them the roach and apex predators such as pike and perch. The hardest of them all, however, is the grayling, for whom the weather cannot be too cold.

Some people believe that you shouldn't fish for grayling until there's snow on the ground, but I've always thought this is nonsense. Sure, they may be one of the only fish to feed on a really bitter winter's day, but why make it hard on yourself and wait until then to make a seasonal acquaintance with 'the lady of the stream'?

Each year, my friend Dougal and I

make a pilgrimage to the River Irfon, just over the border from England in Wales, to fish for its giant grayling. The Irfon is a fast river, flowing mostly over bedrock, with gutters that take the depth from inches to feet in a sheer drop. One careless step will have you whisked downstream towards the Irfon's confluence with the River Wye before you know what's happening.

It's a remote and beautiful waterway which rarely fails to deliver, and the drive up there from our homes in the Wye Valley is always brimful with excitement of what might be in store. ►

**Tackling up for grayling**

The day set aside for this year's trip to the Irfon was no different, with anticipation steadily building for the duration of our 90-minute journey.

The weather was unseasonably warm considering we were approaching Christmas and, having rather predictably overdressed, we were forced to shed layers of clothing on the walk to the river.

After arriving at our designated starting point, we first stood for a few minutes to catch our breath and cool down, staring in awe at the beauty of the Irfon as it meandered off down the valley, skirted by ancient oaks hanging over the margins of the river channel.

The time had finally come to tackle up. Although they can be targeted with feeder tactics, undoubtedly the most productive, not to mention enjoyable, method of fishing for grayling is to trot for them with maggots.

Grayling are notoriously adept at shedding hooks, so a float rod with a soft tip is an absolute must to keep hook-pulls to a minimum. My choice is a Hardy Marksman (11ft 10in), which is very forgiving but also light in the hand, so can be held for hours on end with ease. With such a rod, just a flick of the wrist can generate enough speed in the tip to set a hook, even at range. Use a rod with too firm a tip, however, and the float can come flying out of the water on the strike and land upstream in a tangled bundle. A soft and lightweight 11ft-plus rod, however, should enable you to keep striking at a

dipping float right through your run without terminating the trot.

Hook choice is also important. Over the years, through much trial and error, I've settled on a pattern in which I have ultimate faith – Drennan Red Maggot hooks-to-nylon. They're fine wire and mega sharp, plus I like their colouration which complements the red maggots I favour for most of my grayling fishing.

For a typical day's sport, I'll take three pints of red maggots, plus half a pint of whites mixed in to use as 'change baits.'

Float choice is a little less crucial, as long as the pattern is highly visible, especially on choppy runs. Chubber and loafer style floats are great, but a wire-stemmed stick float with a big domed orange top is my number one choice.

I always like to employ a 'shirt button' style shotted pattern when fishing over an uneven riverbed because it enables you to vary the depth of the hookbait, depending on how hard you hold back the float by momentarily halting the float's progress down river.

The harder you hold back, the more the bottom shot and hookbait will rise up in the water column, and this is often enough to make a grayling take the bait.

The final 'must-have' item of tackle is the smallest, but arguably the most important – a micro swivel to connect your mainline to the hooklink. Without this, the effect of repeatedly retrieving double maggot hookbaits can cause the line to twist-up terribly, which in turn will lead to tangles and poor presentation.

*“I'd just lost the biggest grayling I'd ever seen. All I could do was turn the air blue”*



Every angler knows the desperate feeling of losing a big fish in the final stages of a prolonged fight



By far the most enjoyable way to target grayling on running water is with a stick float and centrepin reel

**Adam's tackle**

- **Rod:** Hardy Marksman 11ft 10in
- **Reel:** Okuma Aventa centrepin
- **Mainline:** 4lb Maxima
- **Hooklink:** Drennan Red Maggot hooks-to-nylon (size 16 to 3.6lb)
- **Floats:** Woody wire-stemmed stick
- **Hookbaits & loosefeed:** maggots

**First trot earns a bite**

With everything ready to go, I waded into the margins, dropped the float off the rod tip and ran it through the swim just to check my set-up was working well before we headed off to a real 'hot spot' further downstream that we had earmarked from a previous trip.

I was still getting my eye in when the float buried. Caught a little unaware, I didn't react as quickly as I should have by clamping my thumb on the drum of the centrepin reel to strike. To begin with I was confused – had I caught the bottom, or maybe one of the many leaves trundling downstream? As I lifted the rod to try to free the rig I could see the orange dome of the float tip sat just under the surface. Applying a little more pressure, I then felt the distinct thump of tail reverberate up the line, before instinct finally kicked in and I belatedly struck – fish on!

After holding station in the flow for a few seconds, the fish made a series of heavy head-shakes before kiting out into the channel with such power that I began to question whether I had in fact hooked a salmon. However, the fight then changed character as the fish rose in the water column and 'porpoised' three times in a row back towards me – it was definitely a

grayling, and a huge one at that.

The battle continued for what felt like half an hour, but in reality was more like three minutes, with the fish hanging doggedly in the main flow and occasionally thrashing on the surface in its bid to shake the hook.

Just as I was muttering through gritted teeth: "Please don't throw the hook," Dougal appeared on the bank behind me.

"You got one already?" he said. "Yes mate, and it's massive. Get the net."

As Dougal got into position, I pointed the rod tip at the surface and swept the rod upstream – a tactic used to land fish in strong flows – before, agonisingly, everything went slack. I stood there in a daze. I'd just lost the biggest grayling I'd ever seen and there was little I could do but turn the air blue.

**Second chances**

With my composure eventually regained, we began to work our way downstream, picking up the occasional out-of-season brown trout along the way, until eventually we reached an overhanging oak tree underneath which the surface had taken on a more glassy, flat appearance, as the current eased and the depth increased slightly. ▶



Trotting in often fast, choppy water requires floats with large-domed, easily visible sight tips



A useful apron or bait pouch enables you to keep essential bait and tackle within easy reach



You can trot with a fixed spool reel, but in quick flows a centrepin affords superior float control



For a successful day fishing all you need is hooks, small swivels, shot and a couple of floats

When fishing for grayling I always like to sprinkle maggots like confetti across the width of the channel, as I think this encourages the fish to dart about picking up baits, throwing them a little bit more off their guard.

Having tossed a small handful into the swim, I baited my hook with two red maggots, and as I did so heard the unmistakable sound of a fish breaking the surface close by. Looking around, I saw nothing, so introduced some more loosefeed. After a few seconds of studying the water to pick the line I was going to run the float along, I saw a fish boil about a rodlength downstream. Shallowing up the float, I let the current take it away off the rod tip, and no sooner had it settled and begun its course, it buried from view.

With a flick of the wrist I set the hook, and was met with the unmistakable head shaking of another good grayling.

As always, for the first few minutes the fish was in control but, gradually, I began to make ground. With each run the fish made I applied a little more pressure on the centrepin with my thumb, only allowing it to take line an inch at a time.

After what seemed like an age, with me

on tenterhooks the whole time praying that everything wasn't going to go slack for a second time, the fish made a final lunge before being scooped up in the net.

### Extraordinary fish

Big grayling look highly impressive in the water, but out of it they're just extraordinary, and at 2lb 4oz this fish was no exception. Contrasting against the burnished oranges and browns of the late autumn landscape, the steely silver of its flank was a stark contrast.

The grayling's appearance is unique among native British species – with a big, bulbous eye, down-turned mouth, sail-like dorsal and a pectoral fin that looks just like a butterfly wing, so vividly patterned with crimson and black.

After resting my hard-earned prize facing into the current for a minute or two, she was fit to go, and with a rapid flash of the tail, was soon back among the bedrock of the Irfon's depths.

We continued to fish the glassy run for a while, before trying a number of other spots along this most beautiful of rivers, only packing up when we could barely see our floats.

Although the heartbreak of losing the monster earlier was still in the back of my mind, it was gradually eased throughout the afternoon by a run of good fish, with Dougal and I taking a further six grayling between 1lb 14oz and just over 2lb, along with several more 'lumps' lost during the course of battle, before it was time to call it a day.

Needless to say, as we drove back over the border, we were already beginning to look forward to next year's pilgrimage to the River Irfon in search of another memorable experience.

Regardless of what we catch, in those surroundings, I can almost guarantee it will be.



### Fish the River Irfon

Adam and Dougal were fishing on the River Irfon at Llanwrtyd Wells. For enquiries about tickets and accommodation in the area, log on to [www.wyeuskfoundation.org](http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org) or [www.cammarch.com](http://www.cammarch.com). Adam Fisher is available for guiding in the area. See the website [www.anglingdreams.co.uk](http://www.anglingdreams.co.uk) for more information.



Grayling are an extraordinary hard-fighting species displaying glorious colours



RIVER STRETCHES TO FISH FOR....

# Guaranteed grayling action!

Looking for some guaranteed trotting sport, no matter what the weather is doing? Try one of these stretches to get a bend in your float rod from a big grayling

#### RIVER WEAR – Durham city centre

The city centre free fishing stretch is well worth a go, with big chub on offer as well as the grayling. Try The Baths area and Feren's Bridge, fishing waggler or stick float with maggot and caster. You'll catch lots of roach and dace.

**Tickets:** Free fishing

**More info:** Cleveland Angling Centre (01642 677000)

#### RIVER CALDER – Mirfield, West Yorkshire

Head for the stretch above Pear Tree Inn Bridge, and fish the stick float or waggler. The area below the Ship Inn Bridge down to the bend is also well worth a go for fish to over 2lb.

**Tickets:** £3 a day from local tackle shops.



The River Calder at Mirfield is a picturesque stretch with a wide variety of species present

**More info:** Call tickets officer Dave Taylor (07887 712823) or Calder Angling Supplies (01484 711063). Alternatively log on to the club's website at [www.mirfieldac.co.uk](http://www.mirfieldac.co.uk)

#### RIVER DERWENT – Matlock Bath, Derbyshire

The stretch starts at the Midland Hotel and runs through the town and park before ending at the Willersley boundary walk. Park on South or North Parade and walk down past the tourist board to the footbridge, where you cross to the East bank.

**Tickets:** Annual tickets to controlling club Matlock AC cost £40

**More info:** Alfreton Angling Centre (01773 832611)

#### RIVER ITCHEN – Winchester, Hampshire

A lengthy free section of picturesque river which runs from the town centre of Winchester (where Durgate Place, Wales Street and Water Lane meet) all the way down to St Catherines Lock. Grayling typically run from 1lb to 2lb-plus.

**Tickets:** Free fishing

**More info:** Poingdestres 02380 510077

#### RIVER TEST – Timsbury, Hampshire

Not the cheapest day ticket on offer, but arguably the most picturesque. Fishery comprises access to around two and a half miles of the River Test plus numerous carrier streams. As well as big grayling, the stretch also boasts huge roach and good numbers of other species.

**Tickets:** £20 per day

**More info:** [www.timsburyfishing.co.uk](http://www.timsburyfishing.co.uk)

#### RIVER SEVERN

**Newtown, Powys, Wales**

Environment Agency-run fishery at Penarth, just outside Newtown. Free fishing from left bank for 550m downstream. To access, drive east on the B4658 for 1.2km from Newtown, then take a right turn (signposted Glan Hafren) to the water works.

**Tickets:** Free fishing

**More info:** call 01743 272828

#### RIVER FROME – Wareham, Dorset

Free fishing from the footpath on the stretch of the Frome from the bridge down to where the river becomes tidal just before it meets the sea. Huge grayling and roach to 3lb-plus possible. Park in the town or at the quay.

**Tickets:** Free fishing

**More info:** Call the Environment Agency on 01258 456080

#### RIVER ROTHER – North Mill, Midhurst, West Sussex

Three-quarters of a mile of river fishing owned by Rother Angling Club upstream on North bank, including Mill Pool. Access is from Rotherfield Pond via a path. This leads to a wooded area and then into a second field. Fishing from permanent pegs only.

**Tickets:** £6 a day from The Tuck Shop in Midhurst, and the Post Office in Eastbourne

**More info:** [www.rotherac.co.uk](http://www.rotherac.co.uk)