

A walk on the wild side

Many idyllic river stretches that used to be 'game fishing only' are now available to coarse anglers. Adam Fisher visits one such gem...

Words Mark Parker Photography Mick Rouse



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We meet up with Adam Fisher and his mate Dougal Ziegler to explore an untapped stretch of the River Irfon, which is now available to day-ticket anglers

AT FIRST glance the wild and rugged River Irfon looks a challenging prospect to fish, but for those adventurous enough to take it on, the rewards can be considerable.

Previously an exclusive playground for salmon anglers, this slice of fishing heaven is now open to coarse rods, offering day-ticket visitors the chance to enter an unspoilt world where memorable catches are on the cards.

Big grayling are the main target, with fish of 2lb-plus relatively common, three-pounders a definite possibility and 4lb giants not unheard of. Some believe the river has the potential to smash the British record for the species.

Reason enough then for Adam Fisher and his friend Dougal Ziegler to spend a day treading its banks. To see what the boys could uncover, we joined them for a mobile session spent trotting with maggots.

Wild Welsh waters

From its source in the Cambrian Mountains, the Irfon winds its way through a National Nature Reserve before eventually emptying into the River Wye at Builth Wells.

With both Adam and Dougal being based near the Welsh borders, the two friends had enjoyed the majority of their 'boy's own' adventures on the River Wye down the years, but that all changed when Adam suggested giving the nearby Irfon a go.

Both had known about the river for years and, as a fisheries consultant for the Wye & Usk Foundation, Adam was instrumental



The Irfon is a mix of fast shallows, glides and deep pools, all of which hold fish

Adam and Dougal's tackle

Rod: Adam – Hardy Marksman Specialist Float 11ft 10in: "Very light and with a forgiving tip, perfect for hooking and playing grayling."

Dougal – Maver Italica 12ft match rod

Reel: Adam – Okuma Aventa centrepin: "Ten years old, still going strong."

Dougal – TF Gear centrepin

Mainline: Both used Maxima 4lb

Hooklinks: Both used Drennan Red Maggot hooks to nylon. Adam says: "I like the hook shape, and using ready-tied rigs is a good idea when your hands are really cold"

Floats: Dave Harrell stick floats and mixed Drennan Loafers



in securing a few beats for coarse anglers along what was previously a 'closed shop'.

"It was always known as a 'locals only' water, most often frequented by dedicated wild-trout anglers," Adam explained.

"The grayling potential has only really been unearthed since the Foundation got involved, and we started coarse fishing it with trotting tactics. Until then, the fish had only been targeted on the fly."

On the day we met up with the Adam and Dougie, the river looked in tremendous nick but, as Adam explained, our meeting had been timed to coincide with one of the Irfon's calmer moods.

"As a spate river, the levels can rapidly shoot up after rain. It can rise by as much as three feet in an hour, but drains off quickly and can be back to normal levels within two days, while nearby rivers like the Severn and Wye will still be in flood," said Adam.

"It's a truly wild water but, as long as you treat it with respect and keep tuned in to what the weather is doing, you can enjoy a magical day catching loads of fish in stunning surroundings."

Chasing the ladies

The first beat of the day the lads chose to tackle was a surprisingly slow-moving, almost canalised stretch, around 15 yards

wide. The nearside bank offered a beach of shale pebbles to fish from, with the water slowly deepening towards the opposite bank, which was tree-lined and presented numerous perfect 'lying-up' spots for the grayling to hold station while waiting for the river to offer up its bounty of natural food.

Adam and Dougal started the day standing calf-deep in the water's edge, both opting for a similar tackle set-up. Float rods of 13ft had been paired with centrepin reels loaded with 4lb Maxima mainline, and suspended on this were large, heavily-shotted floats.

"The beauty of grayling fishing is that once you find a shoal, it's easy to get them feeding readily on a few bronze maggots," said Dougal as he sent a pinch of grubs into the head of the run with his catapult.

"After that, it's just a case of letting your float run down at the pace of the current, holding back occasionally to allow the maggots, presented in ones or twos on size 16 hooks, to flutter enticingly in the current.

"As you can see, there's little finesse in the rigs we're using. The float will be anything from a 6BB to a four swan Chubber or Avon float, depending on the speed of the flow, with around 95 per cent of the shot bulked a foot or so off the bottom. This keeps the bait down in the zone where the grayling expect to see it."

"The beauty of grayling is that once you find a shoal it's easy to get them feeding"

Fishing the pool for the next couple of hours, the two lads' concentration on the dots of orange heading downstream was only broken when a brisk strike was needed to set a hook into a grayling's bony mouth.

Dougal was the first to tempt a decent-sized 'lady of the stream' – as grayling are sometimes called – with a stunning fish around 2lb which twisted and turned all the way to the net as it attempted to throw the hook with a turbocharged display of defiance typical of the species.

After having its picture taken, the fish was held in the water to ensure it had regained all its strength, before being allowed to sink once more into the pool's depths.

In a bid to stay in touch with the rest of the shoal, Adam and Dougal continued to drip-



2lb-plus grayling are on the cards, with 3lb-4lb giants a possibility

feed maggots a couple of times every minute, slowly edging their way downstream after every trot in order to cover more water.

"By feeding, trotting, moving and re-feeding, a long beat can be covered in a short space of time, particularly if there are two of you fishing," said Adam.

"It's easy to cover a couple of miles in a single day, as all you need to carry is the bait, rod, landing net and your terminal gear."

Continuing in this fashion, the lads continued to catch steadily, although for a while they failed to produce a grayling anywhere near the size of Dougal's first fish.

Not to be outdone, Adam dug deep and, seconds before a move was on the cards, he landed a 2lb specimen of his own top pull level with Dougal.

Working downstream

On the following beats the Irfon was quite different in character, being far shallower than the earlier stretch, with long, rippling white-water rapids interspersed by the occasional deep, dark pool.

Both banks of the river were heavily eroded and had collapsed in places, showing signs of years of exposure to flash flooding. This had left oak trees perching precariously on the edge of the river, their jade green, heavily-mossed roots fully exposed.

Both lads began their trots at the head of a pool, Dougal opting for a line three rodlengths out, while Adam was content to explore the inside line where the flow was a little slower.

As they were using heavily-shouldered ▶

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floats with large sight tops the boys were able to trot the full length of the pool, a run of some 50 yards or more.

Adam revealed how the head or far end of such pools often prove to be the most likely areas to pick up grayling, as that's where much of the natural food gathers in the gravel. That's not to say that they can't be caught in the deeper areas, of course.

Dougal and Adam maintained their regime of introducing a regular trickle of maggots to encourage the grayling to actively compete for food, although Adam was keen to point out that sometimes it pays to deviate from the normal plan.

"As well as keeping the feed going in, it's also a good tactic to occasionally stop feeding altogether," he explained.

"They are wild fish and so can occasionally spook off anglers' baits. By putting a single or double maggot hookbait through for a couple of runs with no freebies you will often get the biggest fish of the day. I think this works because they are used to plucking single food items out of the flow at speed when they are feeding naturally."

The lads continued to fish until the



A centrepin reel comes into its own when trotting

setting sun turned the sky into a riot of reds, oranges, greys and blues over the distant hills, and the 'last cast' of the day had been extended to the inevitable two dozen.

As the session finally drew to a close, it was agreed that the River Irfon had been in a generous mood, offering up plenty of superb grayling, including a handful around the 2lb mark.

Sadly, the much-feted three and four-pounders the river holds would have to wait for another day.

Such is the wild and untapped nature of this gem of a waterway, it's sure to produce something special before long.

Take the plunge yourself and, who knows, the angler making the headlines could be you!



Grayling are among the most elegant of British fish species

How you can fish the venue

Adam and Dougal fished the River Irfon at Cefnlltysgwynne, which offers two miles of double bank fishing and one mile of single bank fishing. For the price of a day ticket each, you and two friends can have exclusive access to the entire stretch, which boasts 18 named pools from which to target the grayling. For more information on booking day tickets, log on to the website www.wyeuskfoundation.org