ON THE OXFORD CANAL

Words
HENRY HUGHES

A battered blue narrowboat parts the early mist under a stone bridge and chugs up the Oxford Canal in south central England, "Lyra" painted on a plaque. "After the roach, are you?" asks the bearded, pipe-smoking boatman, accompanied by his plump tabby cat.

"Aye," I reply with a smile. "And his brother, the bream." The man chuckles and nods.

Long married to Britain through my wife, Chloë, born and raised in Kidlington, I return often to these waters. Britain's canals and rivers, used for irrigation in the Roman era and developed into a transportation system during the Industrial Revolution, span 4,700 miles, though their use today is largely recreational.

The Oxford Canal, dug in the late 1700s to accommodate coal barges towed by oxen, horses and men from Coventry, runs nearly 80 miles over 46 locks, past medieval churches, through lush countryside and idyllic villages into the heart of Oxford. And it's full of fish.

"Coarse fish," as they're called in Britain—carp, bream, roach, dace, chub, perch and pike—flourish in these sluggish cuts, often weed-bordered and shaded under alder and willow. The canal averages 20 feet wide with a depth of 6 to 10 feet, with larger basins that serve as marinas.

"Been ages since I've seen someone with a centerpin," says a man at the tiller of a weathered barge cluttered with bicycles, potted geraniums and bird feeders. "Had one as a lad."

"It's a fly rod," I reply, holding it out.

"Well, that's a rarity around here," he smiles.

"Good to see someone flyfishing," a woman says as I pass her tidy, cheerful barge, intricately painted in the Roses and Castles style. "We're going to Scotland in August for grayling and trout," she tells me.

"Wonderful," I say, bending to pet her friendly black cat.

Although popular in Britain, fishing is closely regulated and public access is limited. Most canals remain open year-round, and no one seems to mind if you're fishing. For this trip, I walked into Ace Tackle & Bait in Kidlington to purchase a $12 permit from the Kidlington Angling Society, which afforded me several miles of legal bank access close to Chloë's family home.

On a July morning, I walk the worn towpath, casting a chironomid under an indicator. Finger-sized bream and rudd peck at the fly. Placing the rig a few inches from the far bank elicits a couple more nips. Then the indicator plunges. A silvery flash jukes around the weeds, surrendering along the mossy bulkhead. It's a common bream, so slimy I can hardly grasp it. I pop out the fly, let it go and wipe my hands on the cuff of my pants.

"Snotty as eels, aren't they?" a woman's voice startles me from behind. "Best to have an old tea towel handy."

I smile at the heavyset, gray-haired early bird, her two terriers eyeing me warily. "Good advice," I say. "You've had some experience." She asks where I'm from. She and her husband live on their barge most of the year. One of the dogs strains to sniff my pant leg.

Canal fishing is lively and social. People stop and chat, inquiring about my gear and success, sharing stories about 4-pound bream, arm-long pike or the controversial zander, which can grow to 20 pounds. The European zander, a relative of North America's walleye and sauger, were introduced into the United Kingdom in the late 1800s. Although prized for their delicious, flaky white flesh, these hardy piscivores have spread through the canals and lowland rivers, hunting effectively in murky water, and gorging on coarse fish as well as sea trout smolts when their paths cross. It's illegal to return a caught zander to the canal. Working a streamer one evening last summer, I caught a 2-pounder that impressed me with its smoky marble eyes and vampire teeth.

When the sun gets high, I cast under the Sparrowgap Bridge, a limestone archway echoing with cooing pigeons and splashes of feeding fish. A size-16 Adams goes ignored. Then I slow-retrieve a small nymph and hook a 12-inch chub that proves scrappy.

After another chub and a couple more perch, a passing barge churns up a brown cloud of silt that turns off the bite. The fish are accustomed to this and usually return to business in a few minutes. Sometimes, however, the action stops dead, no matter what fly I try.

Another angler tramps down the towpath pushing a large cart of tactical gear. "This is a great swim," he says.

"You're welcome to it," I wave a hand over the quiet water. "Haven't had a hit in ages."

He introduces himself as Sam and begins unsheathing rods and unfolding contraptions—a titanium chair, an 8-foot net, a match-style accordion keep net, an enormous tackle box and a delicatessen of bait, including worms, maggots, casters, squats and pinkies. "Tip your fly with one of these," he says, pointing to a compartment of wriggling red maggots.

Hesitating for a moment, then remembering Hemingway fly-casting grasshoppers, I pierce a soft maggot over an Ice Cream Cone chironomid, loop on an indicator, and make a short cast under the bridge. In seconds I'm into a hand-sized roach and Sam laughs. "You'll see," he says. "We'll drop some chopped worms and bread flake in this swim and get things going."

Chumming is a traditional ethical tactic in British coarse fishing. Not wanting to offend, I stick around for a bit more action. After landing a dozen roach, bream and perch with my maggot-tipped fly, I tie on a Clouser, thinking a predatory pike or zander may be crashing the party. On my second retrieve, something big nails the fly. I feel the head shakes, but it's gone. "Bugger," Sam exclaims. "Probably a pike or zander. I'll get him tonight on a spoon."

At noon, Chloë meets me with a picnic basket and we stretch out on soft green grass in the village of Thrupp and enjoy bottles of cider, a bag of Walkers crisps and coronation chicken sandwiches. A pair of swans glides by, bees hum in a radiant patch of daisies, and a kingfisher rachets across the sunny water. It's the epitome of pastoral angling, and we don't mind when another barge, Jellicle Moon, pulls up. The pilot, Tim, is a fellow cat lover, T.S. Eliot fan and angler. He asks what patterns worked best. "The maggot-tipped ones," I say.

"Then I've been using the right ones," he laughs back.

‹LEFT TO RIGHT›

The common bream is one of Britian's most popular "coarse fish." This slimy specimen (which might be a bream-roach hybrid) took a chironomid dangled close to the bottom. Canal fishing can be lively, but it can also die when the sun gets high and boats churn up the ancient sediment. Photo: Henry Hughes

In the Oxfordshire hamlet of Thrupp, these reedy canal banks hold lots of fish if you can sneak in a cast between narrowboats. "Don't hook my cat," one woman cautioned with a smile. Canal fishing is often social, with nearly everyone friendly to anglers, especially to the "odd bloke" brandishing a fly rod. "So nice to see someone flyfishing," was a common greeting. Photo: Chloë Hughes