



The National Anguilla Club

BULLETIN

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The National Anguilla Club, 1969

EDITORIAL

In the November Editorial, we saw how wide is the diversity of opinion about the sporting merits of eel-fishing: from Eric Parker's amusing notion that nobody would want to fish for eels deliberately, to Maurice Ingham's view (which we happen to share) that it can hold its own with almost any other sort of fishing.

Well, these are essentially matters of opinion, and every man is entitled to his own. It is inevitable that there should be a wide variety of viewpoints in such matters. More than that, it is highly desirable: it would be a dull world, indeed, if our opinions were all cast in the same mould - worse, there would be far too many eel-fishers around!

The point I was trying to illustrate with the January selection of quotations is that ideas are just as diverse, or even more so, on the relative merits of different baits. We have almost everything imaginable recommended to us, from Dame Juliana's 'grete angylltwyтч' (whatever's that, in heaven's name?) to dead fish, live fish, worms, shellfish, offal - virtually everything save only the proverbial kitchen sink.

One or two members wrote to say that they had enjoyed reading the quotations but nobody seemed to have been struck by the unsatisfactory state of affairs they reveal. And it would be easy, of course, to produce further lists of 'quotations from the experts' about every factual aspect of eel-fishing, just as full of contradictions as the one about baits. Are we, perhaps, in danger of being mesmerised by the constant repetition of contradictions into regarding this state of chaos as natural and acceptable; or into just not noticing it; or worst of all, into thinking of it as being, in some way, the right and proper state for angling to be in?

I wonder whether it would be so easy, or even possible at all, to collect together such lists of contradictory statements about some factual aspect of gardening, say, or photography? I think not; I don't think gardeners or photographers would tolerate such a situation for a day.

Of course, it is much easier to test the truth of statements about most things than is the case with angling. However, the Report on our work together in 1967 and 1968, in the last issue, seems to me to show two things; firstly, that it is, indeed, difficult to arrive at angling truths; and secondly, that although it is difficult, it is not impossible. The Report is based on our own experience, carefully observed, and objectively and quantitatively recorded, of the capture of nearly 500 eels in over 20,000 rod-hours of angling.

We can draw some conclusions from our combined experience with fair confidence; others we can draw only with many reservations, at this stage. And bearing in mind these many reservations despite the massive weight of our joint experience, is it not fair to ask how many of the statements we find in the eel angler's literature were based on the capture of 500 eels, or anything approaching it? And how many are based on any sort of objective and quantitative records?

The answer to these questions, without doubt, is 'very few, if any'. I do not mean that unkindly; in the past, there has been no alternative to speculating, as thoughtfully as one was able, from one's own personal experience. We all know how misleading personal experience can be - not only because it is necessarily limited, but also because the human memory has a knack of recalling only what it is 'convenient' to remember for the purposes of argument! Still, speculation has a vital and enjoyable role to play - and those with a taste for it can now base their speculations on the full weight of the whole Club's experience, as embodied in the Report. I believe this will be increasingly fruitful - and that we shall enjoy a lot of fun and good fellowship, as well as better fishing, while we are about it.

FIRST SESSIONS AND HOLDING PLACES: V

by Chris Bowyer

I think that whether or not it is worth a second or third visit to a spot that has produced good eels depends on the type of water one fishes.

Firstly, anyone who keeps tropical fishes knows that they are territorial and defend a small area of their own in the tank. I think it is possible that big eels behave similarly in their natural surroundings, occupying perhaps some 20 yd. or so of territory - at least, in some waters. For this reason, I should not be surprised if Ray Brown's experiences on canals turned out to be the general rule, and that locks, tunnels, etc. would prove to be preferential holding places. These places have a relatively small area and would not be expected to hold large numbers of eels, so I should think it would be the best bet to move after (say) a couple of sessions to another likely spot on the canal.

Turning now to Geoff. Swailes' observation that 1967 was a good year at Thrapston while 1968 was a poor year, it could be that this another water where the eels have a tendency to be extremely territorial. If my guess that big eels occupy about 20 yd. of territory is about right, and if Thrapston has an even bottom with no definite 'swims', and especially if food is scarce, then the big eels could well cover their entire territory and possibly a good deal more in search of food, and chase out any smaller eels that happen to venture into it.

As one cannot cover many such 20 yd. areas from any one pitch, especially when casting into the deeper water, I would think it wise to move on after (say) the second session, with waters like Thrapston.

The waters I have fished for eels during the last 10 years were ponds, old gravel and clay pits, etc., which have channels of various depths in them. Some of these channels with rugged sides have an enormous ground area, and I have found these are the hot spots at times, holding large numbers of big eels. I have formed the impression that these channels are most promising at depths of 15 to 30 ft. One example of this occurred some years ago when I took a considerable number of big eels from a water which had a long, narrow channel ranging from 15 to 30 ft. in depth down one side of the lake, and turning out at right angles to a large basin of some 45 ft. depth at the centre of the lake. Eels were taken at all depths along the channel, but the hot spot was at about 30 ft. The deep basin held big eels as I hooked a couple of whoppers there, but they were few and far between. In contrast, I tried many other spots in this lake, where the bottom was more or less even, and never had a single run.

There are also two other lakes which Alan Hawkins, Arthur Smith and I fished this last year, and once again the hot spots seemed to be in the channels. One of these is Knottsford Nook which is relatively shallow, with a number of channels 6 to 8 ft. deep running from one side of the lake to a central basin about 20 ft. deep and some 100 yd. out. The runs seemed to become more frequent, the further one cast up these channels, perhaps suggesting that the eels live in the 20 ft. deep basin and work their way up the channels in search of food.

The second water, a small pond at West Cowick, is about 90 yd. long and like a boomerang in shape. It is mainly shallow round the margin with deep holes here and there, but with the main shallows at either end. One end runs into the deeps (about 20 ft.) but at the other end, there is a sudden drop about 15 yd. out into the deeps, forming a marked ridge. Fishing the end with the gradual drop, Arthur Smith had two runs on dead-bait and one eel going 3:2. In contrast, Alan Hawkins and myself, fishing the end with the sudden drop, had

many runs, sometimes two at a time, on both worms and dead-baits in the deep channel. We both missed a number of runs on both baits for no apparent reason, but we did manage to land quite a few to 3:14. It is interesting that the dead-bait Alan cast into the shallows did not get a take all night. Again this seems to show that, in this pond as in the others we fish, the eels have a certain liking for the deep ridge which forms a sort of channel.

I do not say that deep channels are the only places which produce eels, but in my opinion they do seem to be the hot spots.

FIRST SESSIONS AND HOLDING PLACES: VI

by Bob Jones

I feel that the holding place and surrounding territory are possibly paramount factors in the capture of big eels. My own belief is that the territories overlap, so that one may have five or six or many more fish of (say) 2 lb. and under to every one of 3 lb.-plus. If this is so, then the chances of catching the largest fish in an area are immediately reduced to 6+ to 1 against. Whilst territories may overlap, I also think it is possible that each eel has an area round its holt which is exclusive to itself.

The pattern of eel runs seem to me to support this, on the assumption that the initial run indicates the eel's return to its holt from some part of its territory; after swallowing the bait, the second run occurs, perhaps indicating further search in the area for more food.

At times, we find that many runs are abortive; in fact, 'twitch bites' would be a good description. I wonder if these result because the bait has been cast very close to the eel's holt? If the holt of a very large specimen could be located, then the bait could be dropped straight to the fish. It might be practicable to do this on clear, shallow lakes, canals and some rivers. If it can ever be arranged, I shall certainly give it a try in the shallower parts of Greystone Lake.

Incidentally, the recent mention of eels eating cheese (Bull., 5, 54) recalled a visit to the Widdford Trust at Slimbridge, Glos. I noticed a lot of dead roach in the pools and subsequent investigation revealed the presence of a few very large carp in one very small pool. I quickly obtained some bread and rushed to the pool to feed them. They were there, all right, and four beautiful mirrors, all over 20 lb., were soon taking crust. Before I realised what was happening, there appeared seven eels of about 3 lb. or so, all taking crust with loud 'cloops'. I was fascinated by this and watched spellbound for about half an hour, until my bread was used up.

Apart from this, I have only experienced an eel taking crust once before. This was when fishing a pool in Somerset for carp. I had a take which resulted in the capture of a $2\frac{3}{4}$ lb. eel. What about floating baits for eels?

** Floating baits for eels, Bob? See Phil Shatford's contribution in Bull., 5, 57. There's nothing new under the sun! Incidentally, I have many times proposed the direct approach to big eel location by skin diving - and why not? Whether one could reasonably hope to pull out a big eel which took a bait whilst actually in its hidey-hole is another matter, though! - Ed.

CHEESE AS BAIT

by Walter Spencer

The news item about Mr. W.A. Ramsey feeding eels with cheese (Bull., 5, 54) and the comments in the Correspondence section of the same issue do not surprise me in the least. I have long been aware of the aromatic and attractive qualities of this bait in the pursuit of eels.

For two months in 1968, I used cheese exclusively as bait, trying out pieces of solid cheese of strong blends, principally English Cheddar, and paste made from this and also from cream cheese. I found that that the cubes of solid cheese tended to become fragmented and leave the hook, either upon casting or upon impact with the water. On the other hand, the pastes solidified when immersed in water, and proved hopeless for the purpose - looking for all the world like rejected scraps of soap and I am sure just as appetising to the eels.

Eventually, I tried mixing the strong Cheddar with the soft cream cheese, and this solved the problem, making up into a soft aromatic bait which cast well, clinging to the hook in flight, yet was soft enough to leave the hook on the retrieve or the strike. Thus, I felt confident in covering the hook completely, barb and all, with this mixture.

Once I had decided on this mixture, I settled down to give it a trial and put in approximately 200 hours of fishing in a drain at its confluence with the River Hull. The area was figuratively boiling with bootlaces ranging in weight from about $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. to 1 lb.

I fished this spot steadily, using a knob of paste the size of a small walnut. It struck me that my sons, fishing by my side and using a small lobworm on a size 8 hook, were pulling out eels of $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. to 6 oz. at a steady rate of 5 or 6 each hour, whereas I was getting fewer bites - usually 1 or 2 per hour, sometimes less - but at no time did I take an eel of less than 8 oz. Out of 25 eels taken on cheese, only three were 8 oz., five were 10 oz., eight were 12 oz. and the remaining nine were in the 14-16 oz. range. At no time have I caught an eel over 1 lb., but my catches on cheese paste far outweighed those on worm in the same drain.

What puzzled me then, as now, is why the smaller eels of 2 - 4 oz. did not go for the bait. I should be interested to know of any suggestions on this.

Examination of stomach contents showed that several of the eels (those above 10 oz.) had picked up knobs of cheese which had fallen from the hook on the retrieve. One such eel had five knobs of cheese, all in good condition. At the time, I was using size 8 long-shank hooks, but I am now wondering if a golf ball-sized piece of cheese paste on a size 1 or 1/0 hook might prove to be the downfall of the larger eels, and I should be interested in comments on this.

Possibly, it would be worth a group effort to try to establish the value of cheese as a major bait. (If so, I hope members will 'Back Britain' and use English cheese!)

** No rod-hours have been recorded on cheese baits in our session reporting during 1967 and 1968, and we therefore have no objective evidence at all about its possible merits. A group investigation, preferably by the method set out in the 'Unusual Baits Project', would be most valuable. The eels in my tank eat cheese readily (though they do not seem to digest it well, and it causes a copious excretion) but I would judge they find broken worms the more attractive. Incidentally, one obvious possibility is that the difference between Walter's and his sons' results might be a simple bait-size effect (Bull., 5, 71). - Ed.

THE FEEDING OF EELS

by Terence Coulson

In a previous contribution (Bull., 5, 49), I suggested that when a big eel decides to feed, it often gorges itself, if it can, and then lies up for several days digesting its meal, before feeding again. There seems to be some doubt about the validity of this, and because it is relevant to questions of practical tactics (as the discussion on First Sessions and Holding Places has shown) it is worthwhile outlining some of the main reasons I had for offering the suggestion.

The first question to look into is what is known about the rate at which eels digest their food. Zoological knowledge about this does not seem to be as complete and detailed as one might wish, but what is known has been conveniently summarised for anglers by Dr. V.R.P.Sinha ('Fishing', 9.4.65, p. 6). Briefly, at 12°C (about 54°F) small food items such as larvae and leeches were still easily recognisable in the stomachs of small eels upwards of 10 hours after being eaten, and in rather larger eels, stickleback and flatfish were only slightly digested after 7 hours. In Australian eels, food has been found to remain in the stomach for 24 to 36 hours. Whilst we should like to know in more definite terms how long it takes an eel of angling size to digest a fish weighing an ounce or two, and how the rate of digestion varies with water temperature, it is worth noting that Dr. Sinha's conclusion was that eels' digestion is 'not very rapid'.

Whilst I would not give any great weight to this observation, it is certainly true that the eels in my aquarium often feed until their bodies are visibly swollen, and I have many times noted that this swelling persisted for 24 hours, and not uncommonly for 48 hours, after feeding with maggots, worms or steak. I have also examined the stomach contents of eels 12 hours, and even up to about 18 hours after capture (the eels having remained alive in the meantime) and found fish very little digested and still entirely identifiable as to species. I offer these superficial observations for what they are worth; at least, they are consistent with Dr. Sinha's conclusion and perhaps give some additional reason for thinking that with European eels, as with Australian eels, substantial items of food such as fish take upwards of 24 hours to be digested.

Although we should like to know more about it, this seems a reasonable basis from which to work. If correct, it means that if, during a night's fishing, we catch an eel which proves to have an empty stomach, then it is reasonable to infer that the eel did not feed during the previous night, at least.

In fact, in our Stomach Contents Project in 1968 (Bull., 5, 75) we found that 54% of the eels examined had empty stomachs. Evidence that this is a valid finding is provided by the work of Dr. Sinha and Dr. Jones, reviewed in Bull., 5, 22. It therefore seems a reasonable inference that about half of the eels we caught in 1968 had not fed during the previous 24 hours or more.

Our second conclusion of relevance from this Project was that about 10% of the eels caught had two or more fish in the stomach (counting in the bait fish). How many more fish these eels might have pouched, and how many of the eels with previously empty stomachs might have gone on to eat a number of fish, if we had not caught them, is a matter of conjecture. However, it is clear that our figure of 10% is very much a minimum estimate, and we are justified in concluding that a fair proportion of eels are prepared to take aboard several prey fish, once they start feeding. There are one or two examples amongst our reports of quite remarkable meals having been eaten. For example,

one eel of 1:0 which I caught (not surprisingly, on lobworm!) on 22.9.68 had already pouched no less than four roach, each about $2\frac{3}{4}$ " long.

Taken overall, therefore, the facts and inferences outlined above seem to me to imply just the general type of feeding habit I suggested: namely, that eels often gorge themselves (i.e. eat several prey fish) and then spend a period of 24 hours or more to digest and void the meal before feeding again. Unless the eels' digestion is much more rapid than seems to be the case, it is difficult indeed to reconcile the pattern of stomach contents we have found with the idea that they feed virtually every night.

A further inference can be drawn from the results of our Project. Taking the 30 eels in the 0 - 1 lb. range, only 10 (33%) had empty stomachs. In contrast, taking the 13 eels upwards of 2 lb. in weight, 10 (77%) had empty stomachs. The implication seems to be that small eels feed much more frequently, and are more likely to be found with some food in the stomach, than the large eels. If this is correct, then eels behave like many other species in that the small individuals feed frequently, and the large ones intermittently.

One other important point is that the rate of digestion in fish, and the frequency with which they feed, depends upon the water temperature. Our own results on the effect of water temperature on rate-of-catch, although not yet complete, amply demonstrate the importance of these effects in the case of eels.

Coming back, now, to our original question of tactics, all of the above adds up to the conclusion that big eels are not to be expected to feed every night; and there is reason to suppose that the bigger the eel, the less often it feeds. It would therefore be unwise to abandon a promising 'spot' after a single unproductive session, as a general rule.

It seems to me less easy to generalise about how many sessions it is worth devoting to a 'spot' before making a move. To suggest two, or three, or any other number of sessions seems to me to be picking numbers out of thin air. It is a matter for careful judgement in the light of all the circumstances at the time. For example, if some results have already been obtained on the water, the rate-of-catch should be taken into account; because obviously, the lower the rate-of-catch expected, the less justification there is for a move after a blank or two. Similarly, water temperature should be taken into account; one or two blanks in the upper sixties might be considered ample justification for a move, whereas the same blanks in the lower fifties provide less justification for a move.

Twitch Bites: By way of addendum, it may be worth putting on record a few comments I made at our Spring General Meeting on the subject of 'twitch' bites, raised again by Bob Jones in this issue (p. 115). The eels in my tank live buried in the gravel (through which, incidentally, they can 'swim' almost as readily as through the water), sometimes completely out of sight, sometimes with the nose showing in a small depression in the gravel, and sometimes with an inch or two of head and body sticking out into the water. When food is introduced, they sometimes (presumably, when they are hungry) immediately emerge and forage for it; and sometimes (presumably, when they are not very hungry) they do not. However, at times when they are not prepared to forage, if live food such as maggot or worm wriggles onto an eels nose in its depression in the gravel, it is usually eaten - and usually so fast as to suggest an actual reflex action. At other times when they are not prepared to forage, they will take an item of food if they can reach it without emerging too far from the gravel. This type of behaviour in nature would obviously produce 'twitch' bites instead of the classic runs - and, incidentally, quite small eels hooked in this way could well account for some 'monster' stories! My eels are good at homing onto the general area of food by scent, but are then clearly quite unable to locate it by sight (when it is on the bottom); instead, the food has to touch the front third or so of the body, which evidently is provided with taste organs. This is one of my reasons for recommending wider trials of baits which might have strongly attractive scent and/or taste - to eels!

Notable Eels: NORFOLK

<u>LOCATION</u>	<u>CLASS</u>	<u>WEIGHT</u>	<u>LENGTH</u>	<u>GIRTH</u>	<u>DATE</u>	<u>TIME</u>	<u>BAIT</u>	<u>CAPTOR</u>	<u>SOURCE</u>
R.Gt.Ouse, Denver Sluice	1.	36:0	68	17 $\frac{1}{4}$	22.10.1867			A.E.Austin	Many sources.
		6:11	42		23 Jun 63		Lobworm	R.English	A.T. 5.7.63, p. 1(P)
Near Norwich	?	20:0+							Many sources.
Near New Mills, Norwich	?	8:8			13.1.1869				E:HTCT; Land & Water.
		7:4							- do. -
R.Thurne	1.	5:0			Aug 54			K.Wall	A.T. 13.8.54, p. 2.
R.Thurne, Candle Dyke	1.3	11:0			1948		Trapped in an eel	M.Brown	J,Wentworth Day,
		9:0			1948		set.	(professional)	'Anglers' Handbook'
		4:2			Sep 64	21.30	4 oz Bream db	G.D.Bowd	NAC Monthly Report.
		4:0+			Sep 64	night		G.D.Bowd	- do. -
Potter Heigham Boatyard	?	5:2			Jul 61		Roach db	A.Hawkins	A.Hawkins
Wroxham Broad	2.1	4:4			Jul 63		Roach db	A.Hawkins	A.Hawkins
Barton Broad	2.1	4:3			Jul 63		Roach db	A.Hawkins	A.Hawkins
Fritton Decoy	2.1	8:8)			1948	day	Roach db	Mr. Ward	J.Wentworth Day,
		6:8)							'Anglers' Handbook'
A broad near Yarmouth	?2.1	7:0					Taken in tench bow-net		E:HTCT, quoting
		6:8							Buckland (1873) and
		6:0							'Land & Water.'
Small pool, Brancaster	2.	5:9 $\frac{1}{2}$			19 Jun 59			A.J.Sutton	A.J.Sutton
		4:1			19 Jun 59		Worm	A.J.Sutton	A.J.Sutton
A pit at Harleston	2.	6:12			Aug 60		Redworm	W.Fordham	A.T. 19.8.60, p. 1
Shingle pits, Dersingham	2.	4:1			Apr 65		Worm	M.English	A.T. 7.5.65
A Norfolk drain	?2.3	30:0			- Maurice Ingham,		'Coarse Fishing with the Experys',	ex J.W.Martin	
A drain, Brancaster	2.3	5:9 $\frac{1}{2}$			18 Jun 59		Mouse	A.J.Sutton	A.J.Sutton
Yarmouth Harbour	3.	eels of 42:0, 32:8, 28:0 & 24:0					- letters by 'Broadlander' in		(F.G. 27.3.26, p.307 (F.G. 30.10.26 p.447

CORRESPONDENCE

THE EEL RECORD

From Bob Jones: Most members will know that my claim for the vacant eel record has been accepted. Nevertheless, I still accept the old record as my target. My justification for the claim is that I want to bring it to the National Anguilla Club. When all is said and done, what is the point of being Britain's most enthusiastic big eel hunters and not having the record to our credit? I am sure most of us would like to think that the Club consists of Britain's best eel anglers, so I think that as a Club we deserve to hold the record.

STOMACH CONTENTS

From Bob Church: Reference Geoff. Swailes' contribution (Bull., 5, 56), practically all the eel stomachs I have examined have contained food (other than the bait) of one kind or another. On the R. Gt. Ouse, they are usually full of bleak. On the G.U.Canal, perch or crayfish. And so on. Geoff is up the creek here, I think!

SWIM STATISTICS

From Alan Hawkins: Most of my fishing in 1968 was experimental, but I did fish several sessions at Knutsford lagoons, on three adjacent and similar swims. For what they are worth, the results were:

<u>Swim No.</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Eels</u>	<u>Weights</u>
1.	6/7 Jul	-	
	3/4 Aug	1	0:15
	17/18 Aug	1	1:6
	31/1 Sep	-	
2.	6/7 Jul	1	3:14
	3/4 Aug	-	
	17/18 Aug	-	
3.	3/4 Aug	-	
	17/18 Aug	3	2:4, 3:0, 0:5
	31/1 Sep	-	

** Many thanks, Alan. With the collection of statistics, every little helps, and this very useful contribution is the only addition I have received to the data I gave (pp. 46, 47 of this volume). Obviously, it is appreciated that if members have not kept the necessary records, the statistics cannot be contributed; that is understood. But in this case, may I venture to suggest that the unaided human memory is a poor servant in these matters, and that there is probably little to be gained by further speculation until we have gathered some reliable facts to work on? - Ed.