

# WINTER CARPING REWARDS

---



A dramatic sunset out of Peg 18 at Rainbow in early January. I take far more pictures in winter than I do in the warmer months.

It's tough to come up with a title that embraces the concept of winter carping. Winter carping can be tough. Compared to periods in the warmer months action can be slow. And, of course, the nights last for ever! But I've been winter carping, on and off, for well over 30 years now, and I get a bigger buzz out of some aspects of it than I do from the more traditional carping of the summer and autumn months. Here's why...



Above: This 45lb common from Rainbow's Peg 18 came during a January week when it was a pleasure to be out on the bank, a near-unique winter experience for me at Rainbow!





The major problem with winter is that you never know in advance whether the fishing is going to be worthwhile or not. You can't prejudge it, and you can't be selective. You just have to do it. Is January the best time to be reminding you of this? Well yes, because there is still a great deal of winter left, and to my mind the true period of winter carping is only just beginning. Up to Christmas is an extension of the autumn. The fishing slows: it might even appear to have come to a stop, but this pronounced pause can often simply mean that the carp have become harder to catch. Winter is permanent scratching time and methods have to reflect that. A sudden cease in buzzer activity can simply mean that the carp have become warier, because they aren't hungry enough to keep being stupid. At the back end of the year their metabolism is slowing down. From Christmas onwards nature is waking up, and although water temperatures are at their lowest the upswing in nature's new-year cycle encourages an air of optimism. It may not happen that session, but sooner or later those big old boys and girls out there are going to become catchable, and I want to be there when that happens.

I've done enough winter fishing to form my own experience-based opinions about it, but along the way the forming of those opinions has been strongly influenced by the experiences and thinking of others, most notably Rod Hutchinson, Martin Clarke and John Harry. One line in a book, or one comment during a slide show, can have far-reaching effects, and these guys have all made comments that have stuck with me, and stood me in good stead, in winter carping.

'Scratching time' is one of Rod's expressions. To me it sums up the whole approach to winter

carping. They're not going to commit suicide: you have got to get inside their heads and earn every bit of action that comes your way. In modern parlance it might be construed as meaning fishing for bites, but that conveys a wrong impression. Much of my winter carping has been a lone pursuit, and I have had to play it off the cuff. If Chilly's bait application works for you and your friends all well and good, but it isn't necessarily the right approach, and bait application is one of the crucial aspects of winter carping, and one that I'll return to shortly.

The other influencing advice from Rod – in Rod Hutchinson's Carp Book I think – concerned the deployment of your time on the bank. You need to be warm, you need to be comfortable, and you need to find ways of filling in the long winter evenings, simply to shorten the long winter nights! Part of Rod's advice was to make a production number of your evening

meal. Spend some time preparing and eating it. I supplement that practice with computer chess, sudokus, crosswords, the radio, and any other mind-occupier that turns the bivvy into a home-from-home during the long, dark nights. If the nights become an enemy

then you won't make it through the winter, and as the major rewards are most likely to come in February and March it is important that you keep going. The dark hours are for listening for movement, occupying your mind and sleeping. The daylight hours are for water-watching and photography, and the images of winter can be as big a reward as any carp activity during the colder months!

To me, enjoying the experience of being at the water is half the battle of any mentally-tough carping, and for that reason my selection of a winter venue is based as much on a liking for the venue as the likely rewards. Many winter-carping articles recommend you fish a well-stocked water where buzzer activity is a probability. I disagree with that. Fish a water you like, and fish for a meaningful target. The more meaningful the target the more inclined you are to look on each brief session as part of the bigger picture. For me winter carping is one long session, fished in instalments.

Each instalment takes me closer to the hoped-for result. Success or failure is measured in terms of how the winter pans out, not the success or failure of each spell at the water.

John 'The Bollocks' Harry's slide-show comment in the mid-'90s stopped me in my tracks because it reflected an aspect

I hadn't considered, and it strengthened my need to be at my chosen venue as often as possible through the colder months. There's much debate as to whether carp hibernate or not in winter, but they certainly

They're not going to commit suicide: you have got to get inside their heads and earn every bit of action that comes your way



Where are they? Location in winter is even more vital than in the summer months. One sighting can mean a session, or even winter's result on a venue.



Seeing one carp resulted in a late March ten-fish catch from Birch, including this common of 32½lb.

slow down, and may well have a longish period – or periods – during which they are virtually sleeping. John's comment was to the effect that when they wake from this sleep and feel like a little feed they can be at their most catchable, and a major result might be on the cards. From memory he even went as far as to say that carp which are not normally considered catchable may make a mistake at this time. Wow! That is some sort of encouragement! Relating it to my own experiences we are not talking a seasonal hibernation here, but a conditions-influenced slumber. The wake-up and resulting little feed can happen at any time, and it can be a thing of hours, or even minutes. Some of my most memorable winter results have occurred when conditions suddenly and dramatically took a turn for the better, and I was in the right place at the right time when it happened. When they do wake up you have to be there to take advantage of it. A change of conditions the following day can see them switching off for a few more days, or weeks, and the chance will have gone.

Martin Clarke's perceptive comment was





Birch Grove in winter. Fishing the water taught me that I could only get away with one introduction of free offerings in each session. Any further introductions were part of the PVA traps.



Apart from the mental aspect – the determination to be there as often as possible, no matter what – I would list location, bait application and presentation as the three most important aspects of cold-water carping

either in an article, or in his book 'Strictly Carp'. The observation related to winter carping on Harefield, where it was Martin's experience that the carp were most likely to be found, or be most willing to feed, over silt. As the advice was at variance with most of the advice you see for the fishing of gravel pits it caught my attention. Much of my winter carping has been done on silty waters where it is unusual for the lead not to penetrate the lakebed, but prior to reading Martin's comment I'd noticed that the harder it was to pull the lead out of the lakebed the more likely it was to be a productive area. Is silt warmer than gravel in winter? Do carp and tench partially bury themselves in a soft bottom during their winter switch-off periods? Are they

inclined to locate in the silty areas in case their natural silt-living food sources become available during the colder months? I don't know, but I do know that the oft-followed advice of finding the harder spots may not hold true in winter. Find out for yourself. Precise winter location is the most crucial aspect of winter carping. During my amazing Mangrove winter of 1994-95 I formed the impression that virtually every carp in the lake was in one small area of the mere. I found the spot through observation, and by chance, but where you are working blind, casting around with a heavy lead to find soft areas may give you a clue.

Apart from the mental aspect – the determination to be there as often as possible,

no matter what – I would list location, bait application and presentation as the three most important aspects of cold-water carping. Yes, these three are vital at any time of the year, but become more so when the carp aren't moving around as much as they do in the warmer months, have a limited hunger, are more selective in how and what they will eat, and are less likely to pick up a suspicious bait than when they are feeding strongly. There are no hard and fast rules regarding any of these aspects, but there are guidelines that have stood me in good stead down the years. If you're struggling, some of the following observations may help.

### Location

With a few exceptions the winter carp I've caught haven't conformed to the oft-quoted guidelines regarding winter location. Try deep water, snags, holes in the weed and decaying lilies by all means, but don't be surprised if the carp aren't there! Be influenced by your last sighting of the autumn in terms of pinpointing location. If they were there in late October or November they may be there for the winter. I get the impression that carp tend to be where they feel most comfortable in cold-water conditions.

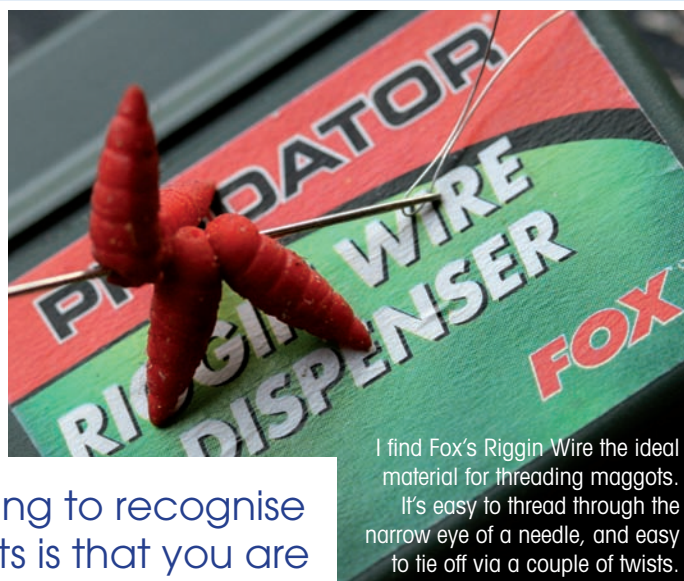
Of the winter waters I have fished the one common denominator I have found is that the carp tend to favour the south-east corner of the lake, particularly if the area is protected by trees. In terms of fishing conditions this is an area that makes sense because it is least influenced by the icy easterlies, and most exposed to the more favourable westerlies. I think other writers have commented on this phenomenon, and it's one that may give you a starting point if you are really struggling to find the fish.

Keep an open mind about location. Carp can do some amazing things. There are times when I think that the most important aspect is oxygenation. I've seen carp showing repeatedly in shallows on the end of icy easterlies. One of the areas favoured by the Birch Grove fish is said to be spring-fed. The area in which I found my Mangrove winter carp is one of the last areas to freeze over in severe frosts, suggesting that there is some warming or oxygenating influence at work there.





Maggots are recognised as one of the most effective winter baits. This is my version of Frank Warwick's preferred maggot presentation, with a mix of rubber and real maggots on the hook.



I find Fox's Riffin Wire the ideal material for threading maggots. It's easy to thread through the narrow eye of a needle, and easy to tie off via a couple of twists.

The important thing to recognise about winter baits is that you are not just looking for something the carp will pick up, but something their systems will cope with

Chopped baits and a cored hookbait form the basis of my PVA bag contents when I bait using boilies in winter. This is my current version of Mainline's Grange, to me the best winter bait of all.



Glaçons can be just as effective in winter as they are in the warmer months, and they are easier to use in cold conditions, too.

One other aspect to keep at the front of your mind on location is watching for bubblers. I'm suspicious of bubblers in the warmer months, particularly on waters where bream and eels are present. The Mangrove and Birch are both eel waters, but eels tend to be even less active than carp during the colder months, so I'm more likely to take notice of any sort of bubbling activity, however slight. I can't recall catching a winter bubbler on any venues other than Birch, but I had a number of bonus fish casting to bubblers on that enigmatic water.

### Bait and bait application

I have no doubt whatever that some baits work better than others during the colder months. If you've got a bait that works, stick with it. If you haven't, I've found maggots/casters, sweetcorn and Mainline's Grange to be effective on a number of the venues that I've fished. I make no apologies for mentioning The Grange because it's the best winter bait I've ever used, and one I've gone back to for my winter fishing at Rainbow.

If you have koi carp you will have some insight into the 'rules' regarding the feeding of fish in winter. There are special koi feeds for the cold-water months, and a strong recommendation that you feed the fish sparingly. Wheatgerm is strongly recommended, and appears to be the main ingredient in winter koi feeds. The important thing to recognise about winter baits is

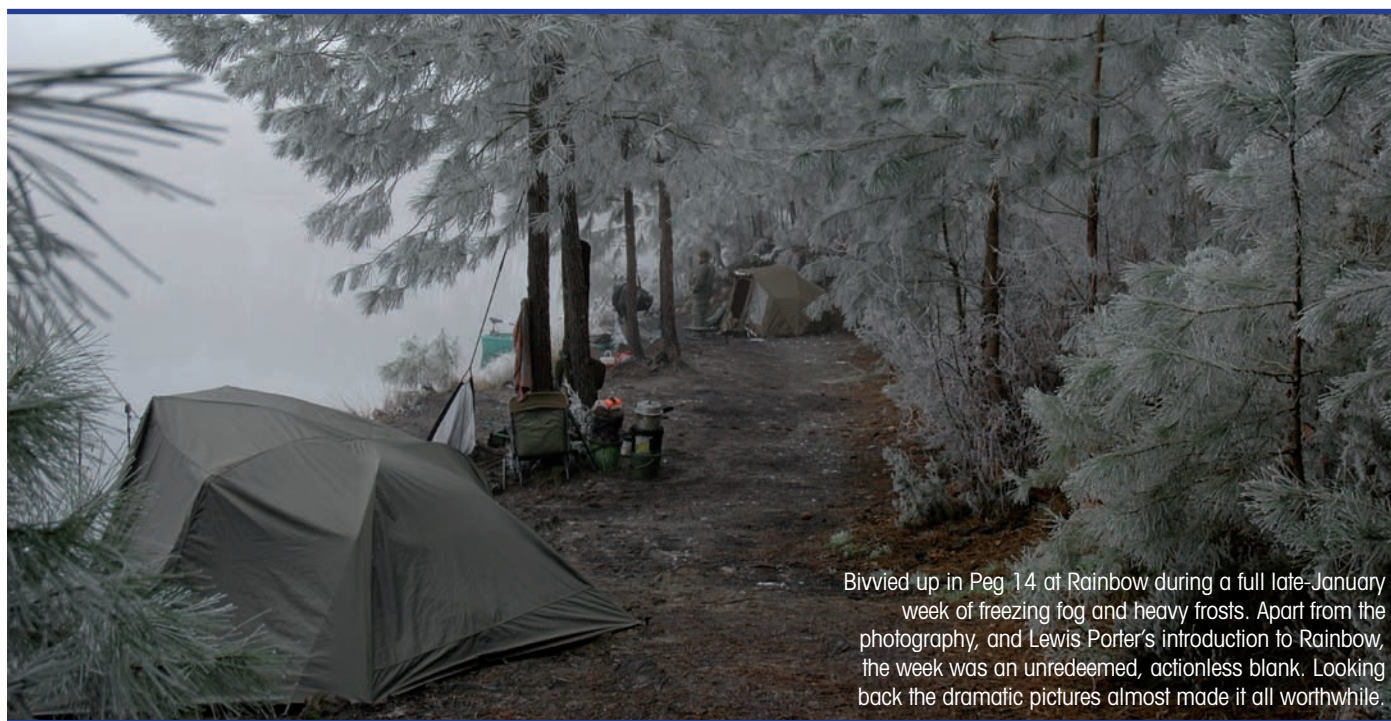
that you are not just looking for something the carp will pick up, but something their systems will cope with. I agree with the principle of ongoing baiting throughout your winter campaign – but to what extent, and with what? Some baits are picked up because of the basis of attraction from the flavouring. Some baits fill carp up quickly, and can even gum them up for the rest of the winter if their digestive system can't cope with them. This is a real problem with winter baiting campaigns. I think they can cope with sweetcorn. I'm sure they can cope with maggots. Beyond that I'm not at all sure that what we are putting in is a viable food, or whether I am giving them something they can actually use. I don't know what's in The Grange, but the evidence in the sack suggests to me that the carp's system is coping with the bait.

Over a period of two or three winters in the early '90s I had to rethink my session bait application on the basis of some strange results. On Birch Grove I found that my initial bait introduction would often result in an early capture. This encouragement would lead me to put in some more bait, on the basis that they must be hungry and feeding strongly, a not unreasonable assumption, one would think. Then I'd get no further action for the rest of the two- or three-day session! This pattern was repeated on a number of sessions, and as a result I had to rethink my winter bait application.

F-f-freezing! A memorable maggot-caught 56lb mirror landed in late afternoon of the shortest day of the year, 2005. The experienced Alijn Danau described the week of heavy frosts as the worst conditions he had ever fished in winter!







Bivvied up in Peg 14 at Rainbow during a full late-January week of freezing fog and heavy frosts. Apart from the photography, and Lewis Porter's introduction to Rainbow, the week was an unredeemed, actionless blank. Looking back the dramatic pictures almost made it all worthwhile.

I could only think, rightly or wrongly, that the carp that were willing to feed were being filled up by the initial baiting. I changed my approach to one that I still use in winter, home or abroad. The initial baiting is with a light scattering of pellets, maggots or whatever else I'm using as the groundbait. The hookbait presentation is invariably some form of PVA trap, be it stringer or bag. If and when I catch a carp I resist the temptation to introduce more groundbait or free offerings. Any further introductions are by means of the PVA trap. This way I have found that the action doesn't cease with the first capture, and I have had a number of multiple winter captures sticking with the method.

For me scratching time means small baits, 6 or 8mm, or smaller. Stringers of small baits will cast a long way. The carp has to pick up more baits to complete its feed. For all I know one 18mm bait may be a feed in winter. I don't know how many 6mm baits that represents, but I do know it's more than one!

Applying bait is a nervous twitch with some anglers. If you are getting no action resist the urge to introduce more bait. Eel and small fish activity can be at a minimum in the colder months. The hemp, pellets and any free offerings out there aren't being mopped up each day. Don't reduce your chances by introducing more bait when feeding is at a

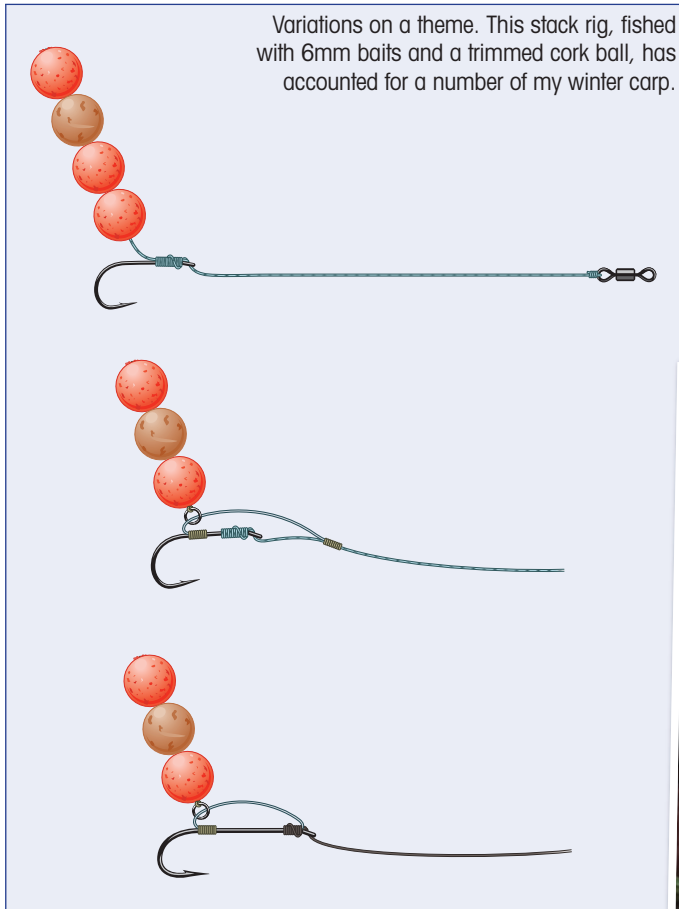
minimum. You've got to con them and frustrate them into picking up the hookbait. PVA is a con trick. Use it effectively, BUT make sure that the PVA you are using, be it bags, mesh or string, dissolves in the water temperatures in which you are fishing.

I stick with Kryston's PVA products because I know they work at the temperatures in which I'm fishing, but, for all that, I always check the spool of tape or string, or one from the packet of bags, in the edge of the lake as an extra precaution. This isn't a criticism of the PVA from other companies, simply a warning. In the early '90s I tested 10 different PVA strings before I found one that actually dissolved in the January water temperatures in which I was fishing. I have heard a number of sad tales of anglers getting twitches on stringers during the night, and then reeling in the stringer, still intact, in the morning!

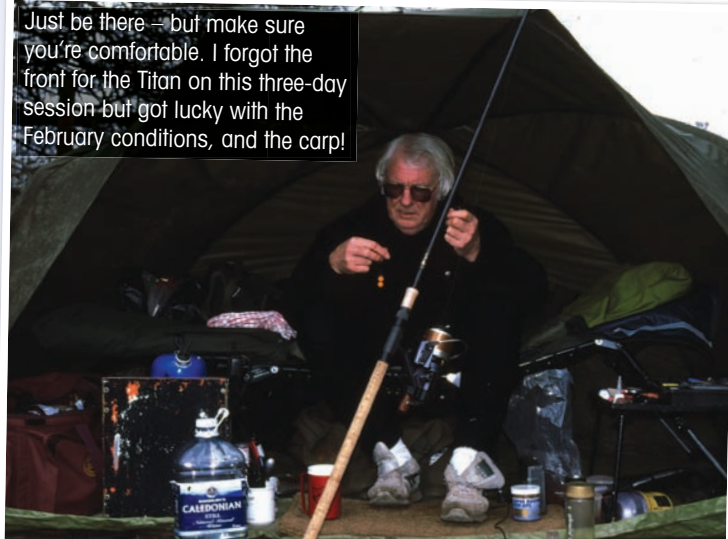
Mentioning PVA reminds me that the glaçons method which we featured in Carpworld last year is just as effective in the colder months as it is in summer. Ice lollies take longer to melt in winter than they do in summer, so it is an easier method to use in the colder months, too!

I'm going to labour the aspect of not overbaiting. During the successful Mangrove winter campaign a number of the guys would be fishing at the weekend. During the warmer months the Mangrove was a night water, and therefore fresh hookbaits would go out at

Variations on a theme. This stack rig, fished with 6mm baits and a trimmed cork ball, has accounted for a number of my winter carp.



Just be there – but make sure you're comfortable. I forgot the front for the Titan on this three-day session but got lucky with the February conditions, and the carp!







Keep an eye out for bubblebers. The memory of this late-afternoon Birch mirror of 28lb+ is still vivid. It came within seconds of The Grange Red bait hitting the bottom.

I can't get myself psyched-up for it every winter, but when I do it is on the basis that I'm going to fish the winter, not just the odd winter session

any changes you have to make then, not at potentially one of the most productive times of the day or night.

### Conditions

On the venues I fish Sod's Law dictates that the worse the overhead conditions in

winter the more likely the carp are to feed. Wind chill is the only aspect that I look on as a real downer, but even then a brief softening of the conditions can lead to a burst of feeding activity. I've had some good fish in conditions where my mind said there was no chance whatever, but on the other hand I've had loads of occasions when the conditions seemed ideal, and there was no indicator activity whatever! Conditions appear to be what our university friends term site-specific. In other words in terms of rain, wind and air pressure one lake's meat is another lake's poison. All of which adds up to

the reality that it could happen at any time, in any conditions. The only sure rule of winter carping is that you have to have your baits in the water to catch anything.

### Mind over matter

I've had a great deal of feedback from my writings on winter carping in the past. I can't get myself psyched-up for it every winter, but when I do it is on the basis that I'm going to fish the winter, not just the odd winter session. I go mentally prepared for the long winter nights. I love the fact that from Christmas onwards the days are already starting to draw out. Nature is waking up, and I've actually bought a new lens so I can add snapping the regular bird visitors to the feeding ground of the swim during the winter sessions. There are some dramatic scenic effects in winter, and the sense of achievement of landing a big winter carp (or any winter carp) is far greater than catching at the easier times of year (times I am currently searching for, by the way!).

"There is more to carp fishing than catching carp" has become something of a cliché over the years, but in the case of true winter carping it sums up the whole approach.

Torrential rain and gale-force winds made my February 2007 Rainbow session on the Island an uncomfortable, but rewarding, experience. This 55lb mirror was the second biggest of a 21-fish catch.

