

The sort of fish that early-season fishermen dream about: an immaculate overwintered Rutland Water rainbow.

PETER GATHERCOLE

Go slow on stillwaters

"Slowly does it" should be the stillwater fisher's motto at the beginning of the season, says **Rob Denson**, who reflects on the thrill of a new season after a winter of inactivity



Rob Denson has fly-fished for trout for 25 years, visiting all four corners of Britain and Ireland, combining his love of fly-tying, photography and a rolling wave. Website: www.robdenson.co.uk

AFTER 45 years of fishing, more than 25 of them for trout with a fly, I still struggle to sleep the night before the first outing of the season. I doubt that this year will be any different. Sad, but true.

I no longer fish through the winter these days. By mid October I'm ready and almost thankful for the winter lay-off. Come the spring, my relations with friends and family, not to mention my bank balance, are all the healthier for the break. But the itch inevitably returns, as if triggered by the extended daylight. The bulk of my early season is spent afloat. Any of our larger reservoirs that can offer elbow room and the chance of a fully finned fish will do for starters.

As the air eventually warms and the weather settles, I'll punctuate the reservoir scene with trips to the hills, and waters containing our wild brown trout, as and when I can. For now, though, it's the reservoirs, and the many, many joys contained therein.

to around thigh-height on opening day – perfect for a spot of quiet nymphing. Trout love to locate and cruise water of this depth over ground that is intermittently dry/flooded/dry/flooded, and in the early part of the season the shallows provide both the temperatures and the food that trout seek. On more than one occasion we exploited this bountiful area in spectacular fashion with floating lines and teams of nymphs. It's always a joy to kick off the season with such tactics, putting the fast sinkers and lures on hold for when they really are needed. My arsenal for such occasions in the late '80s and early '90s came largely from the minds and vices of people such as Bob Barden, John White and John Horsey. These were skinny, suggestive nymphs such as Barden's Killer nymph and White's Anorexic Buzzers: simple but devastating flies that seldom, if ever, fail if fished on the right day – any day when fish are on the fin and on the feed. The very first time we fished that favourite area one could almost smell trout. The

breeze was light and cool, but despite coming out of the east, had none of the dreaded icy edge. Just as well, as we were facing and casting straight into it. Perfect. The light and cloud, as it often is in March, was such that one could not tell where the water ended and the sky started; a distinction made possible only by the movement of air, causing the water to tremble. It's interesting that many years after a red-letter day has burned deep into the memory, it is often more memorable not for the fish we catch, but for the atmosphere of the day: the weather, the smells, and random details such as what we had in our sandwiches. Isn't that why they say there's more to fishing than catching fish? It almost feels vulgar, then, to go on and detail each and every capture and kill, so I won't. Suffice it to say we left Swinsty that day, as we so often did, tired and very, very happy.

“Suffice it to say we left Swinsty that day, as we so often did, tired and very, very happy”

One of my fondest early-season memories takes me back to very, very early in my fly-fishing life. A friend and I had fallen for the charms of two of the three Washburn valley reservoirs, namely Fewston and Swinsty (the third being Thruscross), on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales. Apart from a timeless pastoral tranquillity, the Washburn valley waters are blessed on many fronts. Wild brown trout (Thruscross) and Mayfly were the River Washburn's gifts bestowed upon its reservoirs when the river was dammed in the mid 1870s (Swinsty and Fewston) to supply an ever-expanding Leeds, then latterly, Thruscross, in the mid 1960s. Benefiting from the Washburn's catchment, water levels at Fewston and Swinsty were invariably high in the early season, and after a year or two's regular visits, we had identified a large area of ground on Swinsty that was pretty sure to be flooded

Another reservoir close to my heart and almost as close to my home is Stocks reservoir in Lancashire's Forest of Bowland. Stocks opens at the end of February, but rarely, if ever, do I don the thermals and stride out before mid to late March. Early-season action at Stocks is usually superb, and very popular, but the hotspots are not necessarily to everyone's taste. Decorum and quiet contemplation are available at opening weekend but will involve putting a few yards behind you, or taking a boat. Best to wait a week or three, I feel, until the early-season fever has well and truly abated. Stocks has established itself over the years as a premier fishery with much to offer the most demanding of seasoned anglers and more than deserving of your attention. Once the dust has settled and both anglers and fish have spread out, Stocks will begin to fish well from all areas and from both boat and bank. As with all early-season trouting in the UK, the golden rule in the early weeks of the season is slowly does it. It never ceases to amaze me how in the cold water of early spring many anglers thrash the water to foam and rates of retrieve have more in common with the large hydron collider than an English reservoir! Trout will seldom chase in the opening weeks. It's an effort/reward thing. Being cold-blooded, trout are at the mercy of their metabolism and their temperature, and if chasing a lively food item burns more energy than it would receive if the chase were successful, then it's a no-go. Cold, hard, simple economics. Trout don't chase for fun, but as the season progresses they do chase for food, when food is more abundant, and a lost chase does not “cost” the same or have the implications it did in leaner, meaner times. Slowly does it, then, and don't think about picking up the pace until you start to wear a layer or two less clothing.

Being one of the highest fisheries in England, Stocks does a nice line in wild weather, especially in the early part of the season. Despite casting into the teeth of a howling gale accompanied by precipitation in its various forms, I've had some ►

Rob Denson's fly choice to begin the season



Ess Cat variant

Hook Size 10-12 Kamasan B175 or B170
Thread Olive or black UTC, 70 denier
Body Black and gold straggle
Wing Marabou layered through several shades of olive to chartreuse
Slips Pearl mylar/mirage
Head Chartreuse deer hair



Rootbeer Mini-lure

Hook Size 10-12 Kamasan B175
Thread Brown-olive UTC, 70 denier
Tail Mix of marabou – olive, ginger, golden-olive
Rib Gold or hot-yellow UTC wire
Body Seal's fur mix – olive, ginger, golden-olive
Body hackle Golden-olive hen
Wing As tail
Wing filaments Gliss N Glow
MOP Rootbeer
Cheeks Jungle-cock splits
Shoulder hackle Golden-olive hen



Rootbeer Stewart-style Cruncher

Hook Size 10-14 Kamasan B175 or B170
Thread Brown-olive UTC, 70 denier
Tail Cock fibres of choice – olive, cree, ginger
Rib Black wire
Body Gliss N Glow MOP Rootbeer
Thorax Grey squirrel with a pinch of olive ice-dub
Thorax hackle Grizzle hen dyed golden-olive
Front hackle As thorax but slightly longer

Barden Killer nymph variant
Hook Size 10-14 Kamasan B175 or 170
Thread Brown-olive UTC, 70 denier
Tail Yellow-olive cock
Rib Copper wire
Body Seal's fur mix – olive, sooty-olive



Pseudo Hackle nymph

Hook Size 10-12 Fulling Mill 31531 black nickel or Kamasan B175
Thread Black UTC, 70 denier
Tail Black cock hackle fibres
Body Black “pseudo hackle” trimmed to length
Thorax Gold lite-brite
Cheeks Jungle-cock splits



Peter Ross Spider

Hook Size 12-16 Kamasan B175 or B170
Thread Black UTC, 70 denier
Rib Black UTC wire
Body Silver mylar
Thorax Red seal's fur
Hackle Grizzle hen

Early-season stillwater trout

exhilarating early-season days on Stocks, doing well despite the adverse conditions. One such day, just a few seasons back, saw a “cricket score” come to my side of the boat and a shoe size to the other – not exactly the kind of distribution required if smiles and morale are to be maintained at both ends of the boat. Still, one makes hay when the sun shines, or the hail falls, whether your partner likes it or not! The really interesting thing that day was that each and every fish of mine – all 20-odd of them – came to the same fly, namely the Rootbeer Mini

“The early season does seem to have its own set of rules, which can be summarised as: there aren’t any!”

Lure, which was getting singled out despite its being moved up and down the leader. Top, middle or tail, the fish cared not one jot. So long as the retrieve was slow, and the Rootbeer was there somewhere, they found it... and took it. The fly continues to be a good performer, especially in the flat grey of a precipitation-punctuated March day, although it has never since quite reached the same dizzy heights as it did that day. To be fair, though, one is generally safe on most waters in the early season with flies on the Damsel/Dawson’s Olive/Rootbeer spectrum of colour and style.

The first eight or ten weeks of the season are usually the most changeable and unpredictable of

the year, but despite the vagaries of our weather, reservoirs are full of lively fresh stock, and overwintered fish are ready to feed again in earnest. For most of the rest of the season, extended periods of settled weather are what we hope for, and these generally produce the most consistent sport. The early season does seem to have its own set of rules, which can be summarised as: there aren’t any! Bright skies tend not to have the same disastrous effects that they can and do at most other times of the year. If anything, a good blast of warming sun can help rather than hinder, and stir the fish and their food, not to mention add a welcome degree or two to the water temperature. And when precipitation in a solid or semi-solid form has lashed us raw all morning, and we feel perhaps more than a little downbeat, a rise will be spotted!

Exactly that scenario played out during an opening-week session at Cumbria’s Watendlath Tarn, many years ago. After bank-fishing on our inaugural visit the previous season, we had decided to tackle this rugged but beautiful water from the boat. The day began calm and mild, but as so often happens at this time of year, it spiralled out of control and into a sleet-spattered test of endurance. Cue rising fish. For reasons best known to the Watendlath trout, a sustained rise took place right across the tarn, strangely lasting only as long as the sleet and hail did – about an hour. Buzzers were the cause of the activity, being taken at the point of eclosion, right at the surface. After a brief period of experimentation with lines and flies, Shipman’s Buzzers on a floater emerged – pun intended – as the way forward. Once that little challenge had been cracked, all that remained was to be able to distinguish between the ring of a hailstone and the ring of a rise. Fishing at close range solved that one, and a dozen or more clean, silvery and very lively fish to the boat, taken on “dry” flies in sleet and hail were our reward.

As we move into the latter half of what we call “early season” – mid April to early May – a real opportunity for big, grown-on and overwintered fish presents itself.

Most of our major stillwaters throw up a newsworthy fish or two at this time of year, invariably falling to regular and unsuspecting buzzer and nymph anglers simply out for a day’s r & r. It’s all about the buzzers. After the torpor and meagre pickings of a long, hard winter, buzzers are the first real bonanza of the season. Trout of all ages and sizes the length and breadth of these isles are compelled to feast on the “buzzer soup”. Perhaps the feeding behaviour required for minimum effort/maximum reward – cruising, and mopping up anything that moves and/or loosely resembles a buzzer pupa – means that a trout’s guard is inevitably down as it makes the most of the bounty. Big grown-on fish of many years and many pounds are no more immune to the temptation or less susceptible to being caught. Keep things simple, and an eye on colour and size of the active buzzer species, and the fish of a lifetime is a distinct possibility. My first, and hopefully not last, opportunity to net a glass-caser came and went

one unusually balmy late-April day on Rutland Water in the early ‘90s. We had steadily picked off a few buzzer-feeders in the Dickenson’s area of the north arm before lunch, but netted nothing over 3 lb. The fish we played, though, really did fight like demons, thanks to the raised levels of oxygen that cold water holds – another bonus of early-season fishing. Most of the action to our “straight-lined” teams of three Buzzer pupae came to the lowermost flies on the leader, suggesting that the fish were intercepting pupae in midwater, a good hard tug indicating that a fish had confidently taken one of our offerings and was making a beeline for the next. The “lift and hang” wasn’t eliciting much interest, until on one retrieve I was ready to re-cast after a half-hearted hang when the rod bent over in a hoop, and within what seemed like a split second, ten yards of spare line were taken up, resulting in that satisfying “slap” as the last yard meets rod and reel. The fish was now on its way up as fast as it was heading away

from me, causing the line to vibrate as it cut through the layers toward the surface. And that’s where we parted company, but not before a defiant leap, as if to celebrate freedom, at least gave us a look at the fish. Distance and a high pulse-rate always put a few extra pounds on fish but we agreed that it was at least a double-

anything to go by, there’s still plenty of time for temperatures to plummet and/or snow to make monkeys of us all again. My own view is that our season was cast last year, the year before, and the year before that by the relative successes of the various fauna upon which trout feed, and the proliferation thereof. In other

A heavy trout puts a decent bend into this angler’s rod during a late-spring day on Rutland Water.

“Keep an eye on the colour and size of the active buzzer species and the fish of a lifetime is a distinct possibility”

figure fish. That trout still haunts me. Sometimes the most memorable fish are the ones we don’t land or even see.

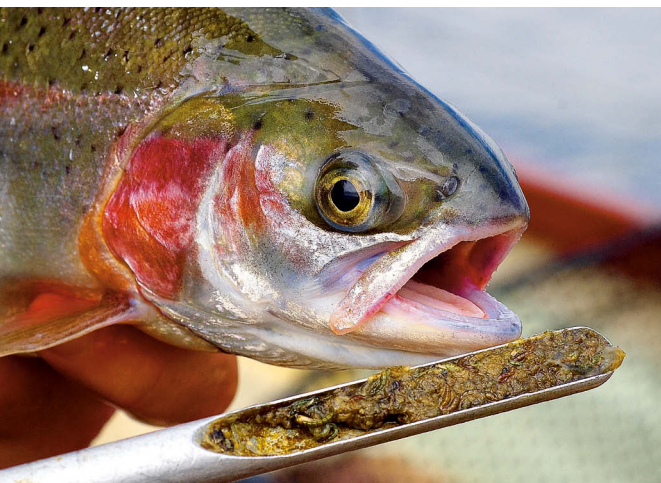
No doubt, as we approach opening day, we’ve all aired our pet theories among fishing friends as to what the dominant feature of this past winter means for the coming season. As I write, it’s been a mild one all round, albeit wet, very wet, and not without misery for many unfortunate souls. If last year is

words, we’ll get weather, but we may or may not get hatches.

Whatever your theory, we get what we get, and the fishing from the start of the season will be, by and large, as it always is: interesting, overdue, and very, very welcome. May I take this opportunity to wish you all tight lines, and a productive season. I sincerely hope that like me, each and every one of you struggles to sleep on your opening eve.



This spring rainbow had been eating daphnia and buzzers.



PETER GATHERCOLE

BILL HUNTER

