

# Pursuit of the common

Mark Bryant and the big Leney

**D**uring part of the summer of last year, I decided to target a particular common that resides in a small intimate four and a half-acre gravel pit. The lake consists of a main body of water with an arm that runs off it. This mature lake has a superb aura surrounding it, as it was one of the first lakes, along with Ashlea pool, excavated on the Water Park. The lake in question has had different owners over the years, but now rests in the control of Watermark Fisheries. This lake holds a small original stock of Leney fish that are over fifty years old that automatically commands my respect. The depths vary on this lake from a couple of feet, down to 26ft with gravel bars, silt patches and clay humps aplenty. Snag

trees adorn the reed-fringed banks, and there are lily pads dotted around the margins. A perfect water to stalk or to set your stall out for a big fish.

I was fishing a nearby, very lightly stocked, 120-acre headbanger, and more than happy with my five fish catch in six weeks of fishing this very demanding water. Being so close to the smaller lake meant that I could pop in during quiet times and have a look to

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see what the common was up to, and more importantly where the angling pressure was. From constantly walking around, I soon began to formulate a plan of attack. This particular fish had a couple of distinct features, apart from being very long and well proportioned; she also had a grey patch on her head and a tail that flicked out of the water when she cruised around the arm. The water would be literally flicked airborne a couple of inches as she twitched her tail! This was very odd, but at the same time very hypnotic. These two features made spotting this fish very easy even in the middle of the lake. From watching the water it quickly became apparent that the common would spend most days down in a narrow arm off the main body of water, and every time I walked round she would be there! It seemed that during the day the big common would come into the arm at around 9.30am, and would group up with one or two other fish. I was surprised that no one had seen this fish and tried to stalk her in the arm, as she was there every time I looked in.

I carried on fishing over on the Inland Sea until they started to spawn. I watched in awe as all of the lake's jewels grouped up and frolicked in the shallow bay with reckless abandon. As most of the bigger fish in the big lake had just dropped a lot of spawn, making them very low in weight, I decided the time was now right to target the common in the small water.

My pursuit of the common should have been over within an hour. I literally walked into the arm on a somewhat dull, overcast day and spotted her immediately. I crept by a small swim and scaled a tree that gave me a perfect view of her and two other carp that she was in company with. The first fish looked to be a mirror of around 25lbs, and the other was also a common of upper-20 proportions. After five or ten minutes it was clear that these fish were circling a weed bed in the middle of the arm. The big common would sometimes lead, but more often than

30lb 3oz common



not the mirror would make the first move and the other two would follow. I started to introduce chum mixers three at a time, so as not to arouse the prolific bird life that's so evident these days. After ten minutes or so the two commons started to show some interest in the now steady stream of mixers that I had been introducing little and often upwind. Careful feeding for more than 30 minutes resulted in these two commons virtually racing each other to the next mixer!

Whilst I had been feeding the mixers, I had set up a light freelined floater rod consisting of 12lb mainline and an 8ft, 10lb double strength hooklink. I then mounted a fake mixer with nervous hands to the back of a size 8 hook – job done. I waited until the two fish had turned away from me, and then gently flicked my mixer hookbait upwind on their feeding line. The bait was inching towards the two fish that were rolling their eyes eagerly, looking for the next mixer. Suddenly they both clocked my bait and turned towards it. Luckily the big one was closer to me, so I gently teased the mixer back so the bigger one would get first chance of nailing it. The next moment was sheer comedy; the big one came up to take the bait and missed! This resulted in both fish almost kissing each other with the bait balanced on both their lips! The bait was gone, I struck, the rod hooped over, and then sprang back immediately. I have no idea which fish I hooked as it happened so fast, but the end result was the same, all three fish bow-waving out of the arm not to return that day. Carp 1 Mark 0.

I had three days off work coming up in a couple of weeks, so I quickly thought of a plan to seek vengeance on the big common. I decided to bait a couple of areas down in the arm so I could keep a eye on them as well as always having a floater rod set up, in case an opportunity presented itself. Although a swim up in the main body of the lake would offer more chances of pick ups, I knew that by fishing the bay I had a very good chance of isolating her and one or two others.

There was a small swim tucked away at the bottom of the arm that looked worthy of investigation. To its right were three overhanging trees, one of which was easy to climb out on, giving me an excellent vantage point. Under these trees was a small silt patch that



was covered by a big tree branch. The common would pass under this on its way around the bay. I started to introduce plenty of hemp, B5 pellets and B5 boilies onto the silt patch in the hope of them clearing the area so I could present a bait cleanly. I rigged a length of nylon attached from a peg in the bank to the branch so when I wanted to place a bait I could simply pull the cord back, place the hookbait, and then lower the branch again. This had the added advantage of keeping the silt patch hidden from prying eyes. Two other small gravel margin spots were also baited in the arm to keep my options open. After about a week of constant baiting it was clear that the common, as well as a few other carp and tench, was clearing the area of the silt patch. One afternoon during my lunch break I witnessed the common and another smaller fish just leaving the silt patch, having munched best part of 4kgs of bait. With my three-day break the following week, I rubbed my hands at the chance of a 30lb common and lake record to boot. With Sunday fast approaching I prayed that no one had spotted what I was up to and that the weather would hold. Sunday soon came round and I gathered up my gear in anticipation for a three-day session chasing the big girl. I must admit a three-day session is a bit of a luxury for me, as I usually only get a odd day or overnight session to fish due to work

and playing semi-professional football, I was looking forward to the challenge and having three days to complete it.

I was soon driving through the gates of the Watermark Complex late Sunday evening, I breathed a sigh of relief, as there were only two other anglers fishing, and they were up the other end of the lake. First things first – I plonked a bait bucket in the arm swim to secure it and made my way around the lake. The common usually moved out of the arm between 6-8pm depending on the sun and weather conditions, so I had plenty of time, as it was now 8.30. A quick chat to the two anglers confirmed that she hadn't been out yet, but had been spotted down in the arm that day! I made my way back to my swim and started to put my plan into action. I set up well back from the water and tucked myself behind some dense foliage so as not to inadvertently spook any fish day or night. The light level was just dropping as I placed two B5 bottom baits under the branch before releasing the cord to allow the branch to spring back to its original position. I then deposited 3kg of hemp, 1kg of B5 pellets, and 50 B5 boilies over the now table sized silt patch. I had recently been developing a new rig that I was particularly pleased with. Through countless observations of fish feeding close in I had modified a rig that seemed to give them all sorts of problems once the bait was in their



mouths, so much so that I was catching more than my fair share of tench in between carp – a good sign indeed. I don't want to give too much away at this point, other than I felt the mechanics of the rig was taking the control away from the carp and they were using their sucking motion to my advantage, so read into this what you will.

A quick brew before darkness, and silence engulfed the Water Park. Only the occasional call from the coots could be heard into the night. I fell asleep half hoping that the big common would creep back in the night and make a mistake.

I was awoken at first light from a burst of single bleeps, and I jumped out of the bag straight onto the moist grass of early morning. The result was a tench of around 4lbs, hooked firmly in the bottom lip! Throughout the morning I was to take a further three tench from the silt spot, confirmation that my rigs were nailing a large percentage of pick ups. There had only been one or two tench out this season, so to have three in the morning was a confidence boost on the technical side. I wasn't expecting any carpy action until 09.30 onwards, as this was the time when she and one or two mates would turn up.

The time was now 8.30am and the weather did not look too favourable.

Dark clouds could be seen on the horizon, and a stiff breeze had picked up. I was a little concerned that the common wouldn't turn up, as the weather was looking more and more unfavourable. At around 9.20am I scaled the overhanging tree to my right to gain a vantage point over the arm and my baited area. As if on cue, the common and two other fish came waddling in at 9.35am. The mirror was leading the big common and the slightly smaller one. I was perched on a branch with the water no more than 3ft below me, when they made a beeline straight towards me, I froze instantly, dipped my head, and stared at the common as they ambled towards me in mid-water. They all passed under me and over the baited area as if it wasn't there! As they went for another circuit of the bay, and I could just make out the odd tench still feeding on the spot. I still had a couple of boilies left in my pocket so I dropped them on the tench's head in vain to spook them off the area. I have noticed before when tench are having it big time there's hardly anything that will spook them out of a swim. On another lake I've even tried dropping a 5oz lead amongst them, only to watch in amazement as they dived out of the way, then carried on feeding! I was sure the three carp knew the bait was there because when they passed through the area the

second time they all looked like they twitched as if to register the subtle pH changes in the water. The same procedure happened a further two more times until finally they all descended onto the patch to feed with the tench. At this point I was sure a take was forthcoming, so I slowly climbed down the tree and sat at the base beside my rods. I was fishing very slack lines with plastocene squeezed at 3ft intervals to my margin, so as not to trip their fins, and I was only angling some 10yds down to my right. After what seemed an eternity the right hand buzzer singled that the 5oz lead had done its job, I was on it in a flash, only to get that sinking feeling as another tench popped to the surface under heavy pressure. I quickly unhooked and returned it and shot back up the tree. The light wasn't that good, but I could just make out the silt bottom in 5ft of now cloudy water. Most of the bait had gone as well as the carp, and all that remained was the odd hole in the silt where the carp had been rooting around. To say I was gutted would be an understatement, as everything looked spot on but for the tench to ruin it at the death.

The topic of fish communication is something that I have a great deal of interest in. Quite what happens, or what is released by a stressed fish, is largely unknown. Through fishing a couple of small waters over the years, I have indeed come to the conclusion that fish can communicate in some form. One instance that stands out the most was when I was fishing a local club lake of no more than an acre in size, a small lake with only 40 or so fish. During the winter when the clarity was at its best, you can clearly observe the carp in different situations. There are two main sets of snags that were 40 yards apart, and most of the fish were split between these two sets of snags. When I fished one set of snags I would often have a fish straight away. On returning the fish to the water (and the same set of snags), it looked very agitated and would swim into the snag with the rest of the carp. These fish would then automatically look very edgy and, in my opinion, became very aware of the captured fish's distress. The result was no more action from that set of snags for the rest of the day. However, if after a capture, I would walk over and return the carp to the

other set of snags, I would continue to have action all day, taking 4-6 fish. I could mention many other experiences but am now straying from my original story! Where was I?

I stayed up in that tree for most of the day as it started to drizzle, but to no avail, or so I thought. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the familiar telltale sign of water being flicked out of the lake. I climbed a little higher to see the big girl all on her own in the middle of the arm a couple of swims up from me. I reeled in, made the short walk up the bank, and once in position I started to flick mixers upwind of her. As soon as the first batch of mixers came over her head, she just sunk down in the water and drifted out of the arm.

I returned to the original peg and repeated the procedure that evening of baiting close in, before treating myself to a trip to the local Indian that was just down the road in the village. One chicken biryani and keema nan bread later, I was fully stuffed and ready to laze like a beached whale on my bedchair for the night. I placed the rods on the same spot and settled in for the night. 4am, and another tench came to the net. I didn't mind catching the tench, but repositioning the bait under the branch was proving a little tricky in the dark. I managed to locate the nylon cord, and lowered the bait back down for the tench's banquet! A further three tench graced my net between 5 and 8am, all again hooked firmly in the bottom lip. I made a quick decision to introduce another 2kg of hemp and boilies, as the tench had cleared the majority of bait. By 10am I had again scaled the tree to see if my guests had arrived, but was disappointed when I saw all the bait untouched and no carp in view. I jumped from the tree and proceeded to reel both rods in to have a look further up the arm. When I made the short 30yd walk up the bank, there in the middle, almost hovering, was the common. I sat for a good hour watching her, and she looked content to be just sitting there motionless. I made a quick decision to up sticks and move the short distance opposite, no more than 50yds, up towards the main body of water. In the new swim, I tried once again to interest her in floaters, but it was useless; she seemed very reluctant to feed. All I succeeded in doing was to push her further up the arm towards the main body of the lake.



As the evening came I had a very quick plumb around. Out in front was a channel with dense weed each side, and the depth was 8ft with a light covering of Canadian pondweed that only came a few inches off the bottom. This channel looked and felt right, as it was the main route that most fish would take on entering and exiting the arm. I used the spod to position 2kg of hemp and 30 B5 boilies into the small channel. Two rods were clipped, having paced the distance out along the bank where I placed a couple of sticks for markers, and then the rods were marked with pole elastic. The bait and lead was placed in small PVA bags to help with presentation in the weed. The casts were bang on hitting the clip before dropping through the oil slick that I had just created. Feeling particularly pleased with the positioning of the baits, I sunk into my bag to avoid the horseflies that were eating me alive. The night came and went with no incident, which I thought was strange. I was up at first light eager to spot any fish that may venture into my quarters. I was a little concerned in that I'd not even had any action from the tench. I was about to re-bait and position the rods when I noticed a few bubbles hit the surface smack bang in the channel between my rods. I scaled a small tree next to my swim for a better view, and once perched above the water, another patch of bubbles hit the surface. These

looked too big for tench bubbles, so I stayed in my position to work out what was causing them. Then she appeared from the channel, her gills puffing like mad – the common was on the bait all right and having a right old munch. The big common would do a small circuit of a weed bed and then dive back down in the channel for another mouthful. This carried on for almost an hour with me practically sitting on my hands willing her to make a mistake. As the morning wore on the she was joined by a smaller mirror that I had seen on the bank at 22lbs 8oz earlier in the season. They both fed for another hour before moving to my right and sitting in my margin sunning themselves after their free meal! I couldn't work it out; this had to be my best chance so far and nothing. Doubts started to creep in about presentation in the weed and as the fish were tucked out of the way down to my right, I quickly reeled in to see what was up. On retrieval I could see why I hadn't received a take – both rigs were devoid of bait and one was missing the hair! The crays had well and truly had me, and like a fool I didn't check at first light. I cursed my stupidity, as this in my mind was the fine line between having her or not.

With both rods on the rests I opted to bait a couple of small gravel patches no more than a rod length from the bank. I was sure the two fish had cleared all the bait in the channel and didn't want



to risk a recast or spodding, as they were very close to the right of my rod tips. A couple of handfuls of hemp and B5 pellet were all I introduced as carefully as I could, trying not to arouse suspicion from each of the shallow baited areas. The two fish were still cruising around in the arm and getting very close to the small baited areas. I still had my floater rod set up, so I started to flick a couple of mixers in every minute or so. If I could get the mirror feeding on top, I was sure the common would join in. After only ten minutes the mirror was up and taking mixers, and then the common almost begrudgingly started to take the odd one too. The mirror and common had now almost parted, so time to have a cast for the common. The cast fell well in front of the fish, and I tweaked the bait back into its path. As she neared the hookbait I could see her eyes swivel and spot the bait. Now only inches away from her, I could feel the palpitations from my chest, and up she came and mouthed the hookbait. I struck instantly, result! Actually not quite, as I pulled the hook bait out of her mouth and it flew over my shoulder straight behind me! I couldn't believe it, as amazingly I had not spooked the fish, just snatched the bait away from her. She was still there wondering where the bait was, puzzled as to where it had gone! The common continued to drift about the arm, every now and then flicking water with her

tail as if to taunt me.

The mirror was still chomping every mixer that I could offer it. This is where I had a bit of luck; there was a slight drift that was taking some of the mixers directly over one of my baited patches in the margin. The mirror, while following a group of mixers, had gone right over this margin patch and started to feed on the baited patch, the common was now behind the mirror, dropped down beside it, and began sifting the hemp and pellets amongst the gravel. Soon I was stood peering over the reeds at the awesome common twisting and turning in the shallow water. I thought the best way to present a bait was by freeline to try to single out the common. Off came the mixer, and on went a side-hooked 10mm B5 boile, I sneaked back into position and willed them both to leave so I could set my trap. Some ten minutes later and I was still waiting to get the bait into position, so I decided to gingerly lower the bait to the side of the fish as they didn't look like they were going to move. I successfully placed a bait on the patch behind both fish as they continued to turn gravel and stones over to pick out all the hemp and pellets. I decided that if the mirror looked like it was going to take the bait, I would gently draw it out of the way. After a minute or so the common started to spin round and head in the direction of my hookbait, whilst the mirror was still facing the other way.

Closer and closer she came, until the bait was within an inch of her mouth. I was squinting to see the bait in the now slightly murky water, and bang the hookbait disappeared, and I struck sideways in the opposite direction. The common started to shake her head while coming up in the water. The mirror on seeing me, or sensing the situation, bolted off, almost giving the common the cue to do the same. A surging 40yd run commenced, and over she ploughed to the far side of the bay with me hanging on, helpless in all efforts to stop the immense power surge. The big common managed to seek refuge in a weed bed that runs parallel with the bank. Now I was thinking that I'd finally hooked her and I was going to lose her due to the weed. With caution I started applying steady pressure to the weed and fish. My heart was in my mouth – was she going to move or not? I kept the pressure on and could feel the weed beginning to give. Relief ran through me when after a couple of kicks of her tail, she was free. Once through the channel that I had baited the night before, I could sense I was winning the battle. The big common came through my margin looking very impressive in the gin clear water. Steady pressure was taking its toll and after a tremendous tussle under the rod tip, I slipped the net under her long frame, and what was surely a lake record. I let out a "YESSSSS" across the Water Park as I lifted the net arms around common, carefully checked her pecs and pelvic fins were flush to her body, and hoisted her up onto my mat. On the scales she went 30lbs 3oz, and I was over the moon; it was a target that I felt I had worked hard for, not only over the three days, but also the weeks in preparation leading up to my trip. The common was sacked carefully for a short time as I made a phone call to the bailiff to come and witness the capture, so my thanks go to Phil who did a superb job with the photos. I packed up that day content with my result and a new lake record. The lake in question still does hold a few uncaught original fish that I'm sure will raise a few eyebrows if they ever appear on the bank. For now though, other big fish are calling but I vow to return to this water to do battle once more with one of its mysteries. Until then they will have to wait. ■