

EVERY year between the months of December and April I visit Lechlade Fishery in Gloucestershire, which is my favourite 'big fish' water.

At this time of year on this water any prospective 'big fish specialists' know they stand a very good chance of actually catching a double-figure fish every time they cast a fly-line!

The recent change in legislation now means that brown trout can be caught and killed legally from enclosed stillwaters such as Lechlade. In my opinion the law should have been changed years ago.

I appreciate fully that wild browns should be returned, and not even targeted by anglers in the close season because we need to ensure successful breeding with minimum stress if we are to maintain healthy wild stocks. But in reservoirs and stillwaters, where the number of fish in the water is literally dependant upon the stocking policy of the fishery, then where is the harm? Many fish stocked are now triploid (sexless) so won't even have the capacity to breed and do not lose condition.

I believe it's better to leave it to the discretion of the angler or fishery. In short, it means anglers now have the opportunity to catch some truly exceptional brown trout on enclosed stocked stillwaters.

When fishing in the winter I always try to pick a day when the weather is above freezing; and there has been a period of settled weather of at least five days. This means the water should be clear because there will have been no sudden run-off from fields that may stir things up and put the fish off the feed. It gives me the best chance of a special fish and allows for maximum enjoyment - there is nothing worse than sleet or snow and a bitterly north wind while fishing; your fingers go numb and you can't feel the line even with neoprene gloves on. This is not my idea of a pleasurable day out, especially when you're paying a considerable amount of money for the privilege of a day's sport.



England lady Joan Russell selects a fly.



One of three double-figure rainbows taken by Rob Edmunds.



Weighted, highly visible lures make ideal stalking bugs and can be fished blind.

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The fish at Lechlade are produced onsite by Tim Small and his staff. I have been fortunate enough to have been shown around the holding ponds, and it's very interesting to see the stocking densities and feeding regime employed by the fishery; and the amount of fish produced. You begin to appreciate the effort that goes into producing such large and extremely high quality stock fish.

It really is quite remarkable that in the winter months (November - April) the average size rises to over 7lb per fish and with many huge fish over 20lb in the water it really does give you the chance of a fish of a lifetime - if large fish are important to you.

The water itself is a modest nine acres surrounded by woodland that ensures that the fishery is never affected by high winds. The margins are deep and the water crystal clear, allowing you to stalk fish if you have a cap and Polaroid glasses. I've found that the really large browns prefer structure in the form of the overhanging trees, drop-offs and casting platforms, which are all holding places and best approached with some degree of stealth.

Don't automatically cast to the middle of the lake; instead look literally underneath your feet. Peer into the depths and you'll often see a huge torpedo-like shape, giving you the perfect opportunity for some sight fishing and the ultimate in excitement.

Twice I have simply jumped onto a casting platform only to see a fish of 15lb-plus bolt out from beneath it, completely spooked and heading for a quieter place to rest. Had I been more stealthy and fished the margins first I may have tempted one of these monsters - we live and learn.

Think about your surroundings

and the dangers. You must have a strategy to get the fish away from the obstruction once hooked. Bully them away from any obstruction that they could snap/tangle you up on, get them into the open water and play them from there. These are big fish that use their weight to their advantage and test you and your tackle to the limits. All too often I see anglers fail because they're so excited just seeing these monsters. Often they rush their casts and spook them, and once they hook one they have no idea or plan as to how best to play it.

The overnight temperature was around 1-2 degrees and expected to rise to around 10 degrees at midday. For me this is perfect, the top of the lake (directly in front of the house) is also well sheltered from the wind so it feels a few degrees warmer there, especially on this sunny winter's day. The bottom of the lake has a 6-8mph wind and it really does chill the surface and make fishing far more uncomfortable.

The set-up

BECAUSE the fish are so large I always opt to fish a single fly on a leader of 8-12lb. If you were fortunate enough to hook two fish at once it would ultimately end in disaster - no leader can cope with two of these huge fish swimming in opposite directions. Also, presentation would be compromised in the clear water with multiple flies and heavy stiff leaders.

There is a high turnover of fish at Lechlade, as on most small stillwaters, and catch and release is strictly not permitted, meaning that lures should usually be your preferred line of attack. Long marabou tails and a weighted head produce movement in the fly that often induces the take - my