

# What's Wrong With Being Single?

Cliff Waters accompanies Welsh international David Hoppe to Warwickshire's Heathcote Lakes, to find that a single-fly approach can actually increase your catch rate.

I admit that I may have a slight fixation about weather forecasting and the weather in general; however, this trip has all the hallmarks of taking appalling conditions to a whole new level. It's nine in the morning as I turn into the gravel drive leading to Heathcote Lakes and it's dark – I mean really dark – and I need the car headlights on.

The outside temperature is showing as a 'tropical' 3°C on my dashboard and David Hoppe and I are going fishing. The forecast (I know, I know) says we can expect something from all four seasons during the day – cold, snow, ice, sun and rain... lots of rain.

This has surely got to be complete madness.

## How's It Fishing?

George Moreton, owner of Heathcote Lakes, is tearing his hair out. The bottom lake, although fishable on two or three platforms, is pretty much iced over. The water hasn't been stocked for at least a month so he has advised us that it's a non-starter. The



Heathcote's new catch-and-release rules allow you to kill one fish – this one was full of sticklebacks.

top lake has been completely frozen for an equally long time, although George explains it should be fishable today, the first time in several weeks, but isn't too optimistic for the following week.

"We've just introduced catch and release on the fishery and it is so frustrating as anglers haven't been able to take full advantage of it yet. The weed cutter came in and did his business a few weeks before the freeze so that should have improved the fishing no end. The temperatures have risen considerably over the past few days and that

pretty much got rid of the ice completely. This is the first day we've been able to open fully for weeks."

Welsh international David Hoppe arrived a little earlier and is now surveying the top lake. "Actually, it's not too bad at all, with very little ice other than a little around the margins. Generally, though, the lake looks to be in good nick considering the conditions, although it is going to be muddy."

## Tackle And Tactics

"The fishery operates a barbless-hooks policy and

doesn't allow Boobies, so that rules out one of the most successful cold-water tactics.

"I'm not certain how the fish are going to react today. They've been under the ice for some while so they could respond in a couple of ways. They may go for a fly pulled quickly, or it might be a case of letting the fly sink to the bottom then inch it back slowly to induce them into a take. We'll just have to wait and see.

"I'm going to use a nice through-action 10ft 7-wt rod and a reel spooled up with a RIO Aqualux slow-sinking line. I'm starting on one of the lake's hotspots just inside the line of aerators. It's an area where George stocks his fish and they are likely to still be hanging around there, so I'll work the different layers of water to find out where they might be holding. I'm tackling up with a single, barbless, Dave's Devilish Damsel attached to 11 feet of 8½lb fluorocarbon.

"I prefer to use the Fluoroflex Plus because the material has a very thin



Anglers seem to feel that the more flies they have in the water, the more chance they have of catching. On the contrary, on some hard-fished waters a single-fly approach can pay off big time.



A waterproof container keeps the rain off David's leader materials.

diameter that will be almost completely invisible in this clear water, and I think I'll need every advantage I can gain today.

"It's worth remembering that it is really good practice to retain the same length of leader as you started with. I constantly see anglers changing flies but then forgetting about the length of their leader, ending up with something that's half the original length, which is next to useless.

"You need to consistently keep a leader length of no less than the length of your rod, which in my case today is 10 feet. A new length of leader is a small price to pay in the big scheme of things.

"I also hate getting my spools of leader material wet because the damp causes the labels to peel off and you end up with a mixture of unlabelled spools. Fluorocarbon is expensive to replace, so I stack them all

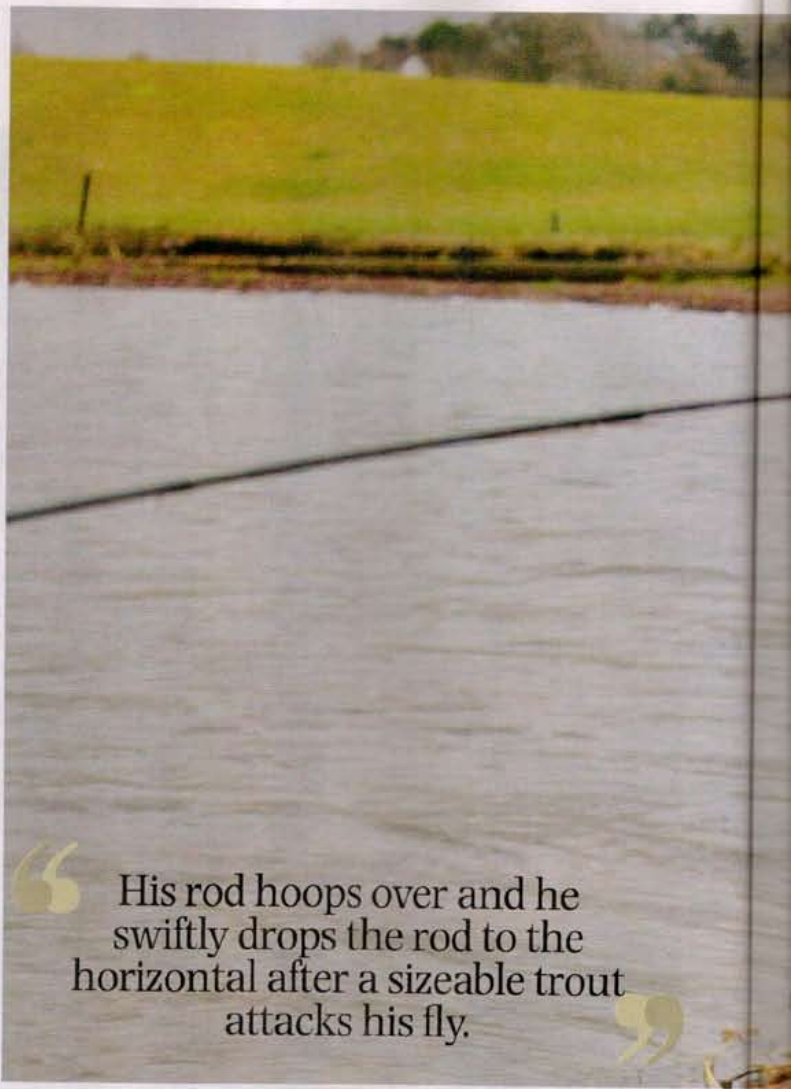
together in a clear, sealable plastic box that always keeps them dry... simple!"

### First Fish

David makes his first cast and finds the weed cutter has left some rafts of the inhibiting green stuff clinging to the bed of the lake.

"There seems to be a clump of weed lying close to the aerator so I'll move a little closer to the other fishing platform and see if I can fish around it. I'm letting the fly sink first, counting down between 10 and 15 seconds before starting the retrieve."

Next cast and the Dave's Devilish Damsel does the business as Mr Hoppe retrieves it back slowly, using a figure-of-eight combined with a couple of short pulls to induce some movement in the tail. A surprisingly sprightly 2lb rainbow comes to the net, much to the delight of the angler. "That was quick, and at least I haven't blanked.



His rod hoops over and he swiftly drops the rod to the horizontal after a sizeable trout attacks his fly.

There's a gap in the weed and as I retrieved through it the rainbow made a solid grab for the fly. It took it at around the 4ft to 6ft mark just after one of the retrieve pulls, so it does pay dividends to put movement into your flies from time to time.

"It goes to show you, though, that the more flies you have on your cast the more chance there is of getting hooked up on weed.

That's not to say a single fly won't snag, but you've got a better chance of pulling it through and many times it will release itself without the weed getting attached to it.

"This is important on two counts. Firstly, if you can continue the retrieve without weed attaching itself to the fly the fish won't spook. Secondly, after they've seen the fly come across their nose a couple of times they'll probably just



A fin-perfect Heatcote rainbow goes back after falling for a Dave's Devilish Damsel.

## Flies Best Fished On Their Own



Northern Spider



Dawson's Olive



Orange Fritz



Cat's Whisker



Montana



Blob



ignore it. So, the fewer the number of casts you make the better the chance you have of securing a hook-up.

"Because this is the shallowest area of the lake it is making a slow retrieve difficult, so I feel we should move and try the lodge bank where the water is considerably deeper. In winter you have to move around to find the fish as they are inevitably shoaled up together.

"I always try to fish as I would in a river environment. That is, making two casts and moving on a couple of steps. This means you're covering fresh water pretty much all the time and therefore stand a much better chance of locating the shoals."

### Local Knowledge

David prospects all along the lodge bank without further success. "We've now reached the bottom end of the lake, the wind has really picked up

and is starting to colour up the edges." However, one of Heathcote's regular visitors, Steve Usher from nearby Stratford-upon-Avon, has pitched up and has also tasted success. Fishing the shallow sand bar at the bottom end of the lake Steve is busy fighting something a whole lot larger than the 2lb rainbow David encountered an hour ago.

"I'm using a Midge Tip and a single Cat's Whisker," reveals Steve. "I have to say I thought the trout would have been holding in deep water, but they are definitely shoaled up close to the sand bar in front of me. I'm making my cast into the deep water and slowly figure-of-eighting it back over the shallow area, where the offers are coming."

David, meanwhile, is persevering over the deeper water a bit further round the bottom end of the lake. "This is probably my favourite spot. After speaking to Steve I've

changed to a Nomad Cat's Whisker; not the anorexic version he's been using, but one with a bit more tail to it. Although I tie my flies up initially with barbed hooks, I've now squashed the barb on this fly with a pair of forceps and made sure that I've done it properly by hooking it into my fleece – if it snags, it's not debarbed!"

### The Case For Singles

To compound the situation the stiffening breeze has blown in the sleet and rain. David makes a sorry sight buffeted by the steadily increasing squally conditions but 'bravely' he continues to battle on. I meanwhile take the sensible option and retreat to the shelter of the Heathcote lodge. It's not many minutes before David joins me. "It's horrendous out there – the rain and hail is bouncing about 12 inches off the surface of the water!"

We discuss how the day is progressing. "I am amazed the fish are shoaling in the shallow water. It would seem more usual for them to head for the deeper areas where the water temperature will be a whole lot warmer but that doesn't seem to be the case. That's fish for you, they rarely, if ever, do what's expected."

I take the opportunity to quiz David further about the use of single flies.

"Fishing with a single fly certainly reduces the number of tangles you'll experience, especially in conditions like today where I'm casting into a stiff breeze.

If I was using three or four flies I would be changing leaders fairly regularly, because no matter how careful you are when casting you will get wind knots in your leader and they are definitely not what you want when playing a fish. The wind knot is an angler's curse as it severely weakens the leader at the point where the knot occurs and the leader will break when it comes under intense strain.



Lures in various colours and weights are the top choice when it comes to fishing a single fly.

"When I fish a long-tailed pattern on a smallwater I inevitably use a single fly as I find it easier to picture where it is in the water. Just imagine you're a fish and you see four flies coming at you through clear water. Chances are you'll think twice about taking one of them because they will look very suspicious."

#### Fry Feeders

With the monsoon abating and blue sky appearing on the horizon, we make our way out of the lodge and back down onto the lake.

The change of conditions brings a change of fortune for David. "I've found another gap in the weed and I'm now able to bring the Nomad Cat's Whisker back much deeper and slower in the water than I've been able to do all day."

His rod hoops over and he swiftly drops the rod to the horizontal after a sizeable trout attacks his fly. The running line at his feet sings through the rod rings as the rainbow dives for open water. He is soon playing the fish off the reel and under control. Easing the trout over the

waiting net we both stare in amazement as the fish chokes up a number of sticklebacks as it lies in the bottom of the landing net. "It's odd, but although I've seen loads of sticklebacks and minnows in the shallows here over the years it never crossed my mind that the trout would be feeding on them today. I fully expected corixa or daphnia but not fry. No wonder they took an interest in Steve's Goldbeaded Cat's Whisker – it's about the same size and colour tone as the natural."

The next 30 minutes or so brought a couple more fish to the net, all, not surprisingly, taking a distinct liking to the Nomad Cat's Whisker, before the wind turned to the north, the snow started to fall and it was time to take our leave of Heathcote Lakes. We left cold and wet but somehow rather self-satisfied that we had tamed this particularly tricky water. ■



#### FACT FILE: Heathcote Lakes Trout Fishery

Lower Heathcote Farm, Harbury Lane, Warwick CV34 6SL

**Contact:** 01926 426983,

**Mobile:** 07966 276334

[www.heathcotelakes.co.uk](http://www.heathcotelakes.co.uk)



This plump 3lb-plus trout couldn't resist a Nomad Cat's Whisker, fished deep and slow.