

Spanish Barbel on the fly



Most of us assume that barbel grub around on river beds using their highly sensitive mouths to locate food. This is certainly true in Spain, but where the big rivers have been dammed up to create enormous lakes, the fish have had to adapt their behaviour and this gives the angler new opportunities.



With little rain during the recent winter of 2018/9 the lakes are only around 30% full at the moment, but there is still a huge body of water.

There are a number of species of barbel in Spain, all different to the UK species – and there appear to be hybrids of these as well. So it can be a bit confusing working out what you've caught. The first barbel I caught there was discussed for some time because it was so carp like. The favourite is the Comizo, which can reach weights in excess of 30 pounds, although most of the bank caught fish are around the 3 to 6 pound mark! Their mouths are noticeably less underslung than the British barbel. There are also Iberian barbel which can almost be mistaken for one of the wild carp that are in huge numbers in the same areas, and Andalusian barbel which look similar but have a two tone yellow belly contrasting with their bronze back. The carp, beautiful commons and the occasional mirror, can be fun to target as well, although not always easy. And there are channel catfish, bass, pike, zander and even the occasional turtle.



The lakes are in the western part of Spain and the centre of the Iberian peninsular.

Spain is a big country and the second highest in Europe overall, and it's getting drier. The population is gradually moving to the big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, as well as the tourist resorts on the Mediterranean. Water is a major issue with all sorts of schemes to supply the heavily populated areas. So huge areas of the country, particularly in the centre are losing their people as the farming of sheep becomes less attractive and less economically viable to a younger generation. Where we go to fish, half the population has gone in the last few years, leaving quaint little towns and villages looking deserted, and struggling to survive. From our point of view, it is easy to get excellent accommodation, it's cheap and there is a huge amount of fishing – all free, with no one else around. We look for cheap flights to Madrid or Malaga and then hire a vehicle.

Our favourite reservoir – or embalse in Spanish - is huge. Ten times the size of Rutland and one of the largest in Europe, so plenty of bank space with all sorts of terrain and bays that hold fish. In dry spells the water levels in the lakes visibly go down and the geography of the banks changes all the time. You never quite know what to expect. In Spring the water's edge can be half a mile nearer the road than in Autumn, after a dry summer.

Over the years a group of us have developed our techniques to catch fish in the way we like to do it. There are lots of methods and much bigger fish to be had but this is visual fishing. Walking the deserted shoreline looking for feeding fish in the margins. Polaroids are essential as very few fish are caught blind. The technique is to put a fly in front of a likely target fish just at the point when it's looking up without spooking it - and in very skinny water they are easily spooked - and see the fish gently swallow the dry. When you get it right it is incredibly satisfying.

The flies are always based on the terrestrials around at the time. Grasshoppers in the spring, ants, bugs, small black beetles in the autumn, daddies and sometimes small bait fish imitating lures. Leaders are no longer than a rod length and strong, as the terrain and the barbel's mouths are rough. A good brand is Seagar in strengths around 8 – 10 pounds breaking strain. Otherwise reservoir gear with a good drag on the reel because these fish pull, often starting with a very fast run. There is no need to carry a net as fish can always be beached on the soft mud.

The fly patterns are are very simple and easy to tie. In spring, big grasshoppers work, especially if there are a lot around and landing on the water. The rest of the year, small black bugs and ant patterns work. The fish grub around in the silt at the margins looking for micro bugs so a larger mouthful is irresistible - well, that's the theory! Other flies worth trying are daddies, foam daddies, goldheads and lures such as minkies and baitfish patterns.

Rises are frequent resulting in a good proportion of actual takes as experience helps get it right. Fish will often come right up to the fly and spook splashily at the very last minute. It's possible that they are using their sensitive mouths and barbels to check the fly out. We do not strike. Many times the fish will return, splash again, and then take the fly on a third visit. As we gain experience we catch a lot more fish!

Great fun and something different. There are a number of Invicta members who've been doing this for a while so feel free to contact Chris McLeod or Ray Storer through the club.

