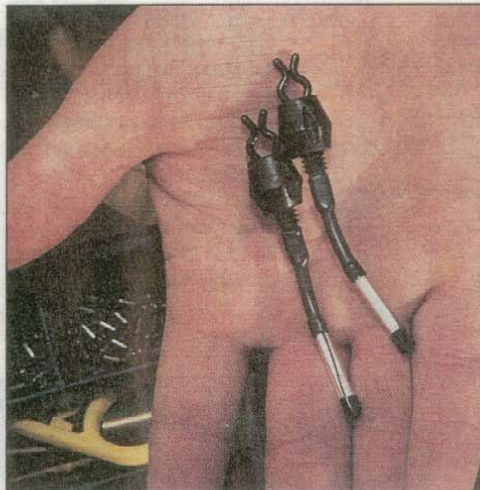




ACTION

Gardner Tackle employee Graeme Schilling targets nocturnal zander



18.00 Old Bury Hill is a beautiful 12 acre day ticket estate lake, crammed with big tench, bream and carp. But it's the predators which interest me. It's been heavily stocked with zander and fish have been caught to over 15 lb. With coloured water and lots of prey fish they have bred like wildfire. The fish average 7 lb 8 oz, my own best is 8 lb 11 oz but I've witnessed plenty bigger. Although big zander do get caught during daylight, I've been granted special permission to fish an evening session.

18.30 I make my own lightweight bobbins with Gardner Freeflow adjustable line clips, silicone tube, an isotope and some dacron. Too much resistance from the rod end and zander will drop baits instantly. I've cast out a dead gudgeon on one rod and dead roach on the other. All I've got on my main line is a running eighth of an ounce bullet. It's almost like freelining! There are some big pike in Old Bury Hill so I've kept baits very small to avoid them. Even so I've tackled up with a wire trace rather than heavy nylon, which some people wrongly favour for zander.

19.45 I had a couple of quick snatches at the baits before dusk, tell-tale puncture wounds in front of the dorsal fin and behind the head tell me that a zander's incisors briefly had hold. I suspect the culprits were small. Now I've just had my first proper take, a steady lift of the left hand bobbin, and landed this six-pounder on a small dead roach. You have to hit the slightest pull here. I've found zander swallow baits on the spot and I'd rather miss a few pick ups than suffer any deep hooking.



22.00 The zeds are still feeding, this one's around 6 lb. As soon as I've landed a fish I let it get its breath back in the net and then try and see on which side of the mouth it is hooked. Then when I unhook it, I slide my finger up and under the gill cover carefully on the opposite side to open the jaws. This prevents me from getting a hook embedded in my fingers. Take care when handling them, their gill plates are sharp. I've had blood drawn by a fish flapping on the mat.

23.00 This 7 lb 7 oz predator has just snapped up a roach on the left hand rod. It's been very active fishing which makes a change from carping. If I don't get had a take after five minutes or so I've been gently pulling the line and moving the bait. I had a tiny jerk then nothing from this one, so I twitched the bait and the line was yanked from my hands! Zander are very fragile so you must support them gently until they swim off strongly.

24.00 I've finished with seven zander including this my first double at 11 lb 2 oz, which I'm delighted with - especially in front of the cameras. There were nearly 400 doubles recorded from Old Bury Hill last winter. There can't be a better place to try for a specimen. Unlike the Fens, everyone's totally open here too.



REPLAY

at Old Bury Hill in Dorking, Surrey.



20.25 The left hand rod has just rewarded me with another fish, slightly bigger at 7 lb 14 oz, on a gudgeon. It was a long fish which later in the year will be a comfortable 9 lb-plus. I'm casting just beyond the well defined marginal shelf between three and five rod lengths out. Zander patrol along this underwater feature. There was a slight chill around dusk, and although it's a warm autumn night you've got to have the right clothing. I sport a fleece hat, thermal bib and brace and have brought a stove too for a welcome cup of tea.

21.35 I added another around 5 lb, the first action on the right hand rod. Then I hit a very powerful fish on a big dead roach on the left hand rod. At first I thought it was a carp. I've caught them here to 16 lb on fish baits before. But into the net goes an enormous 11 lb 2 oz zed. A personal best - I'm over the moon! It only gave a tiny pull on the indicator and was hooked right on the edge of the lips. You can identify individual zander through markings and their spined dorsals. Wonder if any previous captors recognise this one?

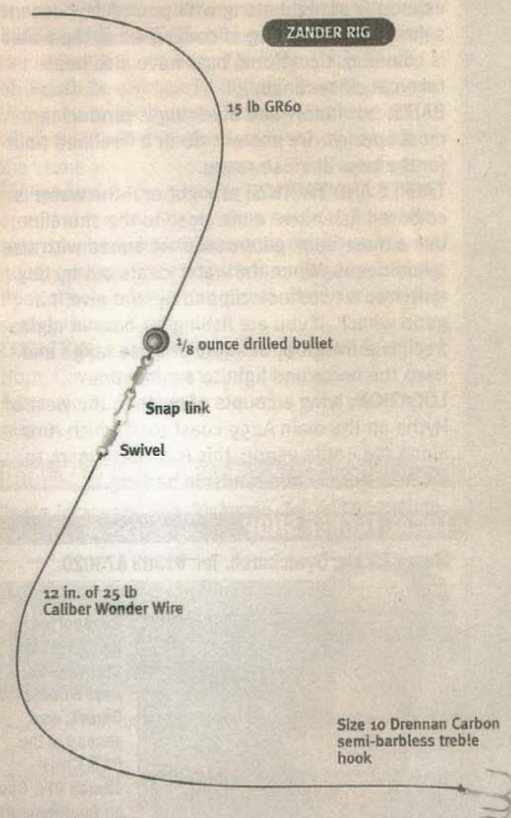


Baits and rigs



My bait list consists of plenty of small dead coarse fish, which must be really fresh. I prefer roach, gudgeon and small chub. It seems the zander preferred roach tonight, which I wouldn't have predicted. You can buy dead roach on-site, also live trout. No livebaits may be brought in from external sources. The best deadbait can often be a small skimmer, which I think are the zander's natural food here. For an evening session I bring at least 30 to 40 baits. If the fish are feeding hard, even that won't be enough. I've had to cut baits in half to make them last longer. When the fishing is hard I feed micro coarse pellets and squatts to bring small fish into my swim, which in turn attract zander. Another popular tactic is ground-bait mixed with ox blood.

End tackle is a free running eighth of an ounce drilled bullet, a snap link and a 12 inch trace of 25 lb Caliber Wonder Wire to size 10 Drennan Carbon semi-barbless trebles. I use a single treble trace for gudgeon and small roach, normally hooking them in the dorsal fin, and two treble traces for bigger baits. One goes in the head, one in the dorsal. Rods are Gardner Ultimate 2 semi-fast taper 2.25 lb test curves, matched with Daiwa Emblem 4550 Bite 'n Run reels and 15 lb GR60 main line.



TICKETS

Day tickets £9, £4 for a second rod, concessions for juniors and OAPs. Predator tickets (October to March) £85, juniors £55, two rods. Limited night fishing, price negotiable, by prior arrangement for season permit holders and regulars. Boats available at £5 per person per day. Barbless hooks only, maximum size 6, minimum line strength 10 lb, unhooking mats and large nets compulsory. Tel: 01306 883621. Thames byelaws apply.