

How to succeed fishing the Ilkley Angling Association (IAA) stretch of the River Wharfe **by David Martin, IAA Secretary**

Introduction

I have been fishing the Ilkley stretch since June 1972 and fly fishing it since 1974. I have caught many thousands of fish from the stretch. I am a very keen all-round coarse and game angler and I always have been. The purpose of this series of articles is to try to pass on some of my huge experience to others so that they can enjoy fishing the club's waters as much as I have. I am inclined to waffle on at times and but I did want to give readers a full and detailed picture of the fishing on our stretch. So feel free to either read it all or to skip straight forwards to the sections of my article that interest you the most. For each species article I will cover the topics of:

- Open seasons, take limits/size limits and other **legalities**
- How – the main **angling tactics** and the best tackle for each tactic
- **When to fish** – seasons, river & weather conditions, time of day, etc.
- **Where** on the Ilkley stretch

There are two main species of fish present on the of IAA stretch that are of interest to us anglers – Brown Trout and Grayling. Two other less important species are present – Chub and Eels. In the past our stretch has held a large population of often large Dace and small populations of Barbel, Gudgeon, Rainbow Trout and Roach. It is not believed that our stretch currently holds any of these species. Partly due to the lack of these species competing for food the Trout and Grayling now grow to larger sizes than they used to 50 years ago.

Brown Trout

This first article focusses on Trout. When I refer to Trout from now onwards I am always referring to Brown Trout.

The IAA stretch holds large numbers of often large Trout. Sometimes they are very easy to catch but often they are not. Sometimes you will catch none but on some days it is possible to catch up to 50 fish in a session. A more normal catch would be somewhere between two and ten fish. Trout of all sizes from very small up to about 5lbs are present. The vast majority of the Trout in the IAA stretch are wild fish born in the river. The club has not needed to stock the stretch since around 2008 and no stocking has taken place for many years on the lengths of the river at Addingham and Ben Rhydding controlled by the large Bradford City and Bradford No1 clubs. Occasionally a 'stockie' is caught on the IAA stretch that has wandered downstream from the Myddleton club water. Wild fish are usually not easy to catch, unlike 'stockies' which are.

Legalities

The open season for Trout is from 25th March until 30th September inclusive. It is not legal to try to catch Trout from 1st October until 24th March and if you do catch any by accident it is not legal to kill any.

All anglers over the age of 12 must be in possession of an Environment Agency fishing rod licence. This rod licence does not give you permission to fish the IAA stretch. All anglers over the age of 12 must also have either a season or a day Ilkley Angling Association permit.

The rule on the IAA stretch is that no more than two Trout per day may be killed and no trout is to be taken under 25cms (10 inches) and none over 35.5cms (14 inches), to be measured from the tip of the nose to the fork of the tail. This is called a slot size limit. It is intended to protect the small Trout and to allow them all to grow on to a sporting size. It is also intended to protect 100% of the larger Trout so that all members may continue to have a chance of catching them.

One rod and line only is allowed to be used per person fishing. No more than one hook may be used except when fly fishing. Spinning for Trout is not allowed. No fish may be held in a keepnet.

Angling Tactics for Trout

The main legal tactics for catching Trout on the IAA stretch are fly fishing and bait fishing. I will cover both in turn but in brief. The IAA stretch is an ideal place to learn these tactics because even novices have a good chance of catching fish. But I encourage you to read much more and, in the case of fly fishing, I would strongly encourage you to have a day of fly casting and fly fishing tuition with a professional instructor. Spinning is not allowed on the Ilkley stretch.

Fly fishing

There are many different fly fishing techniques that are successful on the IAA stretch. Going back 100 years the main techniques would have been **downstream wet fly** (often called the 'North Country' style and using 'spider' pattern flies) and **upstream dry fly**. These two techniques are just as successful now as they were back then. They are both most successful from late-April onwards once good hatches of aquatic flies have started. I personally much prefer dry fly fishing because of its very visual elements. You look for a rising fish; try to work out what kind of insect it is eating; tie on a suitable imitation; cast your fly delicately and accurately so that the rising fish has a chance of seeing it and then hope that it takes it. To me this is the ultimate in fly fishing achievement and excitement. However becoming successful at dry fly fishing takes time, practice and persistence. For novices downstream wet fly is a more easily achievable form of fly fishing on our stretch of the Wharfe.

Other techniques that can be successful on the IAA stretch include:

- **'Klink & Dink'** sometimes called 'Duo' (two flies) or 'New Zealand style'. This technique involves using a nymph and a dry fly on the leader at the same time. This technique is my favorite when there are only a few fish rising. I will expand on it in more detail below.
- **'Czech nymph'** and other short-line and French leader nymph fishing techniques. These can be effective when no fish are rising and all the fish are probably looking for their food on or near to the river bed.
- **Lure fishing**. In fly fishing a lure is a fly that is imitating a small prey fish. Trout, and especially big Trout, are very predatory. Minnows, Bullheads (Millers Thumb) and Stone Loach are common on the IAA stretch and if you want to catch the biggest Trout then using a lure fly is perhaps the best technique.

'Klink & Dink' / 'Duo' has had a lot of positive coverage in the fly fishing press over the years but many fly fishers who do not read the mags don't seem to know about it and so don't use it. I spend a high proportion of my fly fishing hours fishing this technique. This is because often the fish are not rising as much as you'd wish they were. When they are I prefer to fish a single dry fly to 'match the

hatch' of what the fish are taking. But when they are not 'K&D' gives the best of both worlds in that you can be effectively dry fly fishing at the very same time as effectively nymph fishing. Most of the good fly water on the Ilkley stretch is between 2' and 4' deep. If the fish are not often rising then they may well be feeding on nymphs either on the river bed or drifting down on the current just off the bottom. For 'K&D' usually I will pick a slightly larger dry fly than usual and one that is easy to see. Ideal patterns include Klinkhamer, Parachute Adams and Grey Wulff. Usually this dry fly is tied direct to about 4lb or 5lb tippet. Then take about 3' of tippet of a breaking strain slightly lower than that of your main leader/tippet. Using a tucked half-blood knot tie this extra tippet directly to the bend of the hook of the dry fly. This is a New Zealand style of dropper. Then attached a slightly weighted nymph to the end of the extra tippet. My favourite nymphs for 'K&D' include Goldhead Gold Ribbed Hares Ear, Copper John and Goldhead Pheasant Tail nymph. Usually I'll use a size 14 fly but sometimes a 16 or an 18 if the river is low and thus the flow rate is slow. Some fly fishers prefer to attach the dry fly to a short dropper but I do not. I find that this presentation causes more tangles. The dry fly in a 'K&D' set up is achieving three important roles. Firstly it is a dry fly that catches lots of fish. Secondly it is a bite indicator to a take on the nymph. Watch the dry fly all the time and if it dips out of sight strike. Thirdly it acts as a suspender. It suspends the nymph at a level just above the river bed. Thus the nymph will be more visible to the fish for a higher proportion of the time and also it is less likely to snag on the river bed. The way to fish the 'K&D' set up is exactly the same as how you would fish a dry fly – dead drift, ie drifting down the flow at the pace of the current unaffected by line drag. Often not easy to achieve and small regular mends of the fly line help. Thus by dead drifting the dry fly the nymph is also being dead drifted which is the most natural presentation possible. If I start catching most of my fish on the dry fly then I just take off the extra tippet and just fish dry fly. But usually when fishing 'K&D' the majority of the fish come to the nymph. 'K&D' is equally effective with Grayling as it is with Trout. Give it a go.

Tackle for fly fishing

Most people fishing the river at Ilkley would use a **rod** of between 9' and 10' matched with a **4 or 5-weight weight-forward floating fly line**. I personally use a 9' 5-weight set up most of the time. If I am fishing light (under 4lbs) tippets I might drop down to a 4-weight or if it is windy and I am using big dry flies or heavy nymphs then I might go up to a 6-weight. Some anglers prefer a 10' rod for dry fly fishing and a 10' or even an 11' rod for short-line nymph fishing.

I usually set up with a 9' 5x knotless tapered **leader** going down to a **tippet** of about 5lbs. If it is bright, the river is low and I am using small flies then I might well add a further 1' of 3.5lb tippet. There are big Trout in the Ilkley stretch and I want to land them, not leave my fly in their mouth, so I almost never use a tippet of less than 3.5lb breaking strain when I am Trout fishing (I might occasionally in the autumn when I am Grayling fishing). I always use **co-polymer** leaders and usually use co-polymer tippet. In bright low-water conditions I do often use a 3.5lb bs fluorocarbon tippet (attached to a co-polymer leader) for fishing small dry flies.

To get the best out of the Ilkley stretch you will be doing a lot of **wading**. So other items of tackle that I find essential are a pair of good quality breathable chest waders, a small wading landing net (to go over your back), a pair of polarised sunglasses (so that you can easily see the stones and rocks on the river bed as you wade around) and a foldable wading staff. Most of the wading on the Ilkley stretch is in shallow water and I rarely wade deep. However there are some very rocky stretches

where it would be very easy to trip and to fall in and get very wet without a wading staff and the polarised sunglasses. I always use a wading staff to minimise the chance of this.

Flies - I am not going to get into any level of detail on flies in this article. There are some good tips on successful flies available on the IAA website and a few internet searches of 'River Wharfe trout flies' will soon get you lots of good information.

Bait fishing

I personally never bait fish for Trout, but when I was young I did and I still do bait fish for Grayling through the winter months. In the period from 25th March until 15th June the only bait allowed on the IAA stretch is worm (maggots are not legal until 16th June) and so the only allowed bait fishing methods for the first 12 weeks of the Trout season are floatfished worm or legered worm. Both these methods are very effective on the Ilkley stretch for catching Trout with ledgering being most effective in the deeper slower pools and floatfishing being most effective in the quicker flowing shallower sections of river. Use a hook size appropriate to the size of the worm that you are using – a size 8 or 10 for a large lobworm down to a size 14 for a smallish redworm. Strike bites quickly otherwise the Trout may swallow the bait and be difficult to unhook. Always carry a disgorger so as to minimise and damage or injury to the fish you catch.

From 16th June until 30th September all legal forms of bait are allowed on the Ilkley stretch. Other than worms, maggots are the main other good bait for Trout. These can be either floatfished or legered, usually using a small block-end maggot feeder. As with worm strike bites quickly. A hook size of 16 is about right for using a single or double maggot bait.

Trout can often be caught on a bread flake bait but this is usually not as effective a bait as worm or maggot.

Tackle for bait fishing - For floatfishing I like to use a 'match' type float rod of around 13' long; a fixed spool reel loaded with 5lb breaking strain line and I use a 1' hook length of around 4lb bs. For ledgering I use a 10' or 11' long quiver-tip rod with the same reel/line combination as for floatfishing.

On the Ilkley stretch you are not allowed to use more than one rod simultaneously and when bait fishing you must not have more than one hook attached to the rod.

When to fish

In terms of catching fish on the Ilkley stretch choosing when to fish is even more important than choosing how or where to fish or what fly to use. The more confidently the Trout are feeding the more likely you are to catch them. The more you plan your fishing times to coincide with the fish's most likely active feeding periods then the more likely you are to catch them.

The first few weeks of the Trout season can be tough for fly fish. It is usually around the last week of April when the fish start to respond regularly to the fly fisher. Sometimes before then there are short hatches of Large Dark Olives. Sometimes the Trout get on the feed but often they don't. Keep your eyes open. Walk along the river bank looking for rises. If you see any get the fly rod out.

From late April right through to the end of the Trout season, and for about two months after that, there are likely to be rising fish somewhere along the Ilkley stretch at some stage in the day. It might be just a few rises or sometimes there are rising fish everywhere. The more insects there are on the water the more fish are likely to be rising. My two favourite months are May and June. It is during this period that the best hatches of 'mayflies' take place. The big Danica Mayfly hatches through June but usually not in numbers that are large enough to really get the fish going. In May the hatch I most look forward to encountering is the Large Brook Dun. Not as big as a Danica but much bigger than most other UK mayfly species. It is typically around a size 12 or 10 and it looks very similar to a March Brown (which we get very few of). So any March Brown imitation is good to use during a hatch of Large Brook Dun's. In May and June the best fly hatches – and thus the best dry fly sport – is usually from around late-morning to around late-afternoon.

July and August are viewed nationwide as the 'dog days of the Trout season' and this often does apply to the Ilkley stretch. However if you can fish very early or very late in the day good dry fly sport can be had, especially by using fairly large (size 12) caddis/sedge patterns or a black fly such as a black Klinkhamer.

The autumn is the second best time of the year for fly fishing on the Ilkley stretch. There tends to be a lot of flies on the water (mostly small) and thus lots of fish rising – sometimes rising all day long. In the autumn I am usually fishing a size 16 or 18 dry fly or nymph (or 'K&D'). We target Trout up to the end of September and Grayling (by fly fishing) from around late-August through to late-November.

Usually fish catch results are best on overcast and breezy days but dry fly fishing is more pleasurable when there isn't too much breeze. I often check the weather forecast before heading out to fish. I want to know the wind strength and direction. A strong westerly wind can be a big problem because you'll be casting directly into the wind on many of the best dry fly parts of the Ilkley stretch. But it is still worthwhile fishing downstream wet fly, Czech nymph or lures in a strong downstream wind.

If the river is low and clear bright sunny conditions can be the kiss of death for any chances of catching fish. Yes it's nice to go out fishing when the weather is nice but your expectations of success need to be lowered. In these conditions to maximise your chances of a few bites use a finer hook length and try the fastest flowing water.

River conditions are very important to your chances of catching fish. The worst conditions are a very low river level and a high level with muddy water. Perfect conditions are a river falling after a spate. Ideally fish when the river is about 6"-12" higher than normal height but running fairly clear. The River Wharfe is a very fast rising and fast falling spate river. If there is a showery/rainy weather pattern the river level can go up and down like a yo-yo. Often the river level can rise or fall up to 3' in just a few hours (the time it takes for the water to flow from Kettlewell to Ilkley. In the past you had to make educated guesses what the river might be like but now it is much easier to get it right. There is an excellent river level service available on the internet at <https://flood-warning-information.service.gov.uk/river-and-sea-levels>. I use this service a lot to plan when I fish. Put 'Kettlewell' into the 'Location' box and then choose the option 'River Wharfe at Kettlewell'. You will then find out what conditions to expect at Ilkley. If you put 'Ilkley' into the 'location' box you will find out what the river level **was** like a few hours previously rather than what it is likely to be like now. You will be presented by a graph which shows the river level over the past five days and it will

give you a clear indication if the river level is currently rising (bad), falling (often good) or stable (often good). Ideally try to fish when the river level is falling back to almost normal height. The fish tend to bite much better in these conditions whether you or fly fishing or bait fishing.

Combine the river level information with the Met Office or BBC weather forecast for Ilkley and you can decide whether to go fishing or not. I am lucky in that I live just a five minute drive time from the river so if when I get there I don't like what I see I can just go home. Sometimes I drive down to the river to look for rising fish. If I find them then I get my fly rod out and fish. If I don't then I might go home and do something else.

Another 'when' factor on the Ilkley stretch relates to the fact that at times large numbers of people visit the river bank. Whenever there is warm sunny weather, and especially on weekend and school holiday dates when the weather is like this, there can be a lot of disturbance from people (and dogs) on the river bank and in the river. Plan to avoid going fishing on these days during the mid-morning to mid-evening hours. However even on busy days if you fish before 10am and after 7pm you can easily find good spots on the river to catch some fish. The Trout are used to disturbances from people, dogs and stones landing in the water. They might move away for a few minutes but as soon as the disturbance subsides they will move back to their home lie.

Where on the Ilkley stretch

Trout live all along the Ilkley stretch and wherever you stand or sit you are likely to have Trout within casting distance. However some places are better than others. And which is the best place partly depends on the fishing technique that you prefer to use and partly on the river conditions on the day. In the sometimes cold days of the early season the deeper pools are likely to give you the best chance but in low water conditions in the summer months the opposite is the case with the fastest water that you can find often bringing the best chance of catching fish. These are both fairly tough conditions when you are less likely to catch lots of fish.

When the river conditions are good then Trout can be caught almost anywhere along the IAA stretch. But it is a good idea to go looking for them. Don't spend more than 15 to 20 minutes in any one spot if you are not getting any bites and you don't see any sign of Trout rising. Keep on the move until you find the fish. Even when you have and you have caught a few fish you might find that they go off the bite. If you have a poor 20-30 minute spell get back on the move again. Fly fishers are always very mobile and keep on the move. Bait fishers should be too.

I referred at the end of the 'when' section to the disturbance factor on some days. The highest levels of disturbance are where there is easy access and parking close by. Particularly the area near to the main road bridge and the Crumbwheel pool area near to the Middleton woods footbridge can get like Blackpool beach so avoid these areas on busy days. On such days either fish early or late in the day or use the downstream half of the stretch, from the Middleton woods footbridge downstream to the stepping stones near to Ben Rhydding. There will be far less people there.

Conclusion - The Ilkley Angling Association stretch of the River Wharfe is a very good place to go Trout fishing. It holds a large number of mostly wild fish and it provides excellent sport (but not every day) for competent anglers and is an ideal learning environment for novices and gives beginners a very good chance of catching a good sized Trout...or a few.