



Grayling when the crowds have gone home

Warm weather brings hordes of dog-walkers and duck-feeders to the Wharfe at Ilkley but, writes **Paul Procter**, come the autumn and winter you will have this prolific stretch to yourself

Searching for grayling with a team of Spiders on the Wharfe below the old packhorse bridge.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROD CALBRADE



Paul Procter is a vice president of the Wild Trout Trust, an AAPGAI Master Instructor, guide and renowned fly-tyer.

HISTORICALLY, WHARFEDALE HAS been a magnet for fly-fishermen from far and wide; even overseas visitors flock to its banks. Understandably, most are drawn to the upper reaches, where traditional methods hold sway. Here, in search of trout, you can drop flies in pocket water and foaming dubs to your heart's content. Like all rivers, further downstream these dubs develop into larger pools and longer glides. While still a stronghold for trout, grayling begin to make their presence felt, too, and any single pool is capable of housing decent-sized shoals rather than the odd fish or two. Granted, these middle reaches run through towns or villages, but they offer excellent day-ticket sport - often for less than a tenner.

Apparently, Ilkley in Yorkshire is listed as one of the country's most desirable places to live. With folk eager to settle here, a swelling population doesn't help when it comes to game-fishing. And yet, despite the increase in footfall, trout and grayling thrive in the Wharfe hereabouts. This isn't idle gossip, either, as regulars know only too well how robust the stocks of trout - and even more so the grayling - are here. In fact, such is Ilkley's note that this stretch has cropped up in ancient angling literature in which famous authors waxed lyrical about fishing North Country Spiders. It is odd, then, that such well-documented water is overlooked by fly-fishers today. Perhaps it has something to do with how accessible and public this water is. After all, Ilkley park stretches from the old packhorse bridge (upper limit) down to the main road bridge. Naturally, many fishermen seek solitude on a day out and the last thing they need is that niggling enquiry, "ave yer caught owt?" That, or dogs repeatedly leaping in just as you're about to cover a rising fish. Then there are flocks of squabbling ducks to contend with, which

paddle about waiting for the next loaf of Mother's Pride to be flung their way. Thankfully, tranquility is soon restored once the hordes leave. Of course, much quieter, more intimate places do exist where it's possible to run your flies through untroubled water, away from prying eyes.

My good friend and Wharfe stalwart Richard Tong knows these parts better than most, so we met up one autumn morning to try our luck for a grayling or two. For once, conditions bordered on the near perfect. The water was a tad high, but flowing a rich golden colour the Wharfe appeared in fine fettle. Best of all, though, was a light easterly (upstream) breeze that carried a distinct chill. Not only was it good for prompting grayling to shoal up, but it was sharp enough to discourage walkers in the park, too, and this is where we started, close to Ilkley AA's upper boundary.

While tackling up, Richard gave me a rundown on seasonal hatches. As you'd expect, large dark olives (*Baetis rhodani*) feature heavily in spring. These are quickly replaced in mid April by grannom (*Brachycentrus subnubilus*) which I've heard swarm in such tremendous numbers that bankside walkers end up batting them away, thinking there's a plague of moths! This daytime emerging sedge ranks as a high point for Richard and a few like-minded souls. Like any intense fly hatch, this activity spans a good couple of weeks, though you do get three weeks' worth if you include the build-up stage. The river then draws breath before the yellow May dun (*Heptagenia sulphurea*) carnival begins. Decked out in vivid yellow livery, these upwinged flies are difficult to miss, and the trout apparently can't get enough of them.

Summer brings with it blizzards of blue-winged olives (*Serratella ignita*). Once hatches get underway the action can last night after night for weeks, so

"Many fishermen seek solitude on a day out and the last thing they need is that niggling enquiry, 'ave yer caught owt?'"



What is it - a grayling or a brown trout rising?



It's a grayling, taking a fly tight under the far bank.



Paul draws a Wharfe grayling, hooked on a Waterhen Bloa, towards his net.

The Ilkley water at a glance



This out-of-season brownie shows the stamp of trout to be had at Ilkley.

■ **Target species:** Ilkley & District AA water contains good numbers of both wild brown trout and grayling. The trout average 10 in-12 in with a sprinkling of 16 in-17 in (nudging 2 lb) fish. Larger specimens do exist as each year trout of 2 lb-3 lb are reported. Spanning 10-12 inches the grayling here are typical of a Dales river. However, there are a number of larger residents and each year fish close to 2 lb are captured.



A Wharfe grayling, typical of the size found in the rivers of the Dales.

■ **Season:** The trout season runs from March 25-Sept 30; the grayling season from June 16-March 14.

■ **Best times:** Boasting decent spring hatches, early season can be superb with daytime sport expected right through to June. After this, by far the best times are dawn and dusk, especially when the much-awaited blue-winged olives begin to hatch from mid June onwards. Thanks to the needle/willow flies and aphids, September through to November can offer tremendous dry-fly sport. Any cold snap will encourage the grayling to shoal up, making for some good days during the winter.



Willow flies can bring up the fish and provide serious dry-fly sport.

■ **Recommended tackle:** Rods of 9 ft-10ft will suffice though a 10-footer will definitely benefit those who fish Spiders or nymphs. These should be rated for number 3wt-5wt lines and certainly no heavier. For nymphing, tippet strengths of 5 lb (4x) will guard against snags. When fishing dry-flies or spiders this can be reduced to about 3.5 lb (6x).

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The grayling at Ilkley provide great sport when the trout season has closed.

long as damp, cold weather doesn't kill it. In fact this fly can still be evident into the dying days of September and even October. As the nights draw in, willow and needle flies (*Leuctra sp.*) rally themselves once more for a final fling. Often appearing alongside them will be the odd pale watery (*Baetis fuscatus*), making this period a bonanza for grayling enthusiasts. Of course, scores of caddis are present, too, and then there are all those land-bred bugs that litter the surface from time to time.

With nothing rising, trying to locate a fish or two using some sort of nymphs seemed to be our best approach early on - though rather than raking the riverbed with tungsten anchors, much lighter, daintier dressings seemed more appropriate. And, just in case any fish were looking up, a small Black Spider occupied my top-dropper position.

It's hard to imagine a more enjoyable way of

spending an autumn day than working Spiders on a tensioned line in thigh-deep water. This form of fishing is economical, too, as you can cover ground quickly without wasting energy. About 40 yards down the first run a faint knock indicated some interest, followed by doubts as to why the fish failed to commit. Was the nymph too big or perhaps it happened to be moving unnaturally fast?

Given the assortment of bugs here, I thought it unlikely that my size 14 Hare's Ear was too big. Maybe I hadn't mended my line properly on that last drift, causing the flies to motor round too quickly. Before casting again, it's always a good idea to retrace your tracks upstream by a couple of paces. After all, where there's one grayling, others are seldom far away. A few extra mends slowed my flies sufficiently and, third pass down, my line tightened and a spirited brown threw itself furiously out of the water.

As it was a few days the wrong side of September, obviously these weren't our target. On waters holding both trout and grayling, inevitably you'll come across out-of-season fish. Having horsed him to my net, he was quickly admired before being turned loose. A plump fish in mint condition, if all Ilkley's trout are like this, I for one envy the locals!

To avoid pestering other trout, we moved downstream. Richard had put on a dry-fly and was itching to give it a whirl. The problem was there's so much inviting water here that it's hard to walk past it. A long sweeping bend with foam scattered across a good half of its width proved too tempting. Slipping into a fast run at the head of the pool, I left Richard to wander off in search of flat water more suited to dry-fly. Two grayling took the Black Spider almost straightaway. We were nearing that anticipated window of "hatch time". In preparation, I replaced the middle-dropper nymph with a Waterhen Bloa, which instantly got the thumbs up. It was not a huge grayling, but moments later my rod hooped over again, and this fish felt a bit more solid. Initially I thought it was a huge grayling, but a bout of vigorous head-shaking suggested otherwise. Sure enough, a thumping trout eventually rolled on the surface - proof that in certain circumstances trout and grayling will happily lie shoulder to shoulder.

"Serious side-strain hustled the struggling fish away from his companions"

The appearance of a few duns, joined by egg-laying needle flies, prompted me to find smooth water and the chance of rising fish. Rounding a bend below the rocky weir I reached a long, straight flat. Peering through a stand of sycamore, I could just make out Richard playing a fish in the pool tail. Two blipping rises in a tongue of broken water caught my attention.

Shuffling slightly upstream of square and adding a third Spider to my leader, I cast into the foaming confusion and almost instantly a fish pounced. Some serious side-strain hustled the struggling fish away from his companions, which, thankfully, continued to feed, and three more sleek fish obliged, all falling to the Black Magic or Waterhen Bloa. Having tired of fishing Spiders, I put on a single dry-fly - a simple size 16 olive-brown F fly, which would represent either a needle fly or an olive dun.

With a pool several hundred yards long all to ourselves, it was time to get stuck in. The hatch didn't reach epic proportions, yet the pair of us spent a good 90 minutes covering dimpling risers, and though we did encounter the odd trout, the bulk of our fish were grayling.

Shortly after 3.30 the hatch fizzled out, but between us we'd returned a basketful of grayling - not whoppers, but honest-sized fish that make autumn days so special. And best of all we were both confident that, so long as river levels behave, this sort of sport could go on for weeks.



The Ilkley water at a glance

■ **Favourite flies:** It's sacrilege to fish these parts without a selection of North Country flies; the usual suspects include Orange Partridge, Snipe and Purple, Waterhen Bloa and a Black Magic or Hare's Lug and Plover. When fish are looking up small (size 16-20) F fly-type dressings in olive, pale yellow or brown are excellent. Parachute flies, too, are extremely effective with a small Adams or Grey Duster the pick of the bunch. In rough water, larger patterns such as a Klinkhamer or G&H Sedge can bring up fish. Come a flood or cold spell beadhead nymphs such as a Pheasant Tail nymph or Hare's Ear are ideal.

For deep water bugging some form of heavily weighted Cased Caddis will be useful, as will Shrimps and Czech nymphs.

■ **Beat description:** Roughly flowing in an easterly direction with a good mixture of pool, glide, riffle and some pocket water, the Association's fishing extends 1.5 miles from the old Packhorse Bridge in Ilkley downstream to the Stepping Stones. Consisting of double-bank fishing, the water is tree-lined for much of its length, which provides welcome shelter on breezy days. At times the stretch within the park from the packhorse bridge down to the main road bridge can be busy with walkers, though early and late in the day it is relatively deserted. With the arrival of the cold months, fishermen often have this beat to themselves. From the main road bridge downstream to the suspension bridge, although still within the park boundaries, this water is screened from walkers as the path deviates away from the river. Below the suspension bridge is the most secluded section of water, where you'll find peace and quiet.

■ **Access and wading:** With roads or footpaths extending the entire length of this beat both parking and access couldn't be easier. Thigh waders allow reasonable access in many areas but for complete river coverage chest waders are your best bet. A wading stick helps in many areas. Felt soles offer the best grip on polished stones, but the Wharfe has a population of the



Klinkhamer

Beadhead Hare's Ear nymph

Waterhen Bloa

Hare & Plover

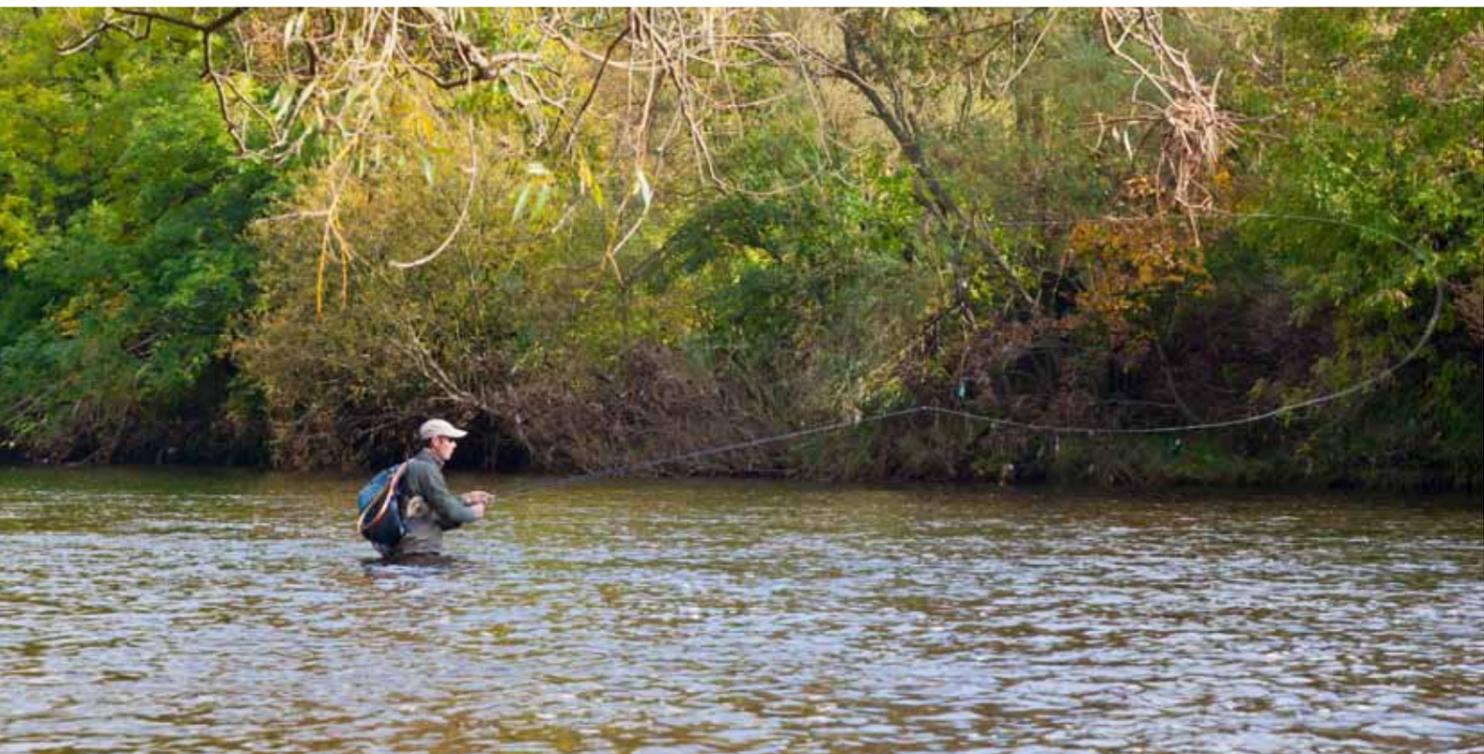
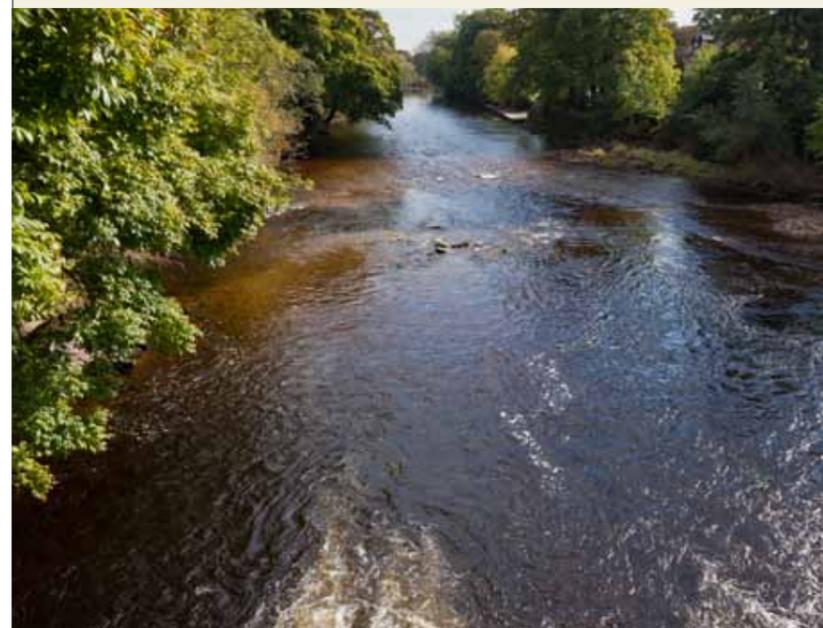
extremely aggressive American signal crayfish so if you are wearing felt soles please remember to disinfect them. Alternatively, the new generation rubber compound (Aquahealth soles) with or without tungsten studs help minimise the spread of this invasive species.

■ **Permits:** Day tickets cost £11 though no Sunday permits are available after the close of the trout season. See www.ilkeyanglingassociation.co.uk/daytickets.html For full details and membership go to www.ilkeyanglingassociation.co.uk

■ **Permits available from:** Ilkley Tourist Information Office, Station Rd, Ilkley LS29 8HB. Tel: 01943 602 319, Fax: 01943 436 235. e-mail: ilkeytic@bradford.gov.uk or Guiseley Angling Centre, 84 Otley Road, Guiseley. Tel: 01943 879 938.

■ **Where to stay:** The Cow and Calf, Hangingstone Road, Ilkley, Yorks LS29 8BT. Tel: 01943 607 335. Web: www.vintageinn.co.uk/ thecowandcalfilkley or Ilkley Riverside Hotel, Bridge Lane, Ilkley, West Yorkshire LS29 9EU. Tel: 01943 607 338. Web: www.ilkey-riversidehotel.com

View of the river downstream of the old packhorse bridge.



Paul covers a rise under the far bank.