

## **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 and in that time I have caught many thousands of Trout and Grayling from it. 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 do.

### **Grayling**

The IAA stretch holds a large population of Grayling with a maximum size of just over 2lbs. It is common to catch fish of over 1lb in weight but rare to catch them bigger than 1lb 8oz. Grayling are indigenous to the River Wharfe and they have never been stocked into the Ilkley stretch. For anglers they complement the Trout very well. The latter is a fish to target from the spring through to the early-autumn whereas we fish for Grayling from late-summer until late-winter. So unless the river is in flood you can catch fish on the IAA stretch for nearly 12 months of the year. The only time when it is not legal to fish the river at all is from 15<sup>th</sup> March until 24<sup>th</sup> March inclusive.

Sometimes Grayling 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 fifteen fish in just a few hours fishing. A more normal catch would be somewhere between two and seven fish.

### **Legalities**

The open season for Grayling is from 16<sup>th</sup> June until 14<sup>th</sup> March inclusive. It is not legal to try to catch Grayling from 15<sup>th</sup> March until 15<sup>th</sup> June.

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 Grayling of any size may be killed**. 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. No fish may be held in a keepnet.

### **Angling Tactics for Grayling**

The main legal tactics for catching Grayling 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.

**Fly fishing** - Grayling eat almost exactly the same natural diet as Trout do. The main exception is that Grayling are very rarely predatory and so lure fly fishing tactics are not suitable for catching Grayling. Rather than repeating what I said about fly fishing the IAA stretch in my Trout article I suggest you read that because almost all of it is equally appropriate to Grayling as it is to Trout.

## **Tackle for fly fishing**

Mostly the tackle used for Grayling fly fishing is the same as for Trout fly fishing. Thus please read the Trout fishing article to find out what tackle is best for Grayling. Grayling grow in the River Wharfe to about half the weight that Trout grow to – 2lbs'ish v's 4lbs'ish. Thus it is possible to use slightly lighter tackle for Grayling than for Trout. However, as it is highly likely that you will hook Trout while you are targeting Grayling, it is best to stick with Trout tackle all year round.

**Flies** – Mostly we use the same flies for Grayling as we do for Trout. However Grayling have a much smaller mouth than Trout do and so we tend never to use large flies for Grayling. A few internet searches of 'River Wharfe Grayling flies' will soon get you lots of good info on which flies to use.

## **Bait fishing**

I often bait fish for Grayling through the winter months. In the winter bait fishing is much more effective than fly fishing for catching Grayling on the Ilkley stretch. Bait fishing tactics for Grayling are very similar to for Trout (thus see the Trout article). Worm is a very effective bait for Grayling with small, 1"-2", worms being best. Maggots and sweetcorn are two other very effective baits for Grayling. When using maggots usually it is best to feed some free samples into the flow on a little and often basis. When using worm or corn hook baits it is not necessary to feed any loose samples. A size 14 hook is ideal for a small worm or a single grain of corn and for maggots a size 16 or 18.

I personally have two most favourite fishing techniques – upstream dry fly and trotting a float with my very old Allcock Match Ariel centre pin reel. Both of these techniques are very visible forms of fishing, which is why I think I like them so much, but both require a lot of practice to become competent. The Ilkley stretch is ideal for both and I always look forward to my winter Grayling trotting. I have a slight preference for using a worm bait over maggots and I very rarely use sweetcorn. One slight disadvantage with using maggots is that sometimes the maggot feed gets the Trout going too much and I would much rather be catching Grayling than Trout. The cost of corn is lower than that of maggots and worms are free if you have access, as I do, to a compost heap.

## **Tackle for bait fishing**

For floatfishing I like to use a 'match' type float rod of around 13' long; a centre-pin reel loaded with 4lb breaking strain line; and I use a 12" hook length of around 3-4lb breaking strain. For ledgering I use a 10' or 11' long quiver-tip rod with a fixed spool reel loaded with 4 or 5lb bs line. If the river is low and clear and the sun is out maximise your chances by using a finer hook length of 2-3lb bs.

When ledgering maggots use a small maggot swim-feeder rather than a ledger weight and a size 16 or 18 fine wire hook. 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 very important. The more confidently the Grayling 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.

I tend not to target Grayling until early-September at the very earliest. Fly fishing is by far the most successful tactic to use through September and October. Fly fishing continues to be good right through to late-November (using small – size 16/18 flies) and usually bait fishing starts to be good from around early-November. Bait fishing can be good for Grayling at Ilkley right through to the end of the season on 14<sup>th</sup> March but the best sport is usually in November and December.

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 or Czech nymph tactics in a strong downstream wind.

River conditions are also very important to your chances of catching Grayling. 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. 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. Ideally try to fish when the river level is falling back to almost normal height. Grayling tend to bite much better in these conditions whether you are 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.

### **Where on the Ilkley stretch**

Grayling live all along the Ilkley stretch and wherever you stand or sit you are likely to have some within casting distance. However some places are better than others. And which is the best place to fish for them partly depends on the fishing technique that you prefer to use and partly on the river conditions on the day. Grayling much prefer to be in or very close to the main flow and they tend only to go into slow deeper pools in high water conditions. One of the very best places to seek Grayling is in the fast ripply water at the top end of a long pool. But if you want to catch them on a dry fly then the smooth surfaced steady flowing water at the downstream end of a pool can be very good. In both cases look for a depth of around 1.5' to 2.5'.

When the river conditions are good, ie. not too high and not too low, then Grayling 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. 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.

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