

BRIEFING NOTE: ANGLING ON INLAND WATERWAYS

Aims

The aim of this briefing note is to advise waterway users who have little knowledge of angling about the background, rules, and etiquette of angling from boats or bankside along our inland waterways.

Angling has declined in recent years but is still among the most popular pastimes in the UK. It can be enjoyed by all ages and is an inexpensive hobby, needing little initial equipment and, like all great pastimes, is simple to learn, yet offers a potential lifetime of variation.

The joy of sitting quietly, half watching a float, and taking in the sounds and sights of the birds, insects and small mammals going about their daily business across the water and around the bankside is a special experience. While other waterway users actively travel past on their boat, bike or on foot, the angler has the time to observe the changing light across the water, watch a busy kingfisher hunt for fish or listen to the scurrying of a vole around the bank edges.

Background

Canal angling became popular during the industrial revolution when factory owners encouraged workers to fish in the growing numbers of working waterways as an alternative to the other drunken and violent sports of the time. Then, as now, there was a huge difference between canal and river fishing – both in the methods used but also the fish likely to be caught. Canals generally have slower moving water, are shallower and often much less fished than the rivers. Over the last 25 years, the canals have fallen out of fashion with anglers, possibly due to the growth of commercial fisheries. Yet canals offer the angler the opportunity to enjoy their hobby within a historical landscape, they benefit from being easily accessible, they run through many of our major urban conurbations and in the winter see little boating traffic. There are many stretches of the canal where it is possible to find quiet, peace, and solitude in the lovely unspoilt countryside to witness nature at its best. Due to the nature and diversity of canal fishing, anglers can never be sure what they will catch next!

It is possible to catch a huge variety of species from our canals – roach, perch, chub, pike, carp and, where rivers run into canals, our native brown trout and rainbow trout. It is possible to catch fish to very good sizes too. A 40lb carp has been caught from the Grand Union Canal at West Drayton, one of this size from the Kennet & Avon Canal and rumours of 40lb carp from the Basingstoke Canal. There is even a flowing stretch of the Kennet & Avon Canal where grayling are sometimes caught. Pike over 28lb from the Basingstoke Canal are recorded and in the winter of 2015/2016 a pike of 26lb 14ozs was landed from the Kennet & Avon Canal.

Modern trends have seen an increase in the popularity of lure angling in canals with active competition scenes offering opportunities to those anglers who are interested in the possibility of taking their hobby to the next level. More traditional matches are still held on our canal network, especially in the winter months when there is less boat traffic. These matches are well attended with sometimes over 50 fishermen taking part. However, many anglers still choose to fish the canals simply for relaxation, often for the more elusive roach – a fish which requires patience, skill, and some luck to catch to specimen size.

The best fishing is either early or late in the day when there is less bankside disturbance, the boats have stopped passing and the locks are not operating and therefore creating moving water.

Permission to Fish

Fishing rights to most of the inland waterway network belong to local fisheries or angling clubs. Often a one-day licence can be purchased from a bailiff visiting the bankside. Other fisheries require joining as a member and paying a yearly subscription to fish. Details of individual fishing clubs and waterways can be found on the Angling Trust website, and it is always better to check before you go to avoid disappointment.

<https://anglingtrust.net/map/>

Some stretches may not be let for various reasons. Canal & River Trust operates a Waterway Wanderers Scheme making these waters available to individual anglers and angling clubs.

<https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/enjoy-the-waterways/fishing/waterway-wanderers-scheme>

The close season operates from 15th March to 15th June and is a period of time when fishing in many places is prohibited to allow coarse fish to spawn uninterrupted. This no longer applies to most lakes, ponds and stretches of canal apart from those designated an SSSI. Rivers, streams and drains still operate a close season. The Environment Agency is responsible for enforcing the close season.

<https://www.gov.uk/freshwater-rod-fishing-rules/overview>

Fishing from a boat may be allowed but a day or season membership of the controlling angling club must be purchased, and their rules must be adhered to at all times.

Rod Licences

A rod licence is required by everyone aged 13 and over to fish for salmon, trout, freshwater fish, smelt and eel with a rod and line in England (except the River Tweed), Wales and the Border Esk region of Scotland. However, thanks to recent regulation changes, anglers aged 13 to 16 are entitled to a free rod licence. Fishing the Thames at the locks and weirs requires an additional licence. Licences are issued by the Environment Agency and are valid for 12 months from the date of purchase so you can decide to take up fishing at any time of the year safe in the knowledge that your licence will be valid for twelve months. There are concessions available and shorter licences of one day and eight-day durations. Fishing without a licence is an offence and carries a fine up to £2,500.

Be aware of unscrupulous websites that sell rod licences at, sometimes, huge profits! Your rod licence is available directly from the Environment Agency website. More information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/fishing-licences/when-you-need-a-licence>

Protecting and maintaining the waterways

The angler is one of a variety of people looking after our waterways and angling clubs hold regular work parties to improve their local waterway for fishing. They carry out work to improve fishing swims by litter picking, clearing overhanging vegetation and maintaining the towpaths. Anglers are very aware of the damage invasive species have on native fish populations and will not return signal crayfish or zander to the water if caught. The impact to bank erosion being caused by Himalayan balsam has led to many clubs running their own work parties to remove the plant from their waters. Floating pennywort and other carpet-forming invasive plants such as Australian swamp stonecrop can make waterways not only un-navigable but also unfishable.

Angling clubs are helping to stop the spread of invasive species by ensuring their members comply with the National Non-native Species Secretariat's "Check, Clean, Dry" campaign. <https://www.nonnativespecies.org/what-can-i-do/check-clean-dry/>

Using the waterways in harmony

Boater etiquette when passing anglers is to stay in the central channel and maintain a steady speed. The maximum permissible speed on most smaller waterways is 4mph. Boaters should slow when passing anglers to reduce wash and give the angler an opportunity to retract a long pole which may stretch the width of the canal. A passing boat will stir up the silt and can encourage fish to begin feeding so is not always unwelcome to the angler.

Anglers should take due consideration when fishing near residential and moored boats. They should refrain from using a catapult to place bait opposite a moored boat and take care to ensure line and equipment does not end up on the boat. Anglers should not fish closer than 25 metres to a lock or in the lock chamber and remember to take all litter home with them.

Towpaths can be a busy place and due to their narrow width, care must be taken for all users to stay safe. Anglers should set up as close to the bank edge as possible and avoid their rods or poles jutting out into the pathway. Care should be taken to ensure no cyclist or walker is passing when casting out. Walkers and cyclists should be aware of equipment around an angler and slow down when passing.

Cyclists should slow if approaching an angler and, if possible, dismount to pass. It is advisable for cyclists to have third party public liability insurance when cycling in public places in case of unintentional damage to a fishing pole or other item.

Canoes, kayaks, and small craft are advised, when passing anglers, unless they request otherwise, to follow a straight course and keep to the centre of the channel, in single file.