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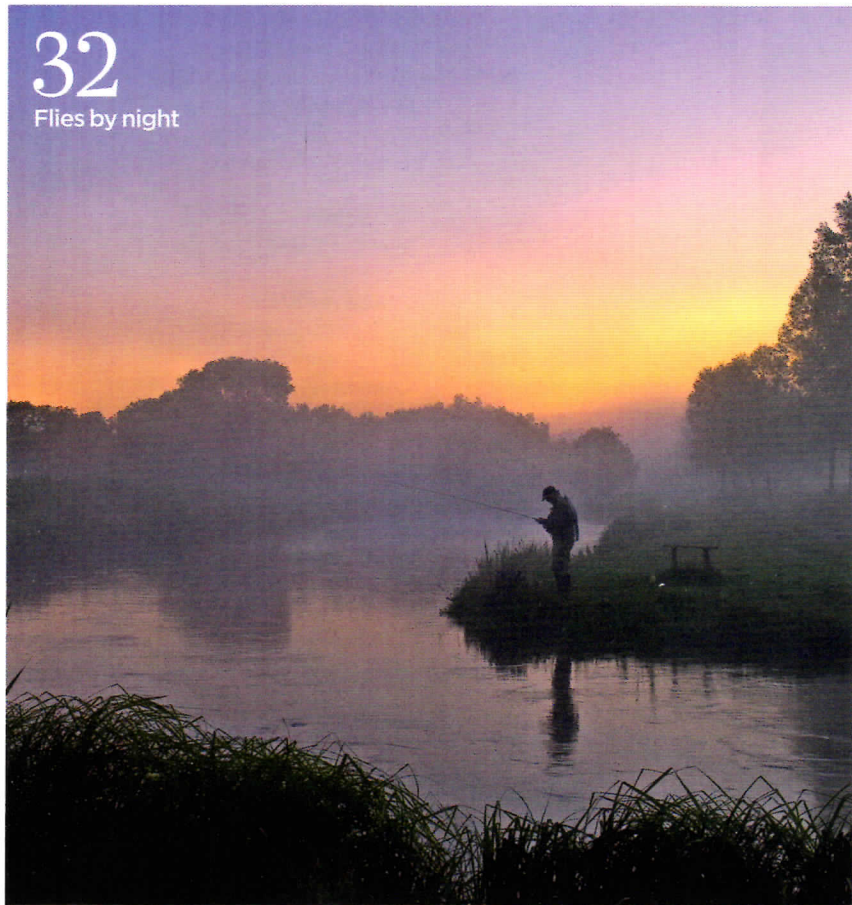
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From dusk 'til dawn on the river-bank

Fishing after dark is a magical experience, says **Simon Cooper**,
with frenetic rises and playful otters to entertain the nocturnal angler



ONE of the joys of living at Nether Wallop Mill, where the brook runs both under and around the house, is that fishing is something my family and friends and I often do together spontaneously. If there is a gorgeous sunrise, the beauty of the river is more than enough motivation to abandon a warm bed. On a summer's evening, we potter around until well

past dark. It is never what you might call full-on fishing, more the chance to soak in the joy of being by a river and share the companionship of being fly-fishers. You fish, you talk, you share a drink... The hours just slide by and before you realise it you have entered the magical universe of the riverside by night. In the blue darkness, lit by a sliver of moon, the river surface will become a bright ribbon, illuminating the valley. In that close proximity to

water every sound is amplified as your ears become your eyes; the landscape will suck you in and a whole new world will be revealed as you discover that a river never sleeps.

There is a definite pattern to the evolution of a river by night. With six or so hours of summer darkness, Mother Nature paces herself to give all the players – insects, fish, eels, bats, rodents, owls and otters – an equal chance to exploit the fruits of the dark. As the



Casting as the sun rises on the River Test in Hampshire. Below: otters will keep you company at night on some chalkstreams

sun sets over the river there is a sense of purpose as the day shift ends and the night shift makes its appearance. Moorhens are definitely day birds; their shrieks seem to get louder as it gets darker until they have chivvied their offspring into the safety of the nest. The occasional water vole, returning from food gathering, will cruise along the water's edge slaloming between the reeds until, with a distinctive "plop", it dips under the surface to find

the underwater entrance to its nest. For the insects it is not so much the onset of darkness that sounds the alarm but the drop in the air temperature. A decision must be made: should they lay their eggs then or wait until the following day? I have no idea whether a blue-winged olive has sufficient concept of time to discriminate between today or tomorrow. I guess it is more a question of readiness, coupled with the urgency that nightfall ➤





brings, that sends them dipping on to the water's surface for an egg-laying frenzy that in turn creates an El Dorado for fly-fishers: the evening rise.

The one thing you can be sure of is that you will not be alone. The moment the sun dips below the horizon the first bats will appear from their daytime roosts in trees, abandoned farm buildings and under bridges. Noiseless, at least to the human ear, they will jink and turn above you like dog-fighting Spitfire pilots, using sonar pings to home in on tiny insects. Like you, they are following the insects to the water although I suspect their need is more urgent. In a single night, each bat must consume 4,000 or so insects before its needs are sated. Bats rarely trouble fishermen; I suppose

Chef Mike Robinson (bottom right) enjoys a twilight picnic of freshly caught trout. Barn owls and spiders share the surroundings

the bulk, heat and movement of an angler is so freakish to them that we are given a wide berth. Trout, on the other hand, are deprived of their daytime defences; without sunlight and shadows, for once the advantage is slightly tilted in favour of the angler.

The evening rise starts all of a sudden as a splash catches your ears. In all probability, you will not be able to see those telltale concentric rings that point to where the fish rose

“ At night, fish come again and again to the surface; they feed like fury, you fish like fury ”

but the secret here is to stay put. Wait for the rises to come to you; there is nothing more pointless than an angler with the vision of a mole blundering around on a river-bank at night. The magic of the evening rise is that within a few minutes of that first splash the whole river will come alive with feeding fish. For once you will realise just how many fish populate a chalkstream as, freed of their

daylight inhibitions, the fish devour the egg-rich flies, coming again and again to the surface. Knowing that it will all be over soon spurs on both trout and angler. They feed like fury; you fish like fury.

Casting to fish you can't see is an act of faith impelled by expectation. Those daytime visual clues you take for granted count for nothing in the dark. Now, you strain your eyes, calculating approximately where your fly has to land and then waiting for the splash that tells you when to strike. At night, fish always feel bigger and more powerful, the headstrong runs that tear off your line beyond your sight are far more heart-pounding than during the day.

All frenetic rises must end and the evening ones will taper off to nothing in a very short time. But I'll bet you will hardly notice the transition. One minute you will be trying to cover every inch of the turbulent water and the next there will be nothing more than a few sporadic splashes. As the adrenalin seeps from your veins you will hope this is just a pause in the action. However, as the chill of the night creeps into your clothes you know it is all over. Even the bats know it, veering away from the river to hunt for different prey over the open meadows, where they compete with the barn owls for air space.



These gliding, wraith-like birds are anglers' nocturnal companions as they criss-cross the land in search of field mice. I am fascinated by how they work; graceful, sublime and effortless in flight, their beauty belies a deadly purpose. They pause mid-flight, drop out of the sky, then reappear a moment later with a mewling mouse between their talons, which they silence by squeezing the life out of it.

In the river that never sleeps the undoubted monarchs of the night are the otters. They are often described as shy but in the dark and in the habitat of their choosing they are bold and unabashed. Long before you see them you will hear them. Otters have no qualms about announcing their presence, calling to each other with high-pitched squeals that resemble a form of mammalian triangulation. Sit still on the bank and they will pretty much ignore you as they cavort, dive and swim in what appears to be nothing more than exuberance. Otters will travel miles and miles in a night staking out their territory, and they certainly waste a huge amount of energy doing it. Occasionally they will get serious, gathering in a pool to hunt, diving and re-diving, surfacing each time with a rasping cough as they refill their lungs until, eventually, one whiskered head appears with an eel, fish or crayfish. Eating

prey is a brutal affair done at speed. Dragged on to the bank, skin, bones and shell are torn, crunched and swallowed accompanied by a disturbing sound that you will be glad to hear end as the otters pour themselves back into the river, heading off to their daytime holt.

With the otters gone, there is a definite pause in the predawn ritual. The denizens of the night have headed home, leaving a smooth river and dew-damp meadows shrouded in a light mist. The silence and stillness is pervasive, almost comforting, until it is broken by a gentle slurping sound from the reeds. If it weren't for the preceding silence you'd never catch this sound but locate its source and you'll see a tiny, shiny grey/black serpent-like head emerge beside a reed stem. It is an eel, patiently waiting for a damselfly nymph to crawl up the reed to hatch in the fresh air. But the latter's effort will be in vain. As the nymph strains to push through the surface tension, the eel will casually suck in his morning meal.

And so, as the sun rises the day shift returns and the familiar order of life on the river resumes. Yet, somehow, no matter how great the day that follows, the magic of the night will stay with you for an awful lot longer. ■



FLIES BY NIGHT

For those who would like to spend a night beside a river, Fishing Breaks offers two-day/one-night fish camps on chalkstreams in Hampshire and Wiltshire. Prices start from £250 for small groups and families from June to August. For details, call 01264 781988 or go to www.fishingbreaks.co.uk.

Simon Cooper's *Life of a Chalkstream*, published in paperback by William Collins, is available from Amazon and all good bookshops, RRP: £10.

The Avon takes on a mythical quality gliding through Salisbury, Wiltshire, as daylight fades

