

THE KAMCHATKA THUNDERBOLT

Sensational steelhead fishing on the edge of the planet

TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955



GLAMPING FOR GRAYLING

A cabin holiday in the heart of Wales

TROUT ON THE HOOF

Walked-up brownies in the Cumbrian Fells

ESSENTIAL RIVER TACKLE

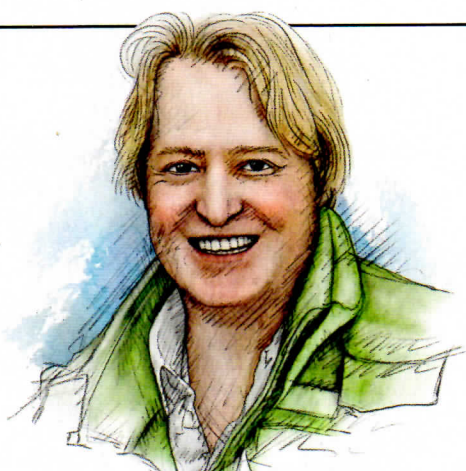
Paul Procter rebuilds his trout outfit from scratch

DON STAZIKER'S GUIDE TO GRAYLING INDICATORS

GIVE SALMON THE "V"

Tie a deadly new style of fly this winter





CHALK TALK

It's a long winter

*The close season can be tough for keepers, explains **Simon Cooper***

A FEW YEARS AGO, DEFRA, THEN known as the Ministry of Agriculture, tied itself in all sorts of knots, metaphorically and actually, when every farmer in England and Wales received a pack that contained a length of blue binder twine.

Someone, somewhere, had discovered that farmers had one of the highest suicide rates in the rural community (vets are the most at risk, by the way) and that the problem needed addressing. The solution was that each farmer, having read the accompanying information booklet, should tie a knot in the twine and put it in their pocket as a reminder, if good thoughts turned bad, that others were thinking of them. I think it is fair to say that this initiative was greeted with derision and incredulity – I don't think it has been repeated. As a product of a farming family I was equally sceptical at the time, but two decades on I see things slightly differently.

River keepers have an apparently blessed life. What could be better than spending your working days by the river? The honest answer is nothing except...

It is true that from April to September a keeper's life has the most wonderful cadence. The imminent arrival of spring. The first smell of newly mown river banks. The writhing, golden bodies that slide into the water with the arrival of the stocking truck. The hawthorn. The mayfly. The blue-winged olives. Sedges. These are the benchmarks by which you measure the passing of spring into summer. The back-breaking effort of each weed-cut, applying order to the rampant growth of nature. Happy fishermen sharing stories. A cup of tea with old friends who go back so many years that nobody cares to count them. The misty mornings where you share the river with nobody other than the creatures that inhabit it. The long dusky evenings of summer when you stand in awe among the stillness and silence. Rivers are the most amazing places. But these are just six months out of 12.

"What good is the warmth of summer, without the cold of winter to give it sweetness?" wrote John Steinbeck, author of *The Grapes of Wrath*. I think we can safely conclude that he never spent days on end in waders repairing banks. Heaved

giant fallen boughs from fast-flowing water. Shovelled soft soil that had turned to mud. Hammered fence posts. Swore at recalcitrant machinery. Nursed aches and bruises on a body that should by rights be 20 years younger for such tasks. I have never met a keeper who needed a winter to appreciate the summer. However, I do know that every winter is long and hard, and not just in the physical sense.

The thing about the spring and summer is that they have cadence; a steady progression of markers that tick off the days and months. Time scurries by. Often there are not enough hours in the day to complete all the tasks. Grass grows relentlessly. There is the daily arrival of fishers to greet and cajole. Running repairs to keep the show on the road until that winter sojourn. An ever-ringing mobile phone for this and that. And you are somehow meant to find a day each week to attend to all your personal chores.

But suddenly it all ends. The river is deserted by anglers. You have the place to yourself. For a while it's a blessed relief. Old-time keepers would embark on an October month of "putting the river to bed". Cutting back the weed. Shaving the fringes to the ground. Giving the banks one last, tight mow. Today, the philosophy is different. The weed, fringes and grass are home to myriad bugs and creatures that rely on all three for cover and food. Cutting them back is essentially a death sentence, so today your winter river will be largely left untouched, a little ragged until the March tidy-up.

For the diligent keeper, the first task of the close season will be attending to the spawning grounds, ensuring there are beds of loose gravel caressed by fast-flowing, oxygenated water. Skilful weed-cutting may achieve this, though often more radical intervention is needed by way of breaking the gravel crust with a garden fork or a high-powered water jet.

"One keeper ... confided in me that he went an entire week without speaking to another living soul"

Then it's on to bank repairs; these are best completed ahead of the aforementioned spawning and the heavy flows after Christmas. Though some work is done by big teams with heavy machinery, usually it is one man with hand tools.

So far, so good, but it is the long haul from New Year until the first murmurings of spring that eat into the soul of the river keeper. The days are short. The weather is bad. The work is probably those jobs that you have been putting off for a year already. But it is the emptiness of the countryside that hurts. Most birds have fled to warmer climes. Small mammals all but hibernate. Even the fish, in post-spawning torpor, vanish. The most constant companions are herons, who, stooped and grey, hardly make for inspiring partners as the water drips from their feathers. All of a sudden, river-keeping becomes a very lonely job. One keeper who lived alone once confided in me that he went an entire week without speaking to another living soul.

I don't think a piece of twine would help, but should you ever be passing your favourite beat in the depths of winter you might be surprised at the good you will do and the welcome you'll receive. **IRS**

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