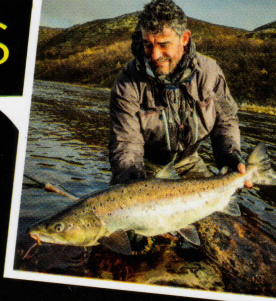


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CHALK TALK

Better days ahead

Simon Cooper peers through the gloom and finds life by the river

FEBRUARY IS A WRETCHED MONTH. It is stuck in a time warp all of its own making, neither winter nor spring. Listing the great things that have happened in February is a little like reciting the names of famous Belgians: as with the month itself — a short affair. Perhaps that is to be its redeeming glory.

Am I being unfair? As I squidge my way along naked banksides and stare up at wet-black trees standing against a grey sky that rarely reveals the sun I'm inclined to say no, but the chalkstreams, in gradually unfurling themselves towards the new season, do offer hope. However, don't anticipate being heartened by the sight of trout, for there will be none. After spawning, our natives simply disappear from view, hunkering down among tree roots and the dark recesses of undercut to conserve depleted bodies for the lean months ahead. Grayling, on the other hand, are in frenetic form.

Trout are not great performers in the reproduction stakes; their "pairing up" is as perfunctory as it sounds. Grayling courtship is far more splendid; they haven't evolved that glamorous dorsal fin for nothing. They are like their brown trout and Atlantic salmon cousins in being polygynandrous; that is to say both sexes mate with more than one partner. However, unlike other salmonids it is the male grayling who guards the spawning bed, encouraging in receptive females while driving away other males, egg-eating trout and unripe females. The denouement, short though it is at less than half a minute, is something to behold as the two unite, the male folding his dorsal fin over the back of his partner to hold them together, side by side, as hundreds of eggs are fertilized that will, having lodged in the gravel, hatch within two to three weeks.

Grayling are not the only creatures with the next generation in mind; water voles are emerging from their winter purdah. And those who have survived since autumn don't exactly

have much time on their hands — life expectancy is just five months. With the banks shorn of vegetation, now is one of the better moments to spot Kenneth Grahame's Ratty as he ranges over 150 yards of riverside in search of a mate and food, a territory surprisingly large for one so small and apparently vulnerable.

Perhaps the most unexpected appearance in February, at least to the uninitiated, are the midges, the dancing clouds sometimes so huge that you have to swat them away to clear your progress and avoid any intake of breath as you pass through. It doesn't take much to bring on these regular hatches. A sliver of sunshine. A brief uptick in temperature. Or a lull in the wind, which allows them to hang for ages until, as if summoned by some unseen hand, they vanish. Newcomers to our rivers, or those traumatised by trips to the west coast of Scotland, often take some persuading that our southern midges are of the non-biting variety. At which point I generally give up any act of entomological know-how because the different types run into the thousands, so I fall back on their Latin name *Chironomidae* by way of explanation. Though quoting a near-dead language tends to make you sound a bit Boris Johnsonesque, there is some logic: *chironomidae* stems from the Ancient Greek word *kheironómos* that in turn translates to the modern "pantomimist" or dancer in a pantomime. Explain this and midges suddenly become far more user-friendly, their strange aerial contortions given an amusing context. I, on the other hand, take succour that thousands of midges in the air multiplies into many thousands more in the river; the larvae and pupae providing winter food for not just trout and grayling, but bullheads and sticklebacks; an important part of the entire aquatic food chain.

But it is the rivers themselves that are the highlight of

"Though quoting a near-dead language tends to make you sound a bit Boris Johnsonesque, there is some logic"

February, sparkling and shining even on the gloomiest day. The gravel looks as if each individual stone has been meticulously varnished. Bright shards of flints are our very own diamonds. The ranunculus weed is at its most vivid green. The ever-rolling stream pounds swiftly by. Reborn. The last remnants of the summer drought and the winter run-off long since taken to the sea. The riverbed, even beneath leaden skies, is so bright that it almost hurts the eyes if you stare at it for too long.

So, when I curse February for its manifest shortcomings, I look to the river to thank Mother Nature for delivering a glimpse of better things to come. **T&S**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.