

I DREAM OF NAMELESS *Part Two* NOMADS

INSIDE THE LAIR

During my fishing of the productive area, the pressure I was putting on them was pushing them further out and into the middle of the lake and no matter how much I tried, I just couldn't get a take closer in. They liked it out there and it seemed they were intent on staying put. The problem was now the distance and I was fishing effectively at my limits. I needed a new advantage and set about planning a season of commando missions for the following spring.

Writer / Photography: Matt Charlton

PROFILE

Name: Matt Charlton
Age: 32
Occupation: Manufacturing
PB fish: 45lb 12oz foreign
44lb 19oz UK
Favourite venue: Anywhere quiet and the Chert
Sponsor: None

I wanted to put myself bang in the middle of their lair and the only way I could do this would be to fish off the adjacent island, trouble was, the resident sailing club and angling association might not approve! But it had to be done and that was that! So, during the dead of numerous winter nights I made my way onto the island with a petrol-trimmer and selection of hand tools and gradually cleared a route to a spot that gave me the most perfect of swims ever. It was freezing February but the work needed to be carried out during the early hours to eliminate the risk of being discovered. On the island, I dug a secret hole in the ground and constructed a large, waterproof storage box for essential, but heavy items of tackle like leads and water that could be left behind, relieving as much weight as possible from the journeys on and off.

The island was an untouched wilderness, an overgrown mountain, probably a quarter of a mile long. It gave the most amazing views ever! High up on the top I was, at long last, looking right down on their secret lair. I felt like an explorer, excited by the knowledge that the carp, as yet, had absolutely no idea of my presence. I could have started fishing early but decided to wait until the first big winds of spring when I was sure they would congregate in numbers.

I made my way onto the island with fishing tackle under the cover of darkness on a new, big, south-westerly at the end of April as the trees were starting to bud. An electric feeling of anticipation built up inside as I stood and stared at the water in front of me, sparkling under a waning moon. At long last I was sure I had the carp exactly where I wanted them. The rods where in place by midnight and I sat under my shelter looking out at a completely new and panoramic view of the lake, one which I must have been the first to experience in any angling situation. Camouflage netting was draped over the Titan but in most cases when my back was turned, it was stolen by the resident family of fox cubs for games of tug-of-war. It always touches me that, whenever one enters a wild world, its inhabitants can be warmly welcoming and happily go about their business around you. As long as that is, you allow them to.

The first run came at half-past four, not long after first light and gave me a small common carp. Five-thirty and with a slight twinge of disappointment, a familiar-looking lump was in the net in the shape of the big mirror from last year, at 34lbs.

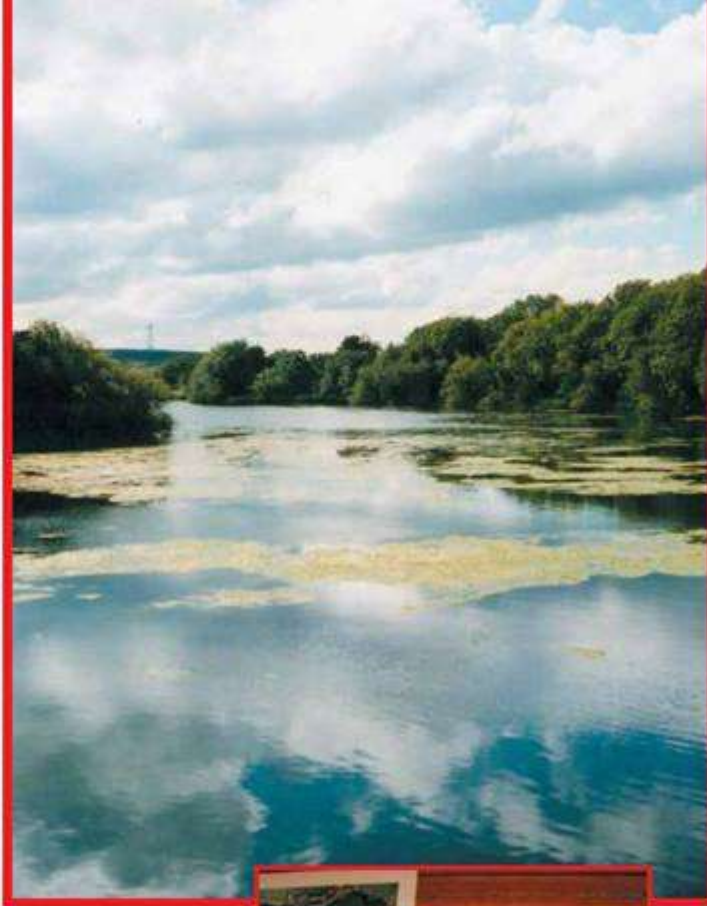
The big mirror's second capture at 34lb 6oz.



I was fishing all four rods on 20mm Strawberry Cream EA high-attract readymades, irresistible to both the fish and me, as I couldn't stop scooting them! I topped up the swim as each fish was caught, most of which were spraying red goo all over the unhooking mat. Rigs consisted of 3.5oz Korda in-lines to a simple 12-inches of 25lb Silkworm line aligned to a size 8; Fox Series 3 hook. Nothing fancy, just my usual, straight-out-the-bag, bottom-bait stuff and I very much doubt that anything else would have improved my results.

The south-west wind had got up to full speed and was whipping up white-caps that glistened like diamonds in the warm, spring sunshine beaming down through broken clouds. Out in front, I had a large, sandy plateau with a thick bed of Canadian pondweed sitting at about 100 yards, right out towards the middle of the lake, an area that could never be cast to from any bank. Its position was perfect for the big, mild winds and it was obvious why they liked it all the way out here, an easy retreat from the pressure I had put on them last year. It was perfect carp habitat, as the bottom varied in depth and substrate - an extremely attractive environment for most aquatic life. It also explained why attempts to fish on the end of the wind would always seem to result in failure. This was the one and only place in the entire lake where weed could be found in abundance and it stopped them in their tracks. The fish just headed to this area, held up and seldom went any further, leaving the rest of the water pretty much devoid of carp altogether.

Half-past six and another pretty mirror is held up for the camera. Unfortunately, by dinner time, the sailing club, like me, had decided to take full advantage of the weather and the boats came out in droves. This made fishing too risky to continue so I decided to wind-in and remained in my hide until evening, feeding my fish with tinned sardines and slices of ham. By dusk, the rods were back on their spots and as usual, the night remained biteless. But I wasn't complaining as this was giving me the opportunity for a good night's sleep, waking afresh as the first buzzer signalled the start of the big morning



feed. The next day produced another three good fish and the following afternoon a stunning 19lb mirror. Things had gone to plan from the off. They were in front of me for sure and in numbers it seemed.

During the intermittent periods of high pressure, I would don my wetsuit, snorkel, mask and fins and swim out to the areas where I was taking fish from into the cold brown silt, feeling for the harder areas and exploring the lair in greater detail. I was looking for common denominators, anything that would give clues as to why the carp were so particularly fond of the hot spots I had discovered within the area. Some days, I would snorkel the entire length of The Pit, stopping to investigate any other interesting areas, often surfacing with hands cut to ribbons on the mussel beds. When I got tired, I would make my way to one of the sailing buoys, spaced out around the lake and cling to these until my energy returned. Although a certain amount of information can be gathered by plumbing and leading, I have never found it an adequate way of satisfying myself that I know enough about an area that proves to be carp haven. So when an area produces carp on a notable scale, I explore it in detail by diving.

During my second session on the island I lost one carp and landed six, but, disappointingly, four of them turned out to be fish I had caught during the previous trip. Again, after a couple of days, the action subsided and I left awaiting the next new big low. This came a week later and another three-day trip produced a further seven carp. This session was my favourite as it threw up three new, super-strong mid-20 mirror and a meaty 25lb leather. Each fish held firm and my arms ached continuously from the battles. I fought them hard, revelling in every moment and trembling from head to toe, stunned by their sheer strength and determination as they instinctively made full use of the water's rugged terrain in any attempt to break free and evade capture.

The whole experience was exhilarating from start to finish. Even the timing of the takes was perfect, ample opportunity to land, weigh, photograph and return a fish and relax happily with a drink or bite to eat, taking everything in, just in time for the next one!

Here I was, sitting in my island hideaway that hadn't been stepped upon since the pit's excavation nearly 40 years previously, catching beautiful, big-scaled, firm-bodied mirror carp that no-one on Earth even cared to know existed.

Two weeks into the year and I'd caught a number of priceless carp, all gleaming in their fit and healthy condition. I was living one of those rare moments when you finally achieve what you have always been striving to accomplish and can relish a complete sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. By popular standards, the number of fish, or indeed their size, was not notably impressive, and despite having caught larger carp prior to and since, those moments, are still to this day some of the most rewarding and cherished memories of fishing I have. Everything had fallen into place. I loved the isolation, the fact that the carp had none of those awful fish-names that erode the wild essence of the creature, the untouched ways of nature surrounding me at all times and the feeling that I had perhaps gone where no man had gone before. I was fishing for wild, mysterious fish on my own terms, uncomplicated by the presence and actions of others.



THE SEARCH FOR MORE

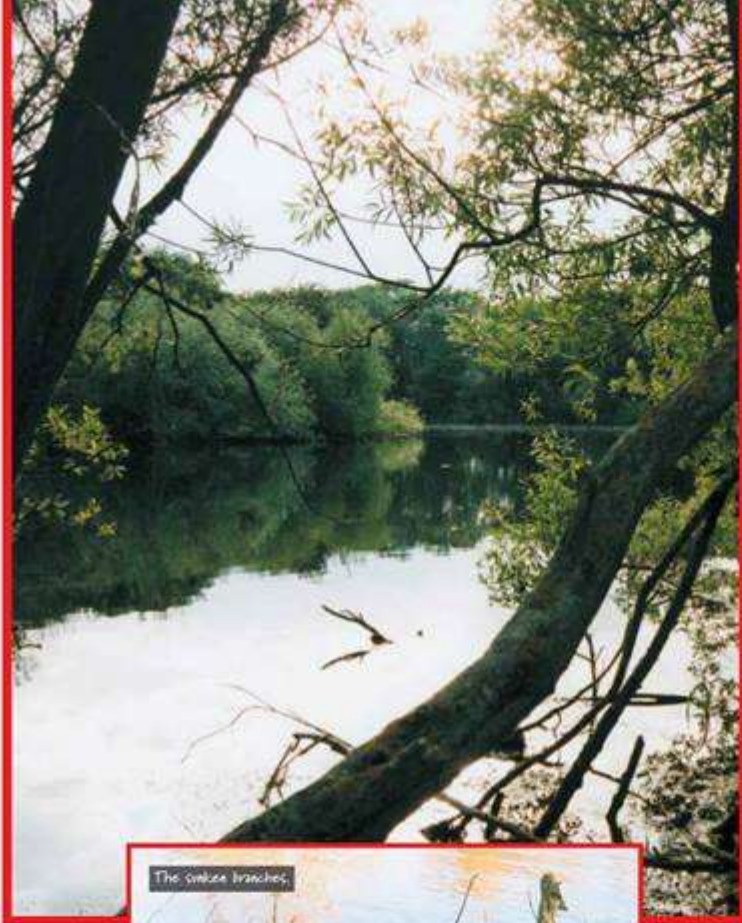
Such was the carp's preference for this particular area in certain weather conditions throughout the year, that I became confident of action every time I fished it and for the first time on this water, decided to continue fishing into the winter, taking fish in February, which I have always considered to be the hardest of months and thus that little bit more rewarding. I had found their home and at times, would have estimated to have the vast majority of the entire population out in front of me, but the increasing number of repeat captures was slowly starting to take the shine off things.

I had often pondered on some fish being 'semi-residential' - spending a lot of time in certain areas and thus the possibility of different parts of the lake holding new, as yet unknown fish. With this in mind, I began to fish alternative areas much more than I had done so in the past in an attempt to discover new fish, but with the odd small exception, to no avail. I did however, continue to catch carp from other areas with some consistency, fishing over several years but disappointingly, I was just turning over the regular tired old bunch time and time again. The same few fish would travel great distances in surprisingly short amounts of time, turning up at various parts of the lake depending on weather conditions, the presence of weed and the time of year.

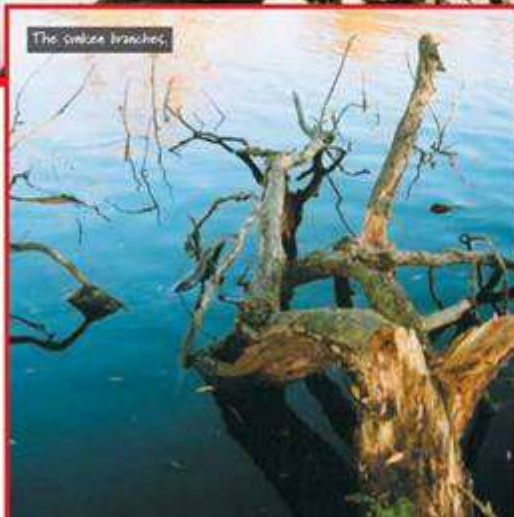
Spawning time would usually see the fish move to an area of shallow, terrapin infested jungle that I call The Swamp. This time of year would give an excellent opportunity to view a lot of the population in groups. On many occasions I have stood in the middle of The Swamp, with several carp swimming fearlessly around my legs, enabling me to recognise individual fish. But I've never seen that elusive uncaught monster that some would believe exists in every big water.

Predictably, the shallow water in front of The Swamp was a superb area to catch carp when the weather was warm. Here, they loved the island margins and a carefully placed bait would almost always result in a take. It was also a fun place to be in the heat of the summer sun as time could be spent snorkelling or drifting around on the boat with my head over the side. When bored, the eternal child within would see me racing through the mangrove chasing terrapins and grass snakes.

With all the hours to while away whilst carp fishing, it is common to sit and wonder to the point of worry, exactly how our beloved baits and carefully constructed rigs lie and behave on the lake bed. So, one hot, still afternoon, in the clear water of the shallows, I decided to find out for sure and snorkelled down my mainlines for a carp's eye view. I was pleasantly surprised. Everything was in order, just how I would want it in my head. Contrary to what is often cause for concern, all the freebies were still present



The swamp branches.



around the hook bait and on this occasion had not, as is often claimed, been devoured by an ultra crafty carp that had, cunningly managed to avoid the hook bait entirely!

As time progressed, The Pit started to receive attention from other carp fishermen. Fish caught were given pet names. I kept away for a few years as my beloved wilderness suddenly became festooned with giant bruy domes. The 'crowds' were something I had difficulty coming to terms with, having been spoiled for choice during my early years at the water when it would be completely deserted, often for the entire year.

Over the course of time I met some efficient anglers, most of whom I befriended and were kind enough to give me photographs of the fish they were catching. Since the beginning, I have kept meticulous records and growth charts of all fish caught, backed up with good quality prints to enable individual fish to be easily recognised and new ones to be quickly identified. I also have a large collection of photographs that display different anglers and the carp they have caught from The Pit. There are many different faces from all over the years, using various baits and fishing different areas at various times. In that collection of prints there is not one single mirror carp that I have not caught myself, which to me, reinforces my estimation of around 50 fish, certainly less than one per acre. That said, I could be far from the truth: It's a big water, there's certainly plenty of room to allow a percentage of fish to evade capture for several years. But when a whole bunch of different people are catching the same fish over and over again through a period of several years; how many unknowns are we to consider exist?

LAST GASTS

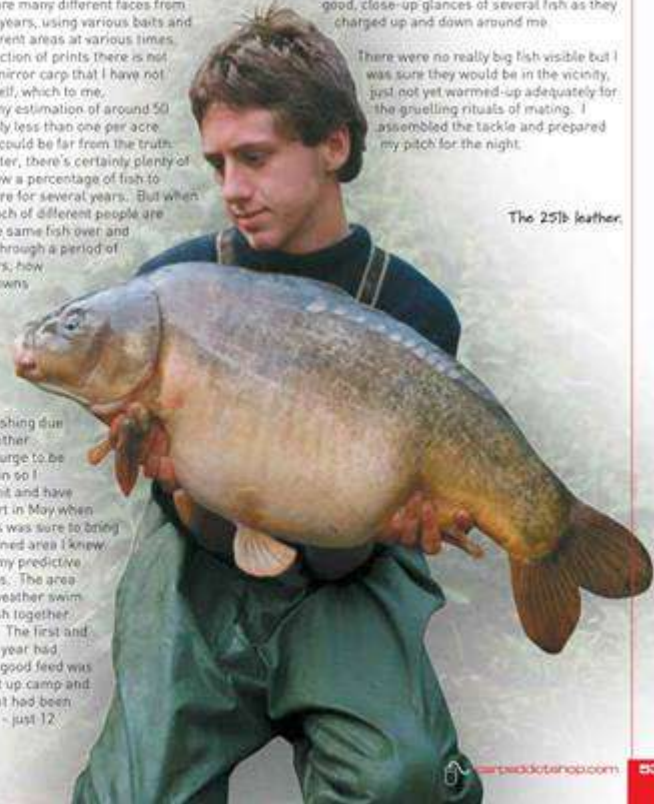
After a break from regular fishing due to home-building and life's other essential commitments the urge to be fishing The Pit surfaced again so I decided to buy a year's permit and have another go. I decided to start in May when the warmth of the sun's rays was sure to bring the carp to a shallow, tree-lined area I knew well. On arrival, it seemed my predictive location had come up trumps. The area around my favourite warm weather swim was alive with carp, more fish together than I had ever seen before! The first and unusually warm spell of the year had triggered their arrival and a good feed was looking likely so I quickly set up camp and put out my rods on spots that had been productive in previous years - just 12 boilies over each.

The first 24 hours passed without a touch so I altered the position of the hook baits slightly. This worked. At around nine o'clock on the second morning a line tightened to the clip and the tightly screwed-down clutch stuck a couple of times. I struck and held on hard, the fish, nor me moving an inch for at least a minute. Slowly but surely I began to gain line and an absolute arm-acher of a battle commenced. I had to wade out in the shallow water to net the powerful fish which I soon recognised as a supersize, long-bodied mirror that I had caught a few times previously. As usual, it was in stunning condition, a fish that always fought like a gladiator and had held its place as the lake's second-largest carp, now weighing over 31 pounds. A nice start that was followed an hour later by a gorgeous, chunky bronze leather at 24 pounds.

After taking another good mirror in windy conditions from a different area of the lake, the sun began to heat up the water again and I made my way back to the shallows where I anticipated their return. Against a warm, southerly breeze, I dashed excitedly across the cow field towards my swim and dropped my gear behind some adjacent bushes. Creeping up to the edge of The Swamp, I gasped as my eyes met with a dozen carp bow-waving through the submerged branches. It looked as though they were beginning their work towards spawning and I couldn't resist a closer encounter so I clambered into my waders, crept into the water and made my way to the centre of the tangled mangrove. The carp seemed pretty much oblivious to my presence and I managed to get good, close-up glances of several fish as they charged up and down around me.

There were no really big fish visible but I was sure they would be in the vicinity, just not yet warmed-up adequately for the gruelling rituals of mating. I assembled the tackle and prepared my pitch for the night.

The 25lb leather.



In the dark, the sound of big carp crashing ruptured the silence and sent ripples lapping at the bankside underneath my rods. Fish were close, so close that there was just no way I could consider sleeping so I sat up, glaring at my isotopes through the blackness. I trembled with excitement, my senses working in overdrive and I itched with the anticipation of it all. Just after 1am, as my eyelids were becoming heavy, a Delkim bleeped four times in a positive manner that could only indicate carp. Fishing around snaggy margins, my clutches were screwed down tight so as not to allow the fish to pick up any speed or momentum by running. But this fish decided otherwise and wrenched line from the spool. I pounced on it and hoisted up my rod, immediately forced to back wind frantically as it bolted off into the darkness displaying the power of a raging bull. Panting heavily through a dry mouth, my legs wobbled like jelly in much the same way they had done when I hooked my first carp 20 years previously. I pulled my head torch from its hook in the tree branches, wrestled it onto my head and waded out with the landing net to take up my fight position in the water, my teeth chattering away nervously.

It was using bulk rather than any athletic pace and suggested another good fish. As I pumped carefully, a faint glimmer of colour flashed in the torch beam under the surface and then vanished in an instant, the line fleeing from the spool again. I was getting seriously nervous now - I was fishing dangerous territory - plenty of trees and submerged branches around to enable the fish to escape if it managed to make them and the strength it was displaying made that a big worry. It reappeared in the torchlight so I set the clutch on the side of caution and waded just a few feet further out. It came toward the net begrudgingly but swung around and charged off again. It was indeed a big, angry fish and was going to take some subduing.

*Super strong mirrors.
This one went 28lbs.*



So I made a decision. I was going to let go of the fear of losing it and fight the fight for all it was worth, letting fate decide the outcome. So, with images of loose hook holds and ghastly snags racing through my mind, I pumped it back towards me and, as if it were a simple battle of wits, the fish turned as I stretched to place the net beneath it. It writhed and thrashed but I gave not an inch until it was well and truly in position and I heaved up the net, praying it had gone in. I opened the bail arm, threw down my rod and hauled the weighty bundle to the safety of the bank.

I collapsed to my knees and paused for a moment to regain my composure. What had I caught? I opened the mesh to reveal a carp of impressive proportions. Immediately, I knew it was a good fish but as I rolled it onto its side I saw a large, familiar-looking scale. It was the big mirror, yet again the same fish that had realised my dream 12 years before. It too had grown and as always, had kept at least ten pounds ahead of all the other carp in The Pit. It was now 44lbs 14oz which, incidentally I'm told, was a new county record. But, although a capture that pleased me - as the big mirror is a superb carp to catch under any circumstances - it had its down-side.

I was searching for new fish and despite catching several more good mirrors that summer, they included no surprises. A few will undoubtedly exist, but my hopes and dreams of unknown monsters have been quietly laid to rest.

The Pit will always be very dear to me; it has been since childhood and I spent well over a decade hunting its carp. I just hope that nature will continually be allowed to take its course and the lake left as it is, untampered with, an under-stocked wilderness that offers a great challenge to the dedicated carp angler. I visit the water to fish from time to time and it still makes my heart stop when the buzzer sounds. I still feel the pain when the line goes slack but I glow from within when I open the mesh to reveal the dreams of my childhood.

Matt Charlton 

