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Don't lose it!

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL WITCHER

Marcus Janssen reports on this year's River Test One Fly competition.

The idea for the River Test One Fly was conceived by fly fishing nut Simon Cooper of *Fishing Breaks*. Having competed in the American equivalent in Jackson, Wyoming since 2005, he decided to launch a British version at home on the idyllic chalkstreams of southern England. Since the inaugural competition nine years ago, it has become a hugely popular event, with luminaries of the fly fishing world coming from far and wide to pit their skills against the Test's browns and overhanging willows.

This year, thanks to Simon, I was very kindly invited by John Graham – a London-based American who captains Stream Dreamers, a team that has been involved since the

competition's inception in 2007 – to take part.

The idea is simple, competitors, who make up teams of three, can only use one fly all day. Lose your fly – on a feisty fish, awkward ash, elm, or sneaky snag – and it's game over. Keep hold of your fly all day, catch plenty of fish and a few lunkers, and you'll be in the money (which is donated to a deserving charity). There are also trophies for the biggest fish and the most fish caught on a dry fly, plus there's the Duffer's Delight award for the team who have the most leisurely lunch or use that as an excuse for the wheels coming off.

The scoring system is extremely complicated – and I have to admit, I never did get my head around it – but that really doesn't matter because each angler is assigned an incorruptible guide who understands the rules to the letter and keeps score, leaving you to keep a close eye on your backcast.

Basically, the aim is to catch as many fish as possible with each fish counting for 15 points.



This year's top dry fly, a Robjett's Daddy





One Fly organiser and host, Simon Cooper, announcing the draws for the 2015 competition

In addition, you are allowed to measure a total of six fish, and their length in inches equates to a predetermined number of points which are added to your total score. Or something like that. Plus there are bonus points for retaining your fly all morning – you are permitted to change at lunchtime, although this accrues a penalty, I believe – all afternoon, and all day.

Competitors and guides meet at that favourite of fishing inns in Stockbridge, The Greyhound, at 7:30am for an unlimited number of cups of tea and coffee, bacon rolls, and the all-important draw to assign river beats and guides to anglers. I landed with my tungsten bead-headed pheasant tail in the butter, according to previous winner Chris Tarrant, who muttered something unrepeatable as Simon Cooper announced that I would be fishing Wherwell Priory under the watchful eye of guide Brian Raw.

"There will be plenty of fish to cast to," said Brian, encouragingly, as we headed north out of Stockbridge, "but they won't count for diddly-squat if you lose your fly in a tree! So you just concentrate on your casting and not getting broken off, and I'll worry about netting your fish and keeping score." No pressure then.

Brian wasn't joking. As I waited for the official start time of 10am – impatiently, in position like a dog on point, rod in hand, fly in the other – I spotted no less than half a dozen trout weaving between the fronds of ranunculus

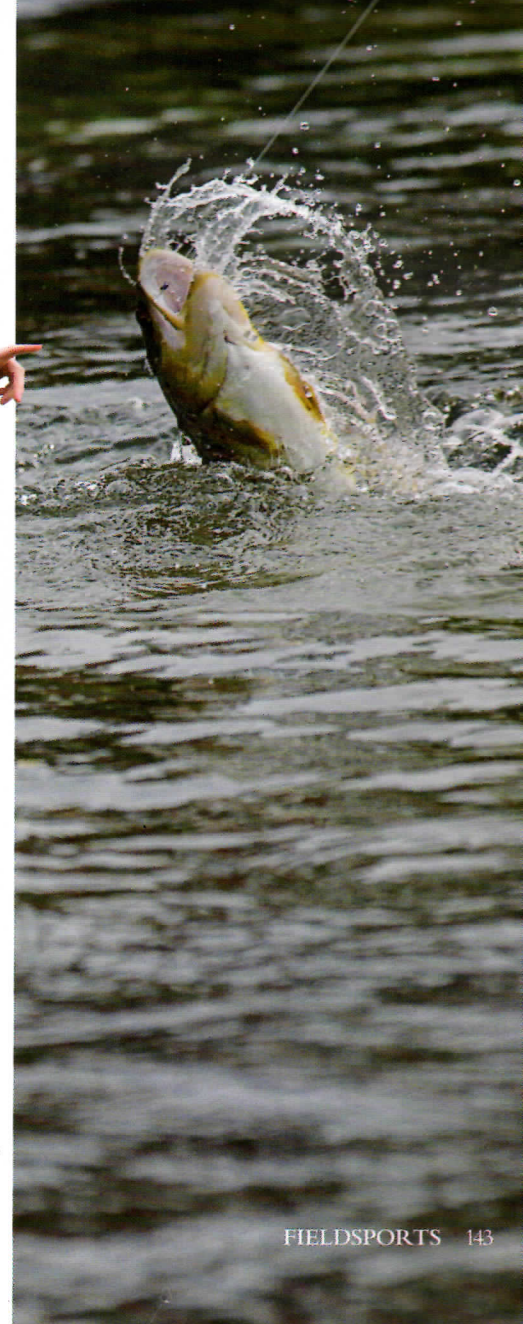


Each competitor is assigned a guide who also acts as umpire and score keeper

in the run above us. "Can I start, yet?" I asked, as Brian peered at his watch. "No, you've still got a minute to go," he said. "Oh come on! Surely your watch is a few minutes slow?" I asked, only half joking.

Perhaps I was a bit too eager, or maybe Brian's pep talk unsettled me a little, but I started badly, missing my first two takes and lining the next fish. "Just settle down now," said Brian as I held up a trembling hand, "it's not a competition. Okay, maybe it is, but there aren't any prizes." Luckily, my nerves did settle and I soon found my rhythm, picking up half a dozen fish in the next 45 minutes or so, including a beauty of 23" which Brian duly added to my

"As I waited for the official start time of 10am – impatiently, like a dog on point, rod in hand, fly in the other – I spotted no less than half a dozen trout weaving between the fronds of ranunculus in the run above us."



FLY FISHING

score sheet. But it was during the next hour or so that things really hotted up as the trout started to feed more aggressively on what turned out to be emerging large dark olives. By the time we stopped for a quick lunch at 12:30, Brian seemed pleased. "If you fish like that after lunch, we might just be in with a shout," he said, taking me by complete surprise. "But only if you keep it together." Talk about tempting fate! Sure as eggs, within a few minutes my fly was snagged in an overhanging beech.

After a fairly slow post-lunch restart, with just one or two fish coming to the net between 1 and 1:30, the following half-hour or so proved to be another golden spell with 11 fish up to 19" falling for my nymph in quick succession. But then it was as if the tap was turned off – the following two hours produced just two fish.

"Remember that this section has been fished twice today already," said Brian. Despite a decent hatch of large dark olives, there was barely a trout to be seen. They'd got wind of us. The grayling, on the other hand, seemed to know that they weren't on the menu and turned their attention to the emerging duns with gusto. But, of course, I couldn't change my fly, which is a strange predicament to be in, knowing that you are turning down a rare invitation from the lady of the stream for an



Previous winners, The Dream Team, made up of Chris Tarrant, Chris Sandford & Ian McKenzie, had to settle for the Duffer's Delight award this year

afternoon session on the dry fly.

"Right, you've got half an hour to go – it's time to up your game," said Brian with a rueful smile as the Wherwell Priory bell tolled four times. As it turned out, the final half-hour of the day did prove to be fruitful, my indicator dipping with a little more regularity as a few good browns emerged from their hidden lies near the far bank and moved to my scraggly nymph. "Right, that's it," said Brian holding up his watch for me to inspect. It was 4:30 and my

first River Test One Fly was over.

"Regardless of the outcome, it's been a bloody good day on the river," said Brian, as we finally meandered our way back to the hut. It certainly had been. I examined what remained of my nymph whilst trying to recall a better day's trout fishing. I couldn't.

That's the thing with the River Test One Fly, it's held on one of the finest trout rivers in the world. And one that, on this occasion, had been very, very kind to us.



Simon Cooper, Alastair Robjent, John Graham & Marcus Janssen

RESULTS

WINNING TEAM AWARD

1st: The Stream Dreamers

John Graham, Alastair Robjent & Marcus Janssen

2nd: The Wellow Wader Wallowers

Darren Dodd, Wes Boyd & Chris Banks

3rd: Minley Manor Moustaches

Grant Harrower, Iain Shone & Paul Quilliam

