



Five wild miles in Dorset

*If you want to catch a big, wild river trout, head south,
says Andrew Flitcroft, who finds virgin day-ticket
water on the lovely River Frome*

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

HATCH POOL
A family of Canada
geese hog a pool on
the main river
Frome at Ilington.

I'D LIKE TO take you back to last spring, May 23 to be precise. The day UK politics was coming to terms with Nigel Farage's victory in the local elections.

Thankfully I'd missed all that nonsense. Peter and I were in Dorset. We'd left the tarmac roads, made our way up a farm track, through a wood, and come to a halt on a bridge over a stream. We stopped on the bridge, wound down the windows and

peered into the writhing water, topped up and tinted by recent heavy rain. It looked borderline fishable; the deep channel beneath was impenetrable, but a faint glimmer of riverbed, pebbles and weed in the sunlit tail gave faint promise. This was the first time I'd fished the Frome at Ilsington and the 2015 season will be the first time in living memory that you can fish it, too. The fishing belonged to a syndicate before present landowner Anthony Daniell took over three years ago. Now it is day-ticket only.

The catalyst for our visit was Simon Cooper of Fishing Breaks. It was he that used the words big, wild, trout and record grayling in the same sentence as he described his new acquisition. When someone dangles that carrot in front of me, I take notice - and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. When he said he had exclusive access to this beautiful and diverse stretch of chalkstream, I just had to take a bite.

Simon opened the gate into a field. "Park here and we'll take one vehicle," he said. There are five miles of water, so a car is essential. I pulled up next to the river where we tackled up and then joined Simon.

I'm sometimes put off by the word chalkstream. It conjures up images of manicured banks and fish that have flies thrown at them day-in day-out. If I'm to be truly honest, I find many of them predictable. So you

THE DOWNPOUR
Andrew Flitcroft gets off to a damp start on the North Stream at Ilsington.

"Some might say it's a poor cousin, but I thought it was more genuine and the better for it"

can imagine my delight when I slipped into the North Stream tributary from its high bank. This little gem - not 30 ft wide - couldn't be more different from those archetypal chalkstreams longingly tended to please the masses. Some might say it's a poor cousin, but I thought it was more genuine and the better for it. Standing waist-deep, I was immediately transported into a different world. The horizon disappeared, together with the road noise and chill of spring. I could hear Simon and Peter but they may as well have been there. It was just me, the rushing glides, back eddies and fresh stream flora. It was almost

perfect, but for the ceiling of light above me which, within minutes, turned from broken sky to a menacing maelstrom. Then the heavens opened. Not a little - a lot. Huge raindrops bombarded my sodden fly as it reached a juicy hollow under an alder root. Just a shower, I thought. But this was no shower - it rained, it poured - the likes of which I'd rarely seen. I stopped

fishing and stood in the river, head bowed and water pouring from my hood. Peter and Simon did the same. An hour or so later the deluge eventually stopped, but it took with it the earlier warmth. I fished on for a few hundred yards, but saw neither insect nor fin. We decided to move.

The five miles of main river and carriers took some navigating. I didn't have a clue where I was or where we were going. We parked on a third dirt track, walked down another and crossed a carrier before reaching a hatch pool on the main river. This was different again: wider, shallower and more open and accessible than the North Stream. More



WILD BEAUTY
A typical Frome trout - large dark spots and golden-olive flanks.



ABOVE LEFT
Storm over and Simon Cooper targets a riser on the main river.

ABOVE RIGHT
Once it got going the Mayfly hatch continued all afternoon.

LEFT Simon's huge Mayfly pattern - a good 2 in long, but as successful as smaller patterns.

"chalkstreamy" if you like. But there were no signs of human intervention. There was barbed wire to climb over and reed beds to battle through, but once in the river you were alone again. This time the gravel crunched, and ranunculus waved from side to side revealing hidden lairs. More importantly, the warmth and sun started to build and the odd Mayfly came off. It couldn't have been more different from the morning. I cast a dun into the hatch once, twice and the third time it was taken. I didn't see the fish, but it took off upstream with the rest of my fly-line and when I applied pressure, it pulled out. It wasn't a four-pounder (thankfully!), but it could have been nearer two. Whatever it was, it was the first fish I'd touched. I netted a couple of eight-inchers on that stretch and with the hatch promising further sport we moved to the downstream limit.

I got in above a humpback bridge. It was deeper ▶





The biggest of the day, about 1 lb. Fish four or five times this size have been caught on the beat.

here, but there were rises. The water was still a little murky and I couldn't see the fish, but they could obviously see the duns floating down. I picked off three or four in the space of 50 yards. They were beauties - heavily spotted and fat as butter.

We moved upstream to a wider, open stretch and the fish kept coming. The big trout eluded us, but the potential for a trophy was obvious. With little or no public access, lots of cover and snags, as well as riffles, deeper glides, wide bits and narrow bits, there is little wonder why Ilsington trout thrive. If you want benches, huts and cut grass, this is not for you. You'll need chest waders and a stick in places. You'll need to walk, or drive to get the best from it, clamber down a few steep banks and get on your bum to slip into the water. This is how a river should be - unspoilt, challenging, yet highly absorbing.

Anthony wants to keep it that way and I applaud him for that. And if I tell you that he has had two wild trout of 4 lb and one of 5 lb since our visit last spring I'm certain your ears will prick up, too, although I don't think Ilsington will be as easy as most chalkstreams. Simon has a difficulty rating on his website: Ilsington gets top marks. It also demands a price equivalent to its "chalky" neighbours. Fair

enough, you might say, but if I told you that on your first visit only, you are required to hire a guide (at £295) to show you around, you might well stop in your tracks. However, get six friends together and an extra one-off £50 per rod doesn't sound quite so bad, does it? I would go back. There is so much to explore and on how many rivers in the south of England do you have the chance of catching a wild trout of 5 lb? **T&E**

[Fishing and tickets]



Season: April 1- October 15.

Fishing: Close to five miles of fishing on the main river Frome, the North Stream and carriers. Wild trout and grayling (catch-and-release only). 2-6 rods per day

Prices: Apr 1-May 15, £125 per rod; May 16-Jun 15, £200 per rod; Jun 16-Oct 15, £150 per rod. Minimum

booking: two rods per day, plus guide (£295!).

Contact: Fishing Breaks on 01264 781 988; fishingbreaks.co.uk (online booking available).

THE MAIN RIVER
Braids of water
between beds of
ranunculus hold
scores of wild fish.

