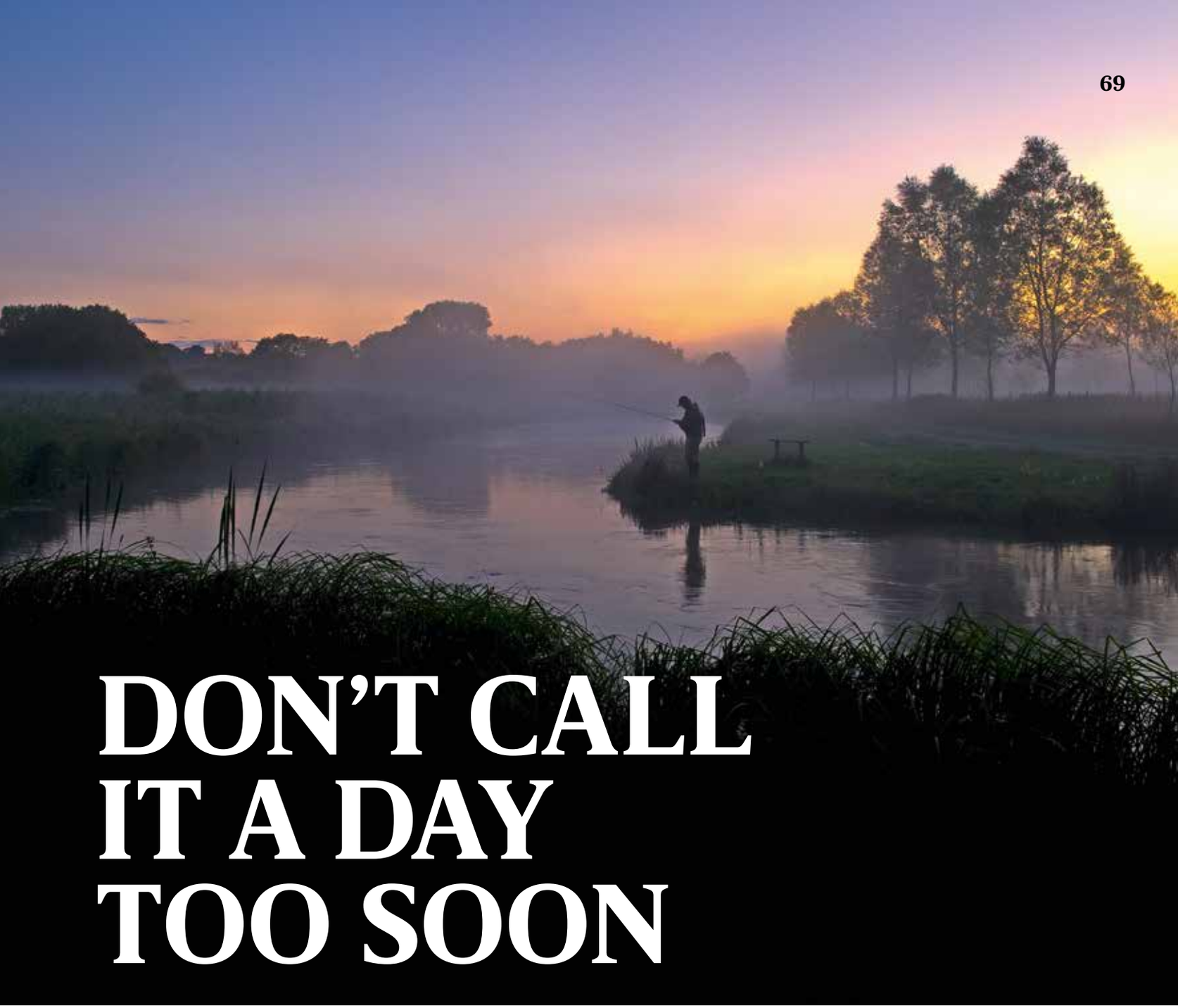

DON'T CALL IT A DAY TOO SOON

By leaving the riverbank early you could miss a decent fish – but you will definitely forsake the sights and sounds of these glorious landscapes

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON COOPER

I think it is doubtful that the Greek poet Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer, some seven centuries before Christ, was a fly fisherman but when he wrote, "Observe due measure, for right timing is in all things the most important factor", he showed an understanding of what makes ordinary anglers great.

So here is the conundrum. You have had that fishing day in the diary forever. It is so important that you forsake even another glass of wine for an early night in preparation for an early morning. You know delay is fatal. Hanging about for an idle morning at home is an invitation for all sorts of chores: could you just drop the kids off at school; pick up the dry cleaning; wait in for a delivery? If you are doing nothing, why don't you repair that [insert name of any number of household items], which is broken? And then there are emails. Once you start the chain of correspondence you are stuffed – everyone will want a slice of you.

You are wise to this, so while the family slumbers and the smartphone lies inert you make your escape, cruising the empty roads, laughing at the hapless commuters scurrying to the stations. Of course, it may well be you tomorrow but who cares. It is not you today and that is what counts. In the early morning light all at the river is serene. The plan has worked and a day of glorious sport lies ahead.

Here is the second challenge. By the late afternoon, perhaps after rather too good a lunch, you are starting to flag. Six or seven hours of fishing, by just about anyone's measure, is a fair old bit. You check your phone. The world starts to intrude and the cogs of your brain whirl forward to tomorrow. You consider the options. Stay or go? As the church clock chimes five you decide to give it one last half hour. If nothing much happens you'll head for home.

If you ever have an idle few hours I highly recommend dipping into John Waller Hills'

> When the Solstice day offers hours of daylight, the fish hold all the cards

magical read *A Summer on the Test*. Dr Andrew Herd, a great authority on fly-fishing history, describes it as "the best book on chalkstream fishing ever written", and I would not demur. Aside from the fishing, I like it so much because it evokes the time of its writing. Hills, stationed in northern England at Catterick as a First World War infantry officer, persuades his medical officer junior to give him a five-day sick note and requisitions a train pass from the compliant transport sergeant. Why? Well, it was late May so he needed to head south to his beloved River Test for the mayfly. Without any sense of irony, he reports that as he fishes he hears the faint sounds of distant gunfire from across the Channel in northern France.

I digress slightly but the book contains one of the single most important gems of chalkstream wisdom I have ever acquired; one that I will take to the grave. Hills tells us that all fishing between the hours of 4pm and 6pm is wasted. Like all "rules" you can argue around the edges and cite times when they are not so but, in the glorious summer months on the precious chalkstreams of England, there are few better rules to live your life by. And here is why.

A TROUT'S RULES

Trout also have life rules (though these are largely handed to them by Mother Nature). This is especially true for brown trout on the chalkstreams where the water temperature, clarity and flow do not alter dramatically much across the changing of the seasons. In the winter, when the days are short and the feeble rays elicit sparse insect activity, every bright moment is an opportunity for angler and fish alike. But come the summer,

Wraith-like mists and colourful skies accompany fishing in the half light

when the Solstice day offers 16 hours and 38 minutes of daylight, the fish hold all the cards – they have an abundance of food and all the time in the world in which to eat it. Add an hour and a bit for both pre-dawn and post-dusk half-light and you are gradually getting somewhere close to a 20-hour day. Your 5.30pm departure is beginning to look a little premature.

The fact is that trout are sporadic feeders because, frankly, looking for food requires risk and effort. Risk because they have to expose themselves to predators and effort because the best food lines lie in the faster current. You'll see this in the posture of the fish. A feeding fish is what we call "on the fin": hovering mid water, body angled slightly upwards, constantly flexing with the current, ever ready to dart forward, side or back to snatch a passing bug. If, on the other hand, it is not in the mood for whatever reason, it will do a passable imitation of a small log, fixed firmly to the riverbed ignoring you, your flies and just about anything the world has to throw at it. It is a myth that trout are always on the lookout for food. Yes, of course, they have to feed but even this fish, with a brain the size of a pea, has worked out that idleness is a pretty good default position for the "calories in/calories out" calculation of lifestyle. The fact is that by high summer trout simply don't need to feed all day when there is food aplenty. The deprivations of winter are a long time past. The body weight they shed during spawning and the sheer effort of survival has been replaced. A few weeks of gorging on mayfly has, if not exactly piled on the pounds, transformed them into perfect *Salmo trutta* specimens. The days are long, the food is plentiful and the living is easy.

Take your cue from the fish. I know it is tempting when your feet are sore, the prospects uncertain and real life intrudes to call it a day earlier than you should, but don't. Regardless of the fishing there are few more magical places in the world than being that single person on a river. The only company

With long hours of daylight, a fish can suddenly break the dark surface of the water

is flitting bats, the last glooping rise of a trout you hear rather than see and there's the absolute certainty that these few hours are ones that God gave only to you.

So take the advice of Hills, at least in principle. Our famous writer headed off to his nearby inn for a "light repast" and, after a snooze, retraced his steps to the river, having given instructions that sandwiches and ale be left in readiness for his late return. I'm not sure how you will best fill the time (maybe read a few chapters of *A Summer on the Test*) but don't fish. Snip off the fly and hang your rod up in a symbolic statement of not fishing. Frankly, I have absolutely no problem doing nothing beside a river. If I am being truthful, should I ever be thrown in jail I would miss the rivers far more than I would ever miss the fishing.

My trick is to potter. Without a rod in your hand your interest will stray from the strictly piscatorial. Suddenly the comings and goings of a water vole family take on a whole new dimension. The iridescence of the damsel flies provides a palette of colours you never knew existed. The sounds of curious cows chewing the cud, bees humming around the nectar-rich fleabane and a moorhen emitting a rat-a-tat-a-tat of high-pitched clucks as she ushers her recalcitrant brood downriver in a straggly convoy as they seek refuge for the night all divert your attention from the fishing. If you are looking for quiet, rivers will often disappoint – they are surprisingly noisy if you give them your ear.

Why do I tell you all this? I am trying to distract you. Put time between you and that next cast. For fishing at dusk should be an unhurried affair. A time to take in a landscape created over centuries by men who loved the rivers then as much as you do now. To stare at skies that go from blue, through a thousand shades of pink and red, before that final burst of orange presages a summer night that will never really go completely dark.

THE SURFACE BREAKS

Wait for nature to catch you up because this really is about timing: that moment when a fish shows itself with a single rise. Your unhurried but unerring cast lays out across the dark surface like cheesewire on mercury. Your fly sits proud. It makes no logical sense but it is easier to pinpoint it now in the gathering gloom than ever it was during the brightness of the day. It drifts through the midst of the ever-expanding but gently fading rings of the rise. Then, beneath your fly the water bulges and all at once the surface breaks, a head appears, the line straightens, your rod tip rises and accompanying your whoop of delight the reel screams as the fish takes off line.

A fish hooked in the half-dark somehow feels bigger. Deprived of perfect sight we rely on our other senses. The tautness of the line radiates every twitch and turn of the fish back through the fingers. The frantic splashes seem louder. The imagination fills in the blanks of what the eye cannot see. Surely this fish must be huge? Eventually you subdue your quarry. He comes to hand quietly as if comforted by the darkness. As you remove the fly he'll pause, hanging with the current before you gently squeeze his tail to remind him that his job is to swim. And with a flick he is gone, swallowed up by the inky river in a trice.

As you look up you will suddenly realise it is all but night. Wraith-like mists roll in across the meadows. Now it is time to head home. But as you tread through the grass, leaving a trail of footprints in the cold dew that will mark your being until dawn, you will know staying was the right thing to do. ■

Simon Cooper's new book, The Otters' Tale*, is published by William Collins on 23 March, price £16.99 (hardback).*