

{ FISHERY MASTERCLASS }

A PASSION FOR ANGLING

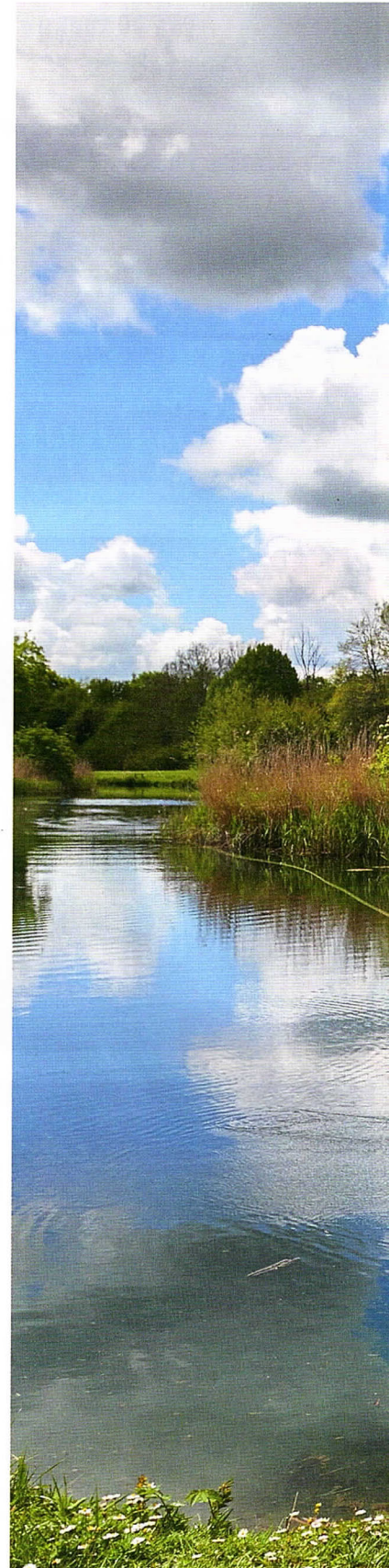
Peter Cockwill is joined by the accomplished all-round trout-fisher Lee Hooper at a sunstruck Avon Springs fishery in Wiltshire

WHEN FLY-FISHERS TALK ABOUT their roots, sometimes the most surprising coincidences crop up in conversation. That's what happened when I met Lee Hooper at the picturesque Avon Springs fishery in Wiltshire, not far from his home near Warminster. We had managed to pick the loveliest of May days when the countryside was bursting with life. This cold spring was forgotten and it was destined to be a great fishing day.

But first we talked. This relaxed man told me, "The fish are there for us and we just need to chill and appreciate the wonderful opportunities that lie ahead." It's a nice outlook and a sign of a confident angler, possibly because he has an armoury of flies that take some beating. Lee is a first-rate fly-dresser, and when I discovered that his favourite dressing came from a 1972 book by Conrad Voss Bark it brought back many memories.

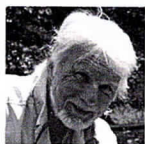
Conrad was synonymous with the Arundell Arms at Lifton in Devon, where many people have been introduced to fly-fishing and the wild brownies of the River Tamar and its tributaries. The hotel used to host casting competitions on Tinhay, its own lake, and in my early days I attended these annual events, and admired the prowess of resident instructors Roy Buckingham and David Pilkington. To discover that, of the many books in Lee's collection, Conrad's *Fishing for Lake Trout* was his favourite really brought back memories. The book features the Voss Bark Nymph, a fly that inspired Lee to move ➤

Lee delivers the perfect cast on Willow Lake.





“No fritz and marabou here, this is a ‘proper’ fly!”



PETER COCKWILL
is a guide and former fishery manager with more than 60 years' fly-fishing experience

from his early days of pulling muddlers to become a dedicated nymph angler. “When I realised that a slow retrieve with patterns such as this nymph would invariably outfish a stripped lure completely changed the development of my fly-fishing,” he said.

Like many thinking tyers, Lee has slightly modified the original nymph. He has replaced the original cock hackles with beautiful, dyed hen capes from Chevron Hackles and added a hot-orange thread at the head to lift a thoroughly reliable pattern. However, as per the original, the body is a graduated colour range of seal's fur — no fritz and marabou here, this is a “proper” fly.

I was also intrigued to discover that Lee is an ace competition angler, an instructor and, as competition secretary of the Fly Dressers' Guild, each year he organises the inter-branch reservoir event for the John Watt Award. The Guild is an important aspect of his life and demonstrating at shows is just one more thing this busy man somehow fits into his life. He is a committee member under chairman Peter Gathercole, today's photographer, so the two had much to talk over. Quite where our various fishing organisations would be without the dedication of these like-minded souls, I'm not sure.

At just 44, Lee has achieved much in the sport since his family introduced him to fly-fishing at the age of seven. It goes to show that once the passion takes hold, there's no stopping it. He is equally at home on a reservoir, a small stillwater or a river, although he may have an advantage on the latter as the enigmatic River Wylfe flows by his front door. I deduced he has a preference for sighting fish, if the opportunity is there. Maybe that's why his dream species is the taimen of Mongolia. This monstrous, predatory fish is known for taking surface flies, so start saving, Lee — we all deserve that “once in a lifetime” trip.

But what of our day at Avon Springs? It was a photographer's dream, with glorious skies setting off the beautifully maintained lakes and surroundings. The home of Barrie Bawden, the lakes were dug by his father (Barrie John) in 1988. With rearing ponds on site, Barrie has created a fishery that boasts an enviable amount of fly life, and in turn free-rising fish. Lee and I have long memories of the two lakes, and it was fascinating to share our knowledge of their various depths and features.

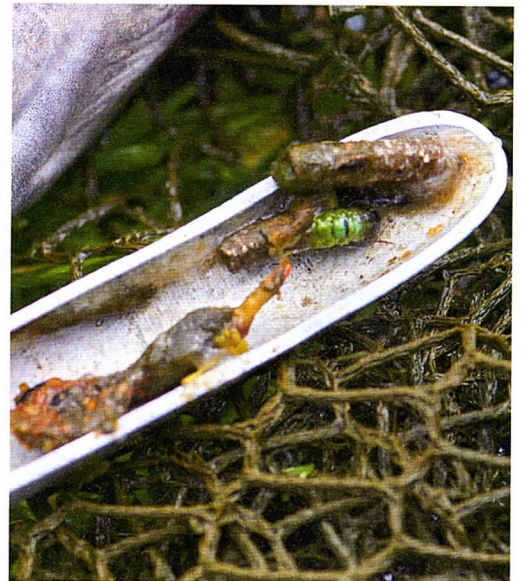
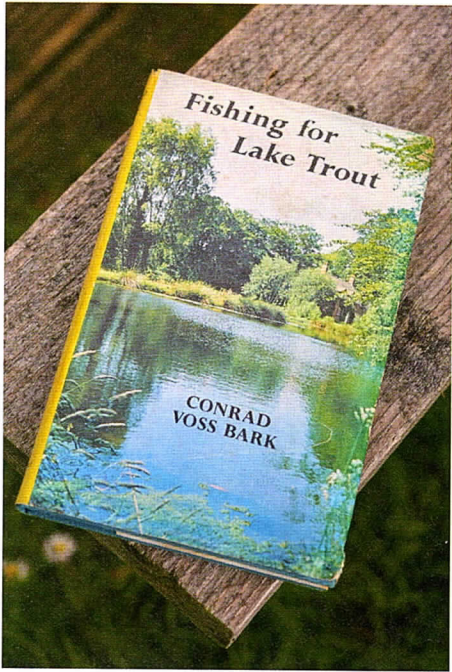
Just for once in this month of unbelievably strong winds there was a pleasant breeze pushing into the bank nearest the car park on Club Lake. Lee opted to cast into the ripple, as it was the most obvious place to find a fish, while I took the opportunity to walk around the lake and catch up with some of the regular characters I recognised. That's when I spotted some quiet rises in the calm waters at the far end of the lake. The fish were cruising around looking for food although initially I couldn't work out whether they were seeking buzzers or hatching pond olives. I saw wagtails cropping olives from the marginal reeds but that didn't really leave enough out on the water to account for the rises. It had to be buzzers and rising fish aren't to be ignored — Lee needed no encouragement to join me. Off came his Voss Bark nymph and on went a dry-fly, one of his CDC emerger patterns and a real work of art.

I began thinking about Lee's confidence in his VB nymph and decided it was time to try my favourite dry-fly, which is equally as old but invariably works for me. So, there we were — Lee with an ultra-modern, superbly tied CDC pattern and me with an ancient, scruffily-tied Renegade. Both flies worked a treat. It was possible to watch individual fish as they cruised the surface picking off hatching flies with a lovely slow swirl, their tail's tip giving away their direction of travel. We both prefer to fish at close range while watching rise forms so that we can quickly lift off to cover a fish instead of making long casts and then having to strip in line to make a targeted cast.

Avon Springs trout are renown for making long runs once hooked and today was no exception — the backing soon put in an appearance against my five-weight line and 3lb tippet. Brilliant sport.

We decided to look around Willow Lake. Lee shares my views that today's proliferation of heavily weighted patterns too often fish beneath the trout. After a while trout become wary of flies ➤

Clockwise: the book that inspired Lee's passion for nymphing. One to the net on Club Lake. A spoonful of caddis from a surface-feeder. A gorgeous Avon Springs rainbow. Talking flies and swapping stories. Lee's updated Voss Bark Nymph.



PUTTING SOMETHING BACK

Lee is a self-employed plasterer with a reputation that ensures stacks of work, yet somehow, on top of everything else, he has forged an integral link with the Fishing for Schools charity. That all started following a chance meeting with founder Charles Jardine at Avington Trout Fishery in Hampshire, and soon afterwards Lee gained his Angling Trust Level 2 coaching qualification. The charity had struck a chord and Lee told me, "Fishing has given my life so much stability that I wanted to put something back. Helping youngsters to catch their first fish has been truly inspirational." This quiet, self-effacing man does so much for others and as so often in life it's about having a good, stable relationship. Lee's partner, Julie, is an accomplished fly-fisher herself, and the two are a regular feature at shows and events.

that drop quickly through the water. His solution is to use slow-sinking patterns, which can be gently intercepted by cruising fish. A favourite is a simple Eggfly. Obviously, in nature, there's no such thing as a slow-sinking egg on small stillwaters, but trout are curious, and willing to investigate. There's a narrow channel on Willow Lake, covered by willow overgrowth, and Lee told me that the deep water attracts cruising trout. Here, a slow-sinking pattern flicked into a clear area of water is a deadly way of sneaking out an extra fish, especially on a hot summer's day.

Our thoughts turned to the nearby River Avon where the lovely weather had at last induced a few mayfly to hatch. The river can be booked separately with Fishing Breaks [fishingbreaks.co.uk]. Earlier that day I had asked the river rods if they minded us taking a few pictures of this delightful chalkstream. Generosity is a feature of many river anglers and the guys made us very welcome.

Back at the car park there was just time for another look through the beautifully tied, slimline patterns in Lee's buzzer box before calling it a day. Some anglers were still pounding away on the lakes having not yet achieved their "limit". Lee is of the opinion that many anglers are missing the true essence of fishing and he has much sympathy with fishery managers who often take the blame for fish "not feeding properly" or "aren't big enough". "Enjoy the day, the opportunity, the countryside, and then a few fish are a bonus," he said. I couldn't agree more, Lee, and thanks for your company. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE





“Enjoy the day, the opportunity, the countryside, and then a few fish are a bonus”



Factfile

TICKETS

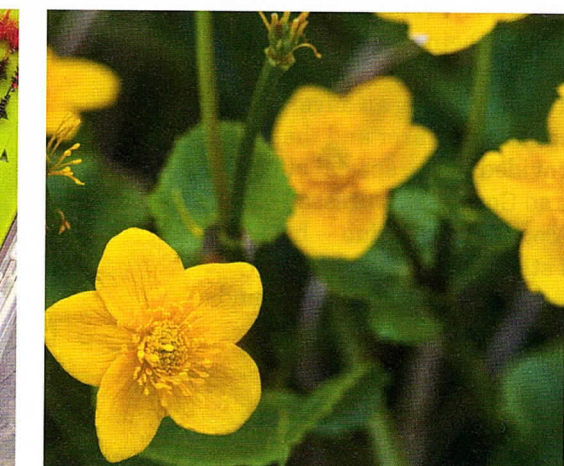
Day, four fish, £50; half day, three fish, £40; evening, two fish, £30. No catch-and-release.

CONTACT

Tel: 01980 653 557.
E-mail: avonsprings@btconnect.com
Web: fishingfly.co.uk

DIRECTIONS

Avon Springs Fishing Lakes, Recreation Road, Durrington, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 8HH. From the A303 Countess roundabout take the A345 Marlborough road to the Stonehenge Inn roundabout (one mile). Take the fourth exit, signposted Bulford and Durrington. At the Esso garage roundabout turn left onto Bulford Road, then the third right on to Recreation Road. The fishery entrance is at the end of the road.



Clockwise: A cast on the Wiltshire Avon. Peter's Renegade fooled this surface-feeder. Time gentleman, please. Marsh marigolds. Lee's immaculately tied flies. The owner's shepherd's hut.