

43 **fabulous Christmas gifts for game-fishers**

# TROUT & SALMON

THE VOICE OF GAME-FISHING SINCE 1955

## The joy of Spiders

**Perfect a  
time-honoured  
trout and grayling  
method**

## Divine trout

**Memorable  
sport on a wild  
Welsh lake**

## THE GREAT HATCHERY DEBATE

**Jim Coates quizzes stocking  
guru Bob Kindness**

## Hunter's instinct

**How to outwit a reservoir monster**



# COLD CALL

Whatever happened to the EA's helpful guys? asks Simon Cooper



**M**AYBE I'M BEING A LITTLE nostalgic, but I do truly recall a time when the Environment Agency (EA), or mostly its predecessor, the National Rivers Authority (NRA), was a force for good – the helpful guys on the end of a phone.

On the chalkstreams, which as you know are probably the most intensively managed rivers on the planet, they took an almost daily role, on first-name terms with river owners and keepers. Poaching. Weed-cutting. Electro-fishing. Restoration. Water-testing. River turned a funny colour or found a suspiciously dead fish? Your local man would be with you that day for explanation, reassurance or action.

Today, your call will be redirected to a call centre in the Midlands. Now, in my experience, the call centre is perfectly fine, but in that muzak way that all call centres are fine. Of course, you must undergo a Stasi-like interrogation as to your bona fides as if that is the most important aspect of the call, but as to the actual issue, it very much feels that a box-ticking exercise is in progress. And it will be. All calls are classified on a 1-4 scale, only the most serious marked for action, though what you and I would regard as "most serious" is somewhat different to the EA, but not in a good way. Oh, by the way, don't bother to call back to check what happened as a result of your incident report – confidentiality (whose you may well ask) prevents further discussion.

So, when did it all go wrong? In the light of all the recent publicity about deliberate raw sewage spills (2021: 372,544 incidents for 2.6m hours) it is tempting to think this is a new assault on our rivers and coastal waters. Indeed, the head of the EA, James Bevan, told Parliament in May "until recently, we have not had very good data about what is happening at sewage treatment works". What utter rot this turns out

to be, as reported in *The Guardian* in October.

The rules state that water companies are allowed to discharge untreated sewage into rivers only at times of exceptional rainfall and only then if they are already treating sewage to the full capacity of the plant. However, ten years ago, a report on a United Utilities sewage works in Cumbria showed that only 65% of the required sewage was being treated while raw sewage was being dumped into the nearby river, with a further 35 United Utilities works suspected of dumping sewage while failing to treat the required amount.

Now Bevan might be forgiven for missing out on this damning report of 2012, except for the fact that it was compiled by his own EA officers and United Utilities was fined £200,000 for the Cumbria breach. I'd say you are being a bit forgetful if you consider, as Bevan does, 2012 to be "new", but even if you cut him some slack, by 2016 he had over 800 monitoring stations to call upon that were providing the sort of data that resulted in the Cumbria prosecution. But clearly nobody was taking the discharge issue seriously, effectively letting the water industry police itself, which in effect gave them a licence to pollute at will.

So when did it go wrong? I think we can trace it back to 1996 when, in the dying days of the John Major administration, the National Rivers Authority was subsumed into the newly created Environment Agency. At that precise moment we lost our rivers' champion, set up in 1989 at the time of water privatisation with a brief to hold the water industry to account, something the EA has clearly failed to do ever since. ■

*Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)*