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THE ART OF WEED CUTTING

There's more to this centuries-old tradition than you may think, writes Simon Cooper



I'LL MAKE NO BONES ABOUT IT – I SIMPLY love June – maybe this year more than ever. It is the blossoming month when the promise of spring is finally fulfilled, the jagged edges of May smoothed away by the gentle hand of Mother Nature. And on the chalkstreams it is the moment we usually pause for breath.

For in a normal year, April and May are a headlong rush. It never really stops in preparation for the opening day and then the full-on weeks of Mayfly. Wake. Fish. Sleep. Wake. Fish. Sleep. 24/7 barely tells the tale. To rephrase Gordon Gekko from the film *Wall Street*, weekends are for wimps. But it is worth it. The clouds of *Ephemera danica* that drift across the river like gun smoke to the delight of both fish and fishers are as life-affirming as anything I know. A reminder that, for all the problems that assail our countryside, not all is lost. Some certainties survive.

And as night follows day, virus or no virus, weed cutting follows Mayfly. As the hatch fades, so do the crowds. Suddenly, after the months of people, none exist. Aside from the hiss of scythes slicing through water and weed, a gentle quiet falls across the rivers as fishing gives way for the middle two weeks of June.

Weed cutting, the hand trimming of the *ranunculus*, starwort and other river vegetation, is at the apex of the river keeper's art. The trick is to trim and primp the weed in such a manner as to create the perfect riverine environment for trout, insect life and anglers.

Imagine yourself standing on a bridge; downstream two waded river keepers are slowly, line abreast, moving towards you, scythes in hand. As you watch this gentle bucolic scene, a vision as old as chalkstream fly-fishing, you might think the process random. But it is not. Imagine if you will the river full of weed. Then think of it like a linear chess board with you as the

keeper cutting out all the weed from the white squares but leaving it in the black, your handiwork determining that the water zig-zags between the rafts of weed, cleaning the gravel bed while leaving cover for the fish, home for the bugs and spaces in which to cast.

That is the basic principle, but it is of course, in practice, more complicated than that. Different years determine different cuts. In low-flow years you will cut less weed which, as Archimedes first propounded, displaces the water to increase the depth. Similarly, in high-flow years you might cut more heavily to prevent flooding. Or, and this is what keeps a river keeper awake a night, if the weed barely grows at all it will be the lightest of trims or perhaps even re-planting.

You might wonder what happens to the cut weed, for in aggregate there are thousands of tonnes of it. The answer is: that depends. It depends on the river. The owners of the larger chalkstreams such as the Test, Itchen and Avon agree to cut within specific periods, the weed left to flow ever onwards downstream until it reaches the ocean. On the smaller streams we do what is called "cut-and-pull", capturing and removing the weed before it reaches our downstream neighbours.

So, as midsummer's day approaches, I might suggest you spare a thought for river keepers everywhere; weed cutting, despite its gentle appearance, is back-breaking stuff. But I won't. For they will be happy to be alone creating a living artwork as beautiful as any John Constable painting. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk) the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale.