



# HIGH SUMMER ON THE AVON

After the crowds and the mayfly,  
Don Stazicker has a chalkstream beat  
full of wild trout all to himself







**I**T IS A MARVELLOUS THING WHEN you get the chance to fish a river you have read about. As a total bookworm, I have fished in my imagination with most of the great angling writers, beginning in the early 1970s with the American Ernest Schweibert, who seemed to have fished just about every famous stream on the planet. Dream fishing ignited in me a passion to one day fish those waters. So, when the opportunity arose to fish the Avon, I jumped at the chance.

From the books of Frank Sawyer and Oliver Kite I knew that Netheravon on Salisbury Plain was where upstream nymphing developed into the Netheravon Style. Commonly known as traditional or sight nymphing, it involves casting weighted nymphs to sighted fish in crystal-clear water and detecting the take by seeing the leader draw under or the fish move to take your fly.



Once rare, little egrets are now common on the southern chalkstreams.

Don hatches his plan of attack after a mug of tea in the delightful shepherd's hut.







An epoxy-coated nymph gets down to the fish quickly.

During the dog days of August, traditionally fly-fishers take their families on holiday, watch the cricket and sunbathe in the garden because the fishing is rubbish. In the past, anglers turned up on chalkstreams until the end of the mayfly and then stopped fishing.

So, what a great day for me to pick to fish the Avon – August 13.

Yet it was perfect – warm sunshine with blue skies, intermittent cloud and the odd minor shower. Kite and Sawyer enjoyed fishing the dog days because the brightness helped them to see into the water for sight nymphing.

Coombe Mill is only a mile up the road from Netheravon where Kite and Sawyer lived. The river is small here, only ten miles from its sources, the West Avon rising near Devizes and the East Avon rising near Pewsey, the two streams joining at Upavon.

The Services Dry Fly Fishing Association, where Sawyer was keeper for 50 years, has the rights on the bank opposite the Coombe fishery.

The width of the river at Coombe is further reduced because it flows in two channels, most of the water in the straighter and deeper mill leat, while the original river follows a sinuous track before re-joining the leat downstream of a substantial hatch pool. The remaining flow that drove the mill enters the river at the lower boundary of the fishery. It's a small, intimate wild fishery for one or, at a push, two rods.

You have exclusive use of the 700-yard true right bank of the leat and the slightly shorter true left bank of the natural river course.

Martin Aris, the keeper, showed me the beat and told me how he came into his job. You've heard the term poacher turned gamekeeper, well, Martin is the real deal. Many years ago, he was caught poaching the river by the owner and given the choice ➤



The hatch pool with its quaint Wiltshire setting.

One of the beat's many grayling, falling to the traditional sight-nymphing method.

*“Kite and Sawyer enjoyed fishing the dog days because the brightness helped them to see into the water”*



Another  
grayling from  
the leat stalked  
with a single  
bug.



**DON  
STAZICKER**

is a highly  
experienced trout  
fisherman,  
fly-tyer and  
instructor. He  
co-authored the  
groundbreaking  
e-book on trout  
behaviour *Trout  
and Flies – Getting  
Closer*, and is the  
river conservancy  
officer for  
Cressbrook and  
Litton Flyfishers  
in Derbyshire.







No stocking at Coombe Mil. The trout are wild.

of a visit to the magistrates' court or becoming the gamekeeper, he sensibly opted for the latter.

There are plans to increase the flow in the original channel using existing hatches, which will further enhance this lovely fishery. The beat is not stocked but supports a good head of wild brown trout and grayling. There is parking and a toilet right next to the beat and a delightful wheeled shepherd's hut with tea facilities and a catch return book. Sign in when you arrive.

You don't expect hatches of upwing flies in the middle of an August day on a chalkstream and surface activity was absent in the bright sun. Walking upstream along the mill leat, fish were visible in the deeper pockets among the weeds and in the shade of the prolific vegetation on the far bank. Wading is not permitted but this is not restrictive as all areas of the fishery are easily accessible from the bank.

*"In sunny weather on a small clear stream the last thing you need is rod flash"*

I will admit to having expected a broader river from the photographs in Oliver Kite's book of the river below Netheravon and around Bulford. If I had known, I would have swapped my sky-blue fishing shirt for something more camouflaged, given the close-up nature of the fishing at Coombe.

We often think that small streams require short 6ft-7½ft rods. They can be essential where there is tree cover but their shortness places you nearer the water and risks spooking the fish. I used a 9ft four-weight rod that gave me better line control and allowed me to keep further back from the bank. It had a matt finish — in sunny weather on a small clear stream the last thing you need is rod flash.

In high summer during the middle of the day there are usually two choices: fish terrestrials such as ants, beetles and greenfly in shaded areas — or sight nymph. Aquatic insects may not be hatching but their nymphs are still there and can provide some of the best fishing of the season. It was unthinkable for me not to nymph on the river where the technique was born.

I chose a 9ft copolymer leader and added 5ft of 3.5lb copolymer tippet. On the leat there were several good trout holding close to bankside rushes where the water was about 4ft deep. It's always a challenge deciding exactly where to pitch your nymph, but the water was so clear that I could ➤



Fish jostle for titbits in the chutes at the hatch pool.





Don fishes the hatch pool where currents offer overhead cover for trout. A heavier alternative to Sawyer's PTN, complete with bead and bling. Martin the keeper keeps Don entertained.

## *"I reflected on a day spent using a method pioneered on the river by two great nymph-fishers"*

easily see my fly and the fish's reaction to it. On most chalkstreams a nymph that imitates the Ephemeroptera (olives), or if you need to get deeper something that imitates a shrimp, is a good place to start. It was on these waters that Sawyer developed his Pheasant Tail Nymph and it's just as effective today as it was when he invented it. However, it has its limitations.

Sawyer felt that it was impossible to make an imitation of an olive nymph sink through four or more feet of water and still look like an insect. He developed his Killer Bug to carry more weight and imitate shrimps to deal with these deep-lying fish.

The original PTN with its copper wire underbody sinks at a moderate rate. The problem with the fish I could see was that I would have to drop my fly so far upstream to get the Pheasant Tail Nymph 4ft down that I would have lined the fish and spooked them.

Instead, I chose a modern heavier alternative, a 2mm black tungsten bead with a lightly dubbed thorax, brown wire abdomen and hackle fibre tails. This small but very dense pattern sinks more than twice as fast as a PTN. Using low diameter tippet that is less water resistant further increases the sink rate.

I took several beautifully marked wild brown trout with this nymph, watching for the flash of the mouth or a slight movement towards my fly to detect the take. In water this clear I didn't need to watch the leader, just the fish.

Typically, the grayling shoals were holding in the open. Although less easily spooked than trout – a good thing in the bright conditions – you have to present the fly at their depth and strike quickly before they eject it. I used a leaded pattern with twisted copper wire wound in open spirals over fluorescent pink thread and coated in UV resin. Sometimes I coat these patterns with epoxy, which is twice as dense as acrylic UV resin and further increases their sink rate. I didn't need such fast sinking flies for these grayling lying in the moderate flow. It was easy to spot the nymph and make sure I was presenting it right down where the fish were





Wait to see the whites of their mouth as they take the fly. Sight fishing replaces bite indicators in the crystal-clear water of Coombe Mill.

holding. I caught several superbly conditioned grayling that fought well. As usual, the shoal became restless and agitated after I had caught several of their number, at which point it's a good idea to rest them until they calm down by walking upstream to fish somewhere else and coming back to them later. Where the water was shallow, I changed to a lightly weighted red spot shrimp or a tiny copper wire-bodied pupa. Both were equally effective.

Later, I tried the narrow section of the original river. I managed one trout, but I definitely needed clothing that was less visible to the fish because I could see spooked fish fleeing upstream from me.

In the afternoon, sitting on the steps of the shepherd's hut enjoying a cup of tea I reflected on a day spent in idyllic surroundings using a method pioneered on the river by two great nymph-fishers. A beautiful day of challenging fishing for wild trout and grayling on a river I had fished so often in my imagination.

Dog days? What dog days? ■

**PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD FAULKES**

## Factfile

Coombe Mill is a great water for stalking fish and sight nymphing in the style of Sawyer and Kite. Summer evenings and overcast days can see good dry-fly action. The mayfly hatch is often spectacular. A grayling ticket, available after October 15, is excellent value.



**BOOKING:** The beat is for one or two rods. 9.30am to dusk. Bank-fishing only. Catch-and-release with barbless or de-barbed hooks only. Upstream dry-fly only, April 15-June 30. Upstream dry-fly and nymph, July 1-December 31. Contact Fishing Breaks. Tel: 01264 781 988. Web: [fishingbreaks.co.uk](http://fishingbreaks.co.uk)

**PRICES:** April 15-May 14, £125 per rod. May 15-June 15, £165 per rod. June 16-October 15, £100 per rod. October 16-December 31, £50 per rod.

**LOCATION:** Coombe Mill, Coombe, Endon, Wiltshire SN9 6DE.

*Details correct at time of press.*

SHUTTERSTOCK