

Bubble bashing

by Sean Mills

Bubble bashing is a term that I created to describe a technique that is very successful when targeting carp on fly. As such, it is very descriptive of the method. The most productive way to catch carp is by sighting them in clear water and then presenting a fly in front of them. This is not always possible however, due to excessive surface glare, bad light or muddy water. I soon learnt that carp are still catchable in these conditions on fly by using the bubble bashing technique.

Carp are omnivorous and will eat anything. Their favourite food, however, is the Chironomid (or non-biting midge pupa, otherwise known as the bloodworm). These tiny insects spend most of their life buried under the bottom soil and mud of lakes and rivers. Because the mud often does not have much oxygen, the larvae produce lots of haemoglobin and are therefore often bright red in colour. Green and brown varieties also exist. Aquatic snails and other insect larvae also hide in the soil on the bottom, and the carp use their sensitive barbels and rubbery lips to dig, blow, and suck them out.

When carp feed on the bottom in shallow water (less than 1.5 metres), they often release thousands of pinprick or larger sized bubbles as they hunt down the bloodworms. As soon as they stop feeding, most or all of the bubbles disappear.

To familiarise yourself with these bubbles, take your rod tip and dig the point into the bottom mud of a lake. Also lift a rock or other object from the bottom and look at the bubbles that are produced. You will notice that different bottoms produce different types, quantities and sizes of bubbles. Often it is the really active feeders that produce the best bubbles, and these are the fish that are most likely to take a well-presented fly.

Rotting vegetation can also release bubbles, as can crabs and frogs that bury themselves in the sand or mud. These bubbles always have a set pattern. They are often released in a string and then stop. They are also large to average. Carp bubbles come up all over the place and there are lots of them. The bubbles produced by carp are small and sometimes look fizzy. Silt is also often visible because of the carp's digging action.

To catch these carp you need to cast a weighted fly over the bubbles and then allow it to sink. Because the carp are expecting an insect to be flushed out in front of them, they often grab the fly as soon as they see it. Sometimes, the fish is so preoccupied with what it is doing that it does not notice the fly at all, which means that several casts to a set of bubbles may be required. Obviously, the more accurately you cast, the better your chances. At other times, by the time you have cast to a set of bubbles, the fish has already moved on and it pays to calculate in which direction the fish is moving by watching where the fish starts feeding next. Carp are shoaling fish, and there will usually be more than one feeding in this manner. Sometimes, in very shallow water, the fish's tail will be visible, which makes life easier, because you then know where to cast so that the fly will land directly in front of the fish's mouth.



Big carp have explosive power. Sean Mills chases a fish hooked in an inlet...



And eventually lands it - all of twelve kilos!

The flies I have found most successful incorporate stiff cock hackles that create additional sound waves under water, which can be advantageous in murky water. Patterns like the Black Zulu, woolly bugger and the black Pinell are all excellent choices. I often use bead chain eyes on these flies for several reasons. Bead chain is a cheap, easy way to weight flies. It is flashy and available in gold or silver versions, and the loose bits of metal inside the eyes emit a very subtle rattle that the fish sense.

Fly losses while bubble bashing can be quite high because of the nature of the bottom, which is why being able to tie your own flies is a great help. Because flies tied with bead chain eyes lie on the bottom with the hook point facing up, they snag far less than conventional flies. These can be used from size 10 to 6. On some dams, carp love larger flies but the best all round size is a number 8 medium shank hook. The hook must be strong to land carp. Sharpen the point before you go fishing. I also flatten the barb to improve hooking.

Tackle for bubble bashing needs to be chosen carefully. Carp grow large and what they sometimes lack in speed, they more than make up for in power, determination and intelligence. Because the average size of the carp you will be catching on flies, varies between 1.5 to 6 kg and sometimes much larger, tackle needs to be on the heavy side. I prefer a seven-weight rod around 8 foot six inches long with plenty of butt power that enables me to subdue large fish more rapidly. When large carp are expected an eight-weight rod can work better. The reel seat should be uplocking because a downlocking fitting means that the reel is mounted on the very end of the rod, and the spool can therefore get caught in your clothing while you are playing a carp. I prefer a slim cork handle because my hands are quite small. The reel needs to be robust with a dependable ratchet or drag system and it must have an exposed reel rim. Drag pressure alone is not enough to tire a carp.

The reel should be capable of taking at least 50 or more metres of Dacron or micron backing. I prefer 100 metres as the minimum after almost having had my reel stripped of backing a few times. Most carp will take most if not all of your fly line and often some backing as well. A carp over three kg that makes up its mind to run can take a whole 27m fly line and 30 or more metres of backing. Very large fish that have space to run can really test your tackle and you may see as much as 80 or more metres of backing disappearing in a series of runs!

I use floating fly lines for all of my carp fishing and because the average cast varies between two to fifteen metres, a weight forward or double taper line will do equally well. For speed fishing, the weight forward taper scores best but for longevity and value for money, the double taper is better. Double taper fly lines also roll cast better. The brighter the fly line, the better, because they can help you detect subtle takes more easily. Floating fly lines allow you to make several casts to a fish without having to retrieve all of the line. They also keep the leader higher which is useful because fish can be spooked when the line touches their backs.

A tapered leader of around 9-foot with a short tippet of around 40 cm is ideal for bubble bashing. The leader does not have to be fancy because the flies are heavy enough to turn themselves over at the end of the cast. I normally make my own. The butt section is 0.45 mm mono followed by 0.40 mm and then 0.35mm line to which the tippet is attached. I use Speed Spin line because it is cheap, knots well and has surprisingly little memory when



A shoal of carp feeding in very shallow water



Carp are highly intelligent, spooky in the extreme and by far the heaviest fresh water quarry available to fly fishers in the western Cape

stretched. Many anglers prefer Maxima, but I find it too expensive.

The tippet material should be abrasion resistant and must have a high breaking strain to diameter ratio. I like a diameter of 0.26mm for bubble bashing and my favourite materials are the Double X platinum plus monofilament line and the Rio Powerflex tippet material. Both have good knot strength, are strong and are difficult for the fish to see.

The advantage of catching carp in muddy water is that they cannot spot you, and you can therefore get surprisingly close to them as long as you tread lightly. Muddy water can also mean that the fish feed much closer to the bank and in very shallow water. How far over the bubbles you cast, depends on how spooky the fish appear to be. I try to cast about 60 cm to a metre past and over the bubbles, before retrieving the fly a little, and then allowing it to sink. I then leave the fly on the bottom for about 10 to 20 seconds and then give it a twitch or two. If the fish has inhaled it at that point, it will be hooked by the twitching action. If not, it can help the fish to spot the fly. I then wait a little while before retrieving the fly slowly for a few metres before recasting. Bites can vary from a little bump to the line moving or twitching to an out and out grab and run. Be prepared for anything. This is especially important because you often have no idea how big the fish is. It could be 2 kg or 20 kg.

I recently fished a private dam in the Stellenbosch area that showed how effective the method can be. My friend, Roy Saunders, was float fishing on the one side of the dam, and I decided to try and stalk a few fish on fly around the dam. For the most part the dam is quite deep, but one side consists of shallows between 60 cm to 1.5 m deep. This is where I found the carp. The water was a murky brown and it was impossible to spot any fish. I soon noticed carp bubbles in many places and I cast to as many as possible. The result was six carp from 4.5 kg to 12.2 kg in about four hours of fishing!

Give it a go, you could just be surprised by a real heavyweight.

Editor's note: The author can be contacted after hours at 021 7889823.

