



SHAUN HARRISON

BAIT QUEST

ARTIFICIAL BAIT

With the long, dark hours of winter drawing to a close, the carp once again start their often familiar patrol routes, covering areas which contain their natural larders. Less time is spent in their comfort zones of winter and once again the carp get much more active, which means they need more food than they did just a few weeks ago.



Well and truly fooled on a mix-and-match presentation.

When it comes to slipping up on our rigs I have always found the carp to be at their most vulnerable at this time of the year. Greed takes over and with a few months of minimal angler pressure behind them they are less paranoid about food being attached to rigs. Reduced angler pressure doesn't necessarily mean fewer anglers fishing, but more a case of fewer anglers fishing where the carp have been thriving.

In my experience, so few anglers seem to sort out the winter spots where they are likely to actually catch a few fish. It's easy enough finding the fish, but more difficult sorting out where those fish go off to feed. Basically, the area where they spend the vast majority of their time resting up is rarely where they actually feed. These resting areas can, in fact, be pretty barren of food and any items introduced to these spots alert a sense of self-preservation.

All very confusing perhaps, but this is not the reason I have sat down to write this piece. I have merely made the point that the carp are now becoming much more active and covering much more ground than they did a few weeks back. Their natural larders are starting to fill up and they are going to be out investigating them.

A favourite method of mine at this time of the year is frequent recasting with bright, 'in your face' baits and I personally think none are more effective than the many varied artificial hookbaits which are now available. Now I guess this may surprise a few anglers, after all, I run a bait company and here I am advocating artificial bait, but anyone who has read my work over the years will have realised by now that I tell it

how it is. I see no point in pulling the wool over anybody's eyes. I could sit here saying that plastic and artificial baits are the worst thing ever to happen to the carp scene, but I would be lying. Not only that, but there will be more than a few of you who have been present when I have wound in and seen bits of plastic on my rigs so any credibility I may have had would then be down the pan. I have spent too many years getting to this stage in life to start having to worry about getting caught out.

I have used a lot of different artificial hookbaits and, to my mind, they have many advantages over the most carefully prepared natural bait

The simple fact of the matter is that I have used a lot of different artificial hookbaits and, to my mind, they have many advantages over the most carefully prepared natural bait. By natural bait, I am, of course, referring to real food items, because a boilie can hardly be described as natural.

Before we move on any further I guess I should clarify what I am writing about here. Many anglers seem quite happy with the artificial corn which is now available in a few different guises from more than one company,

although we really have Enterprise Tackle to thank for bringing the artificial baits to the fore. Now perhaps the second surprise in this piece is that I rarely use the artificial corn myself – much preferring the artificial boilies which Enterprise supply, but I know from the years I spent behind the counter at Walkers of Trowell that most anglers have no confidence in them at all – we used to sell loads of the artificial sweetcorn but hardly any of the boilies. This, from a selfish point of view, suited me fine as I feel that the boilies are much more effective – and very different.

It's not just the plastic artificial baits I have done well with. Once I realised the potential of some of these baits I started to explore further. I now regularly use polystyrene balls, float tops, painted balsa, small rubber balls sold for fly-tying, bits from toys – all sorts of things as sight bobs in preference to my conventional baits.

Even the smallest of plastic baits will catch carp – maggots in particular have become very popular.

SHAUN HARRISON
BAIT QUEST

ARTIFICIAL ADVANTAGES

1. They stay on forever no matter how much casting is done

I have seen concerns raised regarding the dangers of carp swallowing bits of plastic. This is a fair point and one with which we should concern ourselves, but, and it is a big BUT, I, more than most, have used various artificial baits and I can honestly say I don't lose any off the Hair. I did have a few strange occurrences in France before I realised that crayfish were pulling the Hair stops out, but that was soon sorted by making a larger loop on the Hair, thus lengthening the Hair, then threading through the bait in the conventional manner and looping the Hair around the bait and passing the hooklink through the Hair loop. Emergency measures, but it sorted the problem.

Frequent casting with conventional baits often requires frequent changing of hookbaits, which can then mean a lot of wasted time rebalancing rigs. If a fish shows and you feel it warrants a cast, you can wind in a bait which has been out for two days and recast immediately to the showing fish. There are very few 'proper food baits', with which you can do this.

More time fishing – less time messing around.

2. They seem pretty immune to nuisance fish attack

Like it or not, most of the so-called nuisance species seem much more capable than carp of realising that an artificial bait is non-edible. I know we like to think of the carp as being intelligent, but, if truth be known, they are big daft things at times. Yes, they seem to be able

to detect tackle and know that they are being fished for, but this is true no matter what bait we offer. Once it comes down to getting confident enough to have a bit of a munch, then most hookbaits will get hoovered up as long as they aren't too large compared to the main bulk of the feed. By this I mean they weren't particularly aware of what they had hoovered up.

I found it so frustrating right from the start of the very first Korda Underwater DVD that large hookbaits were continually put in amongst tiny particles

Large items of food are a different prospect. I found it so frustrating right from the start of the very first Korda Underwater DVD that large hookbaits were continually put in amongst tiny particles. A piece of cork counterbalancing a bare hook would have surprised a few people. Again, get the fish feeding and the vacuum created in sucking up small food items will ensure most small, light baits will go in.

I digressed a little there, but the fact is, I get much less nuisance fish activity whilst using artificial baits. This means fewer messed up rigs and less chance of the hook picking up bottom debris as the bait is subjected to a game of blow football.

More time fishing with effective presentations.

3. Their colour doesn't fade when left in the water

Not an awful lot to elaborate upon here. Most baits come back looking much more washed-out than when we first cast them. This isn't necessarily a bad thing – except if you want a bright bait!

4. The commercially available ones will take on whatever flavour we want them to take on

I have used flavoured and unflavoured artificial baits over the years. I always used to feel more confident with flavoured ones, but these days I tend to not bother flavouring them. This allows me to use different flavoured bottom baits underneath them without the need to carry lots of variations.

Certainly, once flavoured I have found it impossible to get rid of the flavour but maybe someone can point me in the right direction?

So, what is the difference between a boosted flavour natural bait and a flavoured artificial bait? I guess with most things the flavour washes straight off, but with artificial baits it doesn't.

5. You don't need poifuls of the things to get results

This is one of the major attractions for me and reason enough to continue to utilise artificial hookbaits. I have always messed around with alternative hookbaits. It's rare for me

to try to match the hookbait to what I am feeding as a free bait. It is so difficult to match them exactly once on a rig, with the weight of the hook, and the drag of the hooklink, etc.,

that I rarely bother to try to simulate, much preferring to offer something totally different. I also believe you are less likely to put carp off a certain bait by tripping them up on an alternative – worth bearing in mind if you are trying to establish a bait. Believe me, the more you get fish onto a bait the less important your hookbait is. Once you get them feeding hard they will slip up.

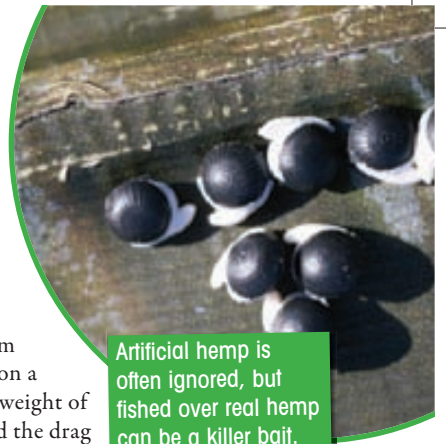
I can, and do, carry a vast range of alternative colours, sizes, and types of hookbait all in a few tiny pots. With natural bait you have to carry so much bulk because you need to cater for each cast, lost bait, etc., etc.

Yes, give me a few film canisters of artificial baits to carry around any day, rather than a separate hookbait bag.

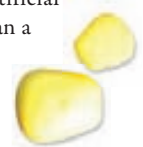
Different Presentations

Well, there we have the first five main points out of the way. For this section I am mostly going to be talking about artificial boilies or artificial items that can be loosely passed off as boilies.

I have mentioned that the brightly coloured



Artificial hemp is often ignored, but fished over real hemp can be a killer bait.

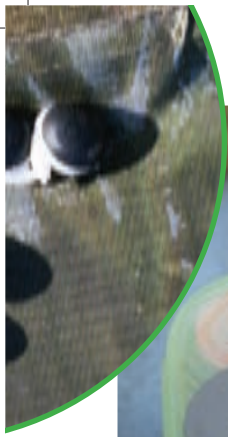


We're in!



Many of the modern-day plastic baits are very porous and will take on a dip or flavour.

AAX 0gms



Shaun's collection of small plastic baits are stored in film canisters.

said so many times in the past – I purposely make my hookbaits different to the loose feed, and not necessarily brighter. I often use very drab colours. A small, dark, discreet bait is often more likely to be taken than a bright 'in your face' bait. It is a case of ringing the changes and finding what type of bait they want on the day. By carrying a selection of different colours you can keep swapping and changing the top bait until you find what the fish in your water prefer. This, you may be surprised to hear, can change at different times of the day. The angler sitting with the same

induce a few more bites, yet give most of them a bag of boilies and they want every bait to be the same. Weird!

The obvious way, and the one which most anglers use, is a simple Snowman setup with a full artificial over a full natural bait. This has caught me so many fish over the years that it's a wonder I ever bothered to experiment further, but I get bored using the same methods and the same baits week in, week out; I need to swap and change to keep my interest.

A particularly successful method I use, especially in the cooler water conditions of late autumn through to early spring, is half a proper boilie and half an Enterprise Tackle boilie. This gives an open side of a natural bait to seep out some subtle attraction, and half an artificial to give some visual attraction. The Enterprise boilies are very easy to cut in half with a sharp knife. Similarly, they can be made whatever shape you desire. This hookbait of two halves method will give another lease of life to your take rate once the carp start to suss out, and shy away from, the more commonly used Snowman presentations.

I would be totally lost without the Enterprise artificial boilies in my own fishing, but there are times I require a bait, or a top bait, a little more buoyant than the buoyant plastic boilies. I then turn to painted polystyrene balls. I stumbled across these originally in a sea fishing shop.

artificial baits are excellent when used as single hookbait presentations, but this isn't the only way I use them – or, in fact, the main way I use them.

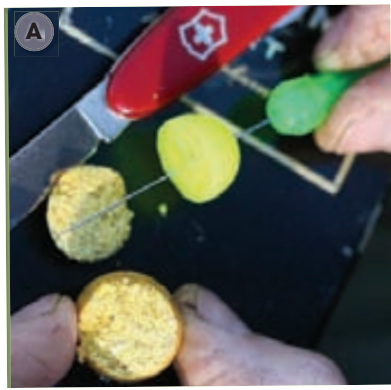
More often than not I like to cap natural baits with an artificial sight bob. As I have

hookbait day in, day out, never gets those bonus chances.

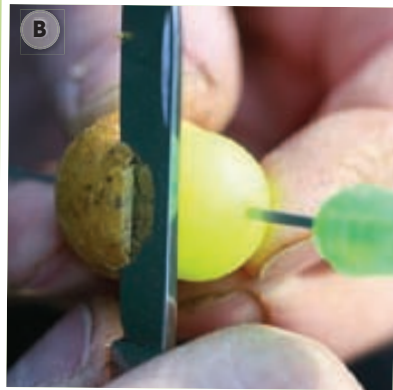
I find it so very strange that you can take a carp angler maggots fishing and he/she will be more than happy to keep trying different colours or alternative baits knowing that they

Shaun's Mix & Match

Here's one you might want to try and a presentation on which Shaun has caught some good carp. Basically, it's a mix of plastic and real bait, with the plastic being very visual and also acting as a buoyancy aid for the real bait above which it is sitting.



Trim the top off a plastic boilie, and the top off a real boilie, sitting them back-to-back on a needle.



Now start to trim away the four sides of the real boilie, working away from the plastic bait, with a sharp knife.



You should end up with a bait presentation looking similar to the one shown in the picture above.



To ensure the two baits stay tight together and don't slip down the Hair, Shaun threads on a float stop.



Here's what the finished presentation looks like. The cut-down boilie will leak off flavour, the plastic is very visual.

SHAUN HARRISON
BAIT QUEST

I learned, whilst working at Walkers of Trowell, that there were some very interesting things available to the sea angler and the game angler, which were incredibly useful in a carp angler's armoury. Lots of things have been available for years but only in more recent times have carp anglers realised some of the potential of these things. Leadcore, fluorocarbon lines, quick-release rig clips, line counters, blunt ended flying backleads (lure nose cones) and many of the hook patterns we now use, to name but a few, have been around for years and years, it's just that we carp anglers don't tend to go looking in other areas of the sport, instead, most of us wait for other people to discover them.

Personally, I can't help myself. I would much rather go looking at sea fishing tackle or game angling gear than spend time looking at carp tackle. I have picked up some real gems over the years from the most unlikely of shops.

Back to these polystyrene balls. I couldn't believe my eyes. There were packs of all different sizes, from tiny ones of 3 or 4mm up to around 12mm. These polystyrene balls, I guess, were sold for making anti-crab-type rigs for flounder, etc. so were pre-drilled. Each pack contained three colours, Blaze Orange, Fire Orange and Saturn Yellow – the three most commonly used float top paints. I quickly parted with a bit of my hard-earned (and it was only a bit) for handfuls of the things. I remember thinking at the time that if one of the carp-related companies got hold of them they would charge a fortune for them.

I caught from the start on these, fished above conventional baits. The two orange colours have been the most successful for me, although I have caught on the yellow. I never fish anywhere without a small mixed pot of these mixed-colour, mixed-size polystyrene balls in my kit. When you want a small, bright hookbait they don't come much brighter than these!

Another very useful find were some small buoyant rubber balls sold in the fly-tying world. These are used for tying lures with buoyant heads. A vast range of colours and variations on sizes are available and with these you can get some nice drab-coloured ones. These rubber balls tend to be quite soft to the touch and take on a flavour incredibly well. I was on the Mangrove the first time I put on one of these. It was February and a gale was blowing from right to left, making it impossible to get a bait out to where I had been catching a few fish on previous visits. It was so frustrating and I was racking my brains for what to do. The wind simply didn't drop for long enough to get a cast in. I needed a smaller bait with less air drag. Then I remembered these tiny rubber balls



These little gems from the fly-tying world are well worth a closer look. Basically, they are used to form the eyes on a lure, but make great decoy baits.



Polystyrene balls like this will soak in flavours and dips to add attraction.

which I had purchased for another situation. They were small 4mm and 6mm ones in an old 35mm film canister soaking away in flavour. Like a lot of things, I had brought them but had never got around to using them.

I played it very carefully to the margins and up popped a 30! Soon it was in the net. A 30lb+ February mirror on a single, relatively tiny, artificial bait with absolutely no freebies out there at all

I tied up a fresh rig with a shorter Hair and smaller hook to accommodate just one of these tiny baits. Out from the shelter of my umbrella I prepared to cast and gave it the big one. For the first time that day my marker knot left the reel and the bait was bang on the money – so to speak.

Not being particularly confident of a single 4mm artificial bait cast in the middle of nowhere, I was slightly taken aback when a dropback occurred on that rod around an hour after casting. I wound down and, sure enough, a carp was on the end. I played it very carefully to the margins and up popped a 30! Soon it was in the net. A 30lb+ February mirror on a single, relatively tiny, artificial bait with absolutely no freebies out there at all (I couldn't reach to put any out, and it was too rough to even contemplate taking out a boat, and I had been the only one fishing there). Big lesson learned again. It is more important where you put a bait, rather than what you actually offer.

I have since caught a few fish doing this, but you need to be really confident that you have your location bang-on. I don't mind fishing blind with a bait which is easily detected – but one as small as that....

The Renowned Artificial Sweetcorn

Partridge Tackle were the first company I was aware of to distribute this, but the three I most often see on offer are the ones from Enterprise Tackle, and Alien Baits, and the Korum ones from Preston Innovations, although lots of other companies seem to be jumping on the bandwagon too.

I have used all the ones mentioned and all behave in a slightly different way with different buoyancies and very different textures. For a while there were only buoyant versions available, which limited presentation possibilities a little. The first small yellow versions were so popular that soon many other colours were released and eventually sinking versions too. In fact, there are now so many variations on the humble grain of corn that it would take a lifetime to try all the variations and come to any worthwhile conclusions as to the ones best used in differing situations. At least now, with so many variations, it is going to take much longer for certain ones to blow as everyone who is confident enough to use them will be messing around with their own favourites, rather than the same one all the time.

The introduction of the plastic corn has certainly helped revolutionise maize fishing. It still amazes me that you can look into a bucketful of maize, thousands of separate grains, but you struggle to find one suitable for the rig – yet you expect the carp to eat every single grain in the bucket. Aren't we strange creatures?

A surprising method which catches a lot of carp is a small artificial grain of sweetcorn fished on top of a boilie. I guess it can act as a bit of a sight bob, but, more often than not, the grain of corn isn't large enough, therefore not buoyant enough, to actually end up sitting on top of the boilie. Unless you use particularly small, light boilies, the chances are your piece of corn is going to be sitting at the side of your boilie. Yet another instance of rigs behaving differently to some of those illustrated in the magazines.



AX 0gms





Shaun carries a variety of different sizes of fake corn.

Other Artificial Baits

You name it, you can now buy it. Artificial maggots, casters, worms, bloodworm, bread, pellets, peanuts, tiger nuts, whole maize, flaked maize, hempseed, Chum Mixer, the list goes on, with new products appearing all the time. I have never had it so good. I had plenty to experiment with anyway from outside the usual suppliers, lots of beads and everything else, but now I am less likely to get

competition from others who will probably be satisfied with the items made available in carp fishing shops.

If you haven't yet plucked up the courage to sit behind rods with artificial baits on the end you really are missing out on something. If you aren't confident enough to fish the baits on their own, get the carp feeding well on proper bait and you may be surprised how many more takes you receive on a small artificial bait than a proper bait. Fish two baits side by side and see for yourself.

I think it was Bernard Loftus who came up with the Mag-Aligner and Rob Maylin brought it to everyone's attention after first milking the method himself. Artificial baits aren't just for young, naïve carp, the big old warriors slip up as well.



Two takes in two hours on an early spring day... result!

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SHAUN HARRISON
BAIT QUEST

Glow-In-The-Dark

Strange ones these. I have done very well on some waters, but on others I have struggled to tempt a take. It was right back in the very early-'80s when I discovered that carp can become attracted to small light sources. The carp in the pool I was fishing at the time used to respond to floaters really well after dark. For obvious reasons, not many bothered to fish for them like this. I did, and found it very difficult to tell when I had a take unless the carp spooked itself and bolted. I decided to make a controller with a beta-light inserted into the top. I did this by wrapping lead wire around the bottom of a pike cigar slider. I pushed a beta-light into the top then drilled through the side of it and inserted a biro tube for the line to run through. Quite hi-tech really for 1981 – I should have got a job on Blue Peter! Anyway, the following night I couldn't wait to get down to the pool armed with the controller that was going to catch me so many carp – or so I thought.

It was dark. I fed some Felix Crunch pilchard-flavoured cat biscuits (no-one used dog biscuits back then – not many use cat biscuits now) and up the carp came. I cast out and sat staring at my beta-light controller. Suddenly the light went out and the line tightened. I missed it.

I recast and a repeat performance. Then a fish started to suck down the biscuits in the edge. I lowered in the controller and was able to actually see the hookbait. A carp approached; I could see the water bulging in front of it. It never paused for the hookbait but continued towards the controller – then the bloody thing tried to take the beta-light!

It then dawned on me that the takes I had missed were carp taking the controller! Another good idea backfired on me. That is until the following night. I was back, armed with a hook with a beta-light trapped in place with small, float rubbers and a small polystyrene ball either side to keep the hook buoyant. A couple of minutes after casting, the light disappeared and the line tightened. A few minutes later I was looking at my first carp caught on artificial bait.

The following evening I had another one, but lost the beta-light during the fight. I couldn't afford to keep repeating this so the method was remembered but put on the back-burner.

During the late-'80s I fished in the same way at Patshull Church Pool but this time with a hook critically-balanced to sink very slowly amongst a hand-placed bed of particles. The very first night I did this I caught a carp and, on inspection in the morning, all my free baits appeared to still be there. That carp had taken the beta-light first.

Several Years On and a U.K. 40lb+ Carp

I was starting my second night on a big-fish water holding only a handful of large fish. I had been unlucky on the first night as the carp had wiped out a carefully baited margin spot. My rig had sat amongst that bait, but on lifting it out in the morning I found my ultra-sharp hookpoint had caught hold of the bait, rendering the rig totally useless. I couldn't believe it. This had been the closest I had been to catching a fish from this water.

I was in a dilemma whether to stay put, in the hope that the carp would revisit the following night, or to make a move and set a similar trap elsewhere. I had bait they wanted to eat and it was obvious the carp would move into very shallow water under cover of darkness to feast upon it.

During the night I had actually heard a couple of fish bosh over on the far side of the lake, yet I had heard nothing where I was sitting. I decided to go for a wander and see what I could find. Indeed, the crystal water was slightly coloured on the other side of the lake and that in itself was enough to make me gather my bits together and move around to pastures new. The side I had been fishing was incredibly clear, indicating that whatever had been rooting around in the night and clearing me out of bait had long since departed.

I spent a long time looking before committing myself to a couple of small clean areas amongst the thick weed to present a couple of rigs and a scattering of bait. I wasn't sure what to do with the third rod, so left it rigged up ready on the bank in case of a carp showing. As long as it was away from my



The second take of the day soon followed.

baited areas I would risk a cast with a bright artificial, which should stand out clearly even if partially buried in weed.

The hours drew on and no fish showed. Soon the sun was dropping and the light was fading. I looked at the third rod still waiting, then had an idea. A couple of weeks earlier Frank Warwick had given me a few prototype glow-in-the-dark artificial boilies. On a water like this I was convinced the carp would never have previously seen these. It was worth a go. It would either scare the living daylights out of them or it may just result in a take. I charged one up by dropping it into boiling water (I prefer this method rather than charging by UV light as recommended) and cast it well away from my first choice baited area. It looked like a shooting star travelling through the night sky as I feathered the cast to land as quietly as I could manage into a lightly-weeded area.

I sat back and settled down for my final night on the water, hoping that this second night the carp would again visit my bait. I had been sitting there in my small chair for a couple of hours and was just thinking about getting into bed when the alarm below the rod with the glow-in-the-dark hookbait screamed into life. As usual I threw my drink over myself and rushed forward to sink the hook home properly.

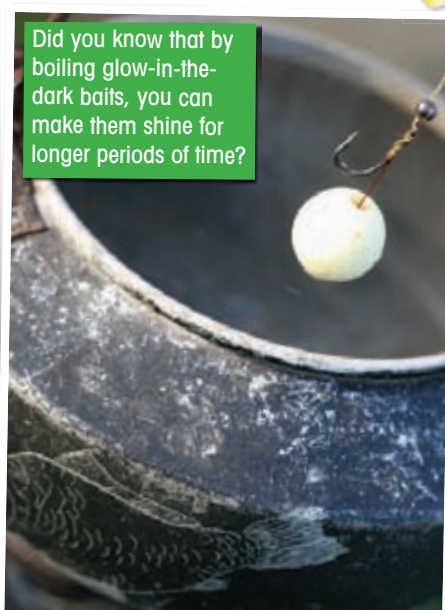
What happened next was so strange. The lake in question is literally in the middle of nowhere with no light source at night. The surrounding area is so dark, with a solid bank and thick forest behind. As I tightened down into the unseen bait thief the rod took on a more than healthy curve and a tiny bright light could be seen rising in the water. That tiny bright light proceeded to strip line off me in frequent bursts and slowly move around the pool. It was all so surreal. The water was so clear I could see the bait at all times. Eventually, as the light hit the



Here's the controller float from way back that Shaun mentions – way ahead of its time when it was conceived.



Did you know that by boiling glow-in-the-dark baits, you can make them shine for longer periods of time?



MAX 0gms

spreader block I lifted the net, engulfing my first carp on a glow-in-the dark artificial boilie.

It was so dark I could hardly see what was in the net, but on a test lift I was pleased to feel that solid weight which didn't lift out of the water, the solid weight which means only one thing – big carp! I flicked on a light and a massive-shouldered carp lay in the folds of the net. Everything was quickly sorted and on the scales it went 40lb 6oz.

I made a telephone call to report the capture and was asked to sack up the fish for proper identification in the morning. I don't sack fish very often but I was fishing as a guest, so felt obliged to do as I was asked.

New Artificial Baits

There seem to be more and more little bits appearing on the scene; Alien Baits have some wonderful new ideas and Enterprise Tackle are adding to their list all the time. In fact as I write this I have just received some of the pop-up boilies in smaller sizes. If I had produced some myself then these are the sizes I would have started with. Being round, they have more buoyancy than the artificial corn. These will also save me having to cut the barrel-shaped boilies in half when I require smaller baits.

I really can't understand why anglers have an aversion to artificial baits. As outlined, they can offer many advantages as a hookbait over a conventional bait. I am at my happiest fishing artificials in a proper baited area. It is usual for me to fish three baits on the same baited patch. It is amazing how often the rod with the artificial baits attached is the one to keep producing over and over again.

I guess it is the thought of lumps of unflavoured plastic and rubber which puts most anglers off. As I said, I have not been able to get rid of the flavour in most of the artificial baits I have flavoured. Enterprise Tackle sell their baits plain or ready-flavoured to save you messing around.

As you will see from what I have written, I have an awful lot of time for artificial hookbaits.

A final thought has just come to mind. The majority of pop-ups on offer these days contain quite a bit of non-food stuff, yet most anglers don't give it a second thought. Yet tell them to use plastic....

There are many different opinions why plastic baits work so well. Some think it is to

The majority of pop-ups on offer these days contain quite a bit of non-food stuff, yet most anglers don't give it a second thought. Yet tell them to use plastic...

Steve Watson, a very successful artificial hookbait angler - rest in peace mate.



do with the fish oils which are in some rubbers and plastics. Whatever it is that turns the fish on, plastic baits work. They work very well. If you haven't yet plucked up the courage to have a cast with one on the end you are denying yourself some wonderful sport.

Be assured that hookbaits certainly do not need to match the free baits to be successful. A thought came to mind the other day whilst chatting to someone and it is something which very much applies to artificial hookbaits over a bed of proper bait.

If you were baiting up to catch a cow you would probably offer it grass. The cow would certainly eat the grass but would a blade of grass be the best bait to catch it on? Eventually it may find it and eat it but a daisy planted in a field...

At the end of the day it all comes down to confidence in what you are doing and

confidence in yourself and being willing to experiment. The only angler I saw come in Walkers of Trowell when I worked there and start to look further than the obvious artificial baits was the late Steve Watson. I noticed him starting to purchase fluorescent plastic beads and guessed he was probably going along a similar route to myself so had a quiet word and confided in him some of the experiments I had been doing. Steve had been doing similar with what you might describe as very alternative hookbaits.

Steve's last year leading up to his untimely death provided him with some incredible fishing. The best fishing he had ever experienced and there would have been plenty more of it to follow.

I hope you are still getting your string pulled somewhere Steve. Rest in peace mate.

Best fishes, Shaun Harrison.

A stunning early spring carp of just over 20lb tells Shaun his presentation is right.



Carry a selection of different colours and sizes, and don't be afraid to ring the changes.

