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Angler's Mail

Weekly

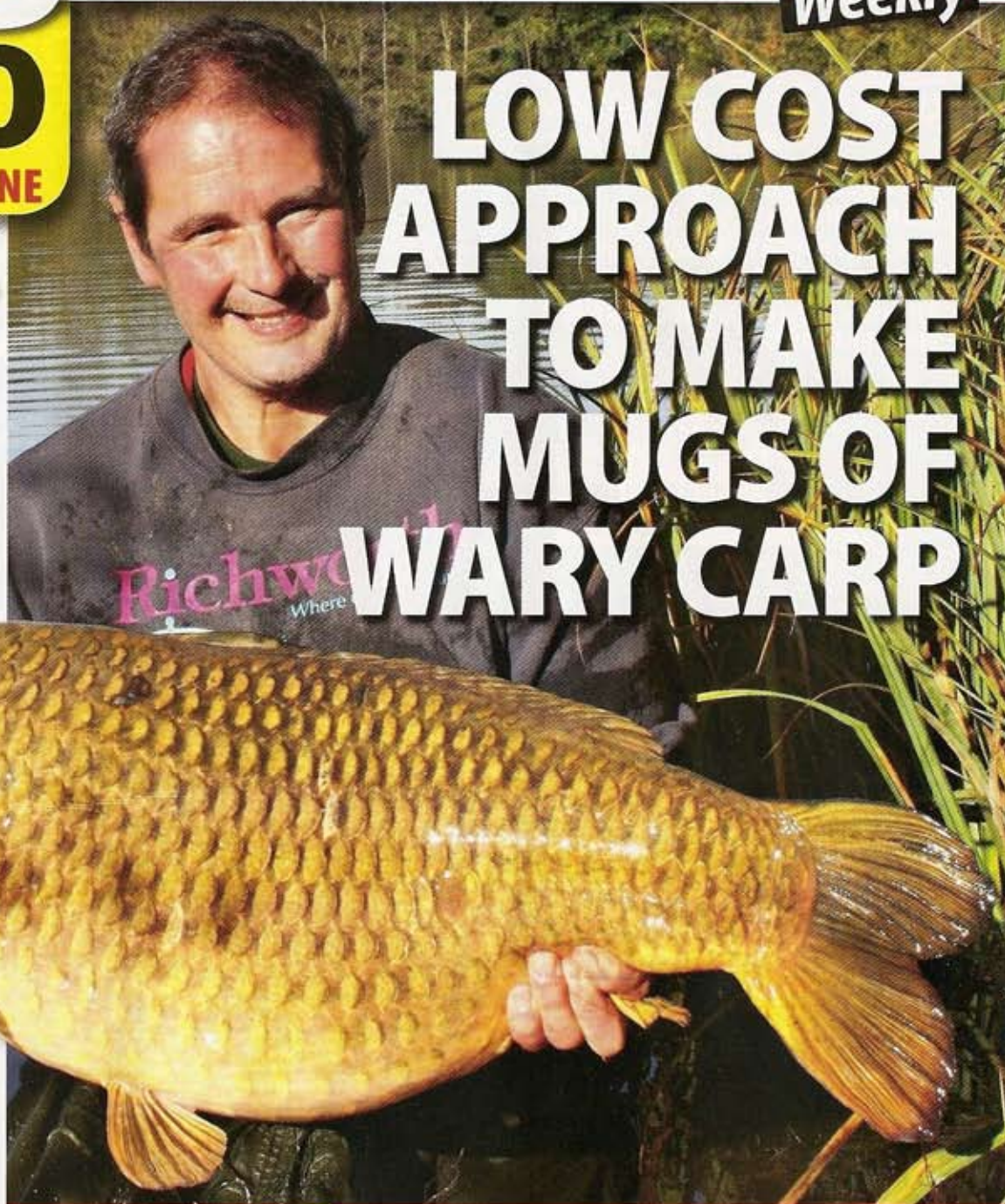
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IAN WELCH'S angling adventures

Here, in our unmissable 4-page slot, the UK's most cutting edge specialist coarse angler is the man to follow every week. Welch writes exclusively in *Angler's Mail*.

On the barbel Buss - destination Spain!

THIS
WEEK'S
VENUE

LAS LAGUNAS DE RUIDERA, CASTILLA LA MANCHA, SPAIN.

A small village in the province of Ciudad Real, Ruidera has a long history of settlement and was part of the stopping off point for Roman garrisons travelling between Rome and Cadiz and Merida and Zaragoza. The main features of the area are 15 natural, interconnected and spring-fed lagoons.

They extend for dozens of kilometres through unspoiled countryside, before flowing into the 8 km long Lake Peñarroya which forms the source of the River Guadiana. Deep and vast, the Lagunas hold carp and pike over 40 lb along with roach to 2 lb and black bass to 6 lb, but the real prizes are the three indigenous barbel species: the Mediterranean and Smallhead Barbel growing to 20 lb with the jewel in the crown, the comizo, topping 35 lb.

IAN'S AIM

Big comizo are rare beasts indeed and it's a seriously challenging venue but Welch wants one - badly!

CONDITIONS

The week-long session starts off in warm autumn sunshine but the forecast is warning of seriously wet conditions heading to the area.

RON BUSS is a national treasure in the big fish world. So when his son, Steve, set up carpandcatbussters.com to run guided catfishing tours to Spain's River Ebro it was no surprise when the venture quickly became one of the most successful on the river.

With his appetite for angling encompassing all species it did not take Steve long to expand into other areas, and it was understandable his thoughts would eventually turn to the most challenging of all the Spanish species: comizo barbel.

Steve and I had been trying to arrange a session together for some time, and when we finally got around to sorting something out he had his comizo head well and truly on, and suggested I join him in Castilla La Mancha with top comizo guide, Pete Staggs.

The village of Ruidera in Castilla La Mancha is not the easiest of areas

to reach and, until the new airport at Ciudad Real opens, travellers to the region are faced with a drive of 2.5 hours from either Madrid or Alicante Airports.

I opted for Madrid, and a grinning Steve was there at Arrivals to welcome me with a mixture of good and bad news. In traditional fashion he asked me which I wanted to hear first. As always I had to get the worst over and done with.

The bad news was that Steve and his dad were on the wrong end of a three week blank for comizo and, although Ron had landed carp to 30 lb, there had been no hint of a big barbus. Now that was not good, not good at all, and the only upside was that Ron wasn't heading home until the following morning, so at least I'd be able to catch up with him over a bottle of Rioja that evening!

The good news was as good as the bad news was bad, in that local



It looks huge even when viewed from the top of a surrounding hill but this is just a small bay at the western end of one of the Lagunas - there are kilometres of water above and below!



Big Ron Buss, a legend on the UK carp scene, had enjoyed some excellent carp from Ruidera in the three weeks prior to my arrival but sadly the comizo had not been in evidence.

expat guide Pete Staggs had netted a whacking great comizo of 28 lb 8 oz just as Steve was leaving for the airport that very morning!

The fish was sacked up waiting for me to take the photos but, better still was the possibility that it was a sign the fish were finally in the area and on the munch.

With a lot of catching up to do the drive passed very quickly and, before I knew it, I was being given a big bear hug of a welcome by Ronnie and an

introduction to Pete Staggs, whose face I had immediately recognised from numerous comizo barbel photographs.

As I was to find out during the next week Pete is undoubtedly the world's leading authority on comizo fishing, and living alongside the Lagunas De Ruidera he is brilliantly placed to know the moods of the fish and their habitat.

The difference between the photograph of a fish and the reality





PETE STAGGS is THE authority on comizo fishing – the good news for the session was the fact he had netted this 28 lb 8 oz monster just before I arrived in Madrid. It could be the fish were finally on the move after a long, lean spell of angling.



You could quite literally put your fist in there! Built to crush crayfish and to prey on live and dead fish, the comizo has an awesome gob.



Inspection of the sack showed Pete's comizo had been feasting on a diet of crayfish and hemp.



Inter-connections between Lagunas exist underground, as large channels or, in this instance, as a waterfall.



Serious fish call for serious rods, so Pete toolled me up with 3.5 lb Fox Carpmasters.



Wind, undertow and fishing at range meant I needed extra weights on the swingers.

VENUE information



DESCRIPTION.

Unimaginably vast, gin clear, heavily weeded, crayfish infested and with depths down to 21 metres, the Lagunas are not waters for the faint-hearted and a local guide is essential to put you on the right track. Comizo fishing calls for serious tackle and serious commitment – even then results are not guaranteed!



TRAVELLING AND GUIDED SESSIONS.

Ian travelled to Ruidera with comizo guru Pete Staggs who runs tailored packages for both fishing and birdwatching throughout the region. Check out www.ruidera-adventure.com for full details, e-mail info@ruidera-adventure.com or call Pete direct on 0034 926 525001.

can be a gulf, and when Pete opened the sack to reveal his prize I was poleaxed. I had never seen anything like it before.

It was, I was informed, a silver comizo as opposed to the rarer gold or black variants and it was absolutely stunning in every respect.

Built for speed and power, with a massive mouth to crunch its diet of crayfish as well as chomping on live and dead fish, the comizo is one of nine barbel species to be found in Spain. Endemic to the Iberian Peninsula and the Tagus, Guadiana and Guadalquivir river basins, it is scarce and listed as threatened, with a decline in numbers having resulted from habitat damage due to the twin evils of pollution and abstraction.

Unlike here in the UK there is no uncertainty about the status of Spanish barbel in stillwaters; comizo are indigenous to stillwaters and although they are also present throughout the rivers they favour the slower, deeper sections and rarely grow large.

The bigger lake fish hunt through the crystal waters of the inter-linked Lagunas, using tunnels through the dense weed as underwater highways between their favoured feeding areas. Seasoned campaigners like Pete are able to identify the patrol routes and set their traps accordingly.

This morning his trap had been sprung big time, and the result was the most mouth-wateringly impressive beast. I knew there and then that no matter how long it took or how

much it cost I just had to catch one myself.

Pete has lived in Spain for many years and fished extensively for the carp. But spurred on by images of comizo in the German angling magazine *Blinker* he decided to try and track one down for himself.

In 1996, after six months of fruitless exploration on the Guadiana River system he netted his first one, a 27 lb 8 oz specimen, from the spot his quest had originally started from! Over a decade later his passion for the species has not declined – and I could see why!

With the fish safely returned I started to get myself sorted out, and the first job was to take a quick look at the scale of the water, and the problem, in front of me.

The expanse directly ahead covered some 200 acres but it was just a bay at the western end of one of the Lagunas. Over the horizon it stretched for some 3 km until it reached the next in the chain, and just behind my fishing spot it flowed into the massive expanse of another.

All of the waters in the system are interconnected. Some, like the one I was on, via large channels, others by waterfalls or underground streams. The comizo are able to roam between the larger connections but are ultimately isolated from the river system, and it was daunting to think I was fishing a couple of baits in an area of water which extended over thousands of acres.

As on all venues of this scale the challenge of



We fed hemp, maize and chopped boilies to top up clear spots at range.



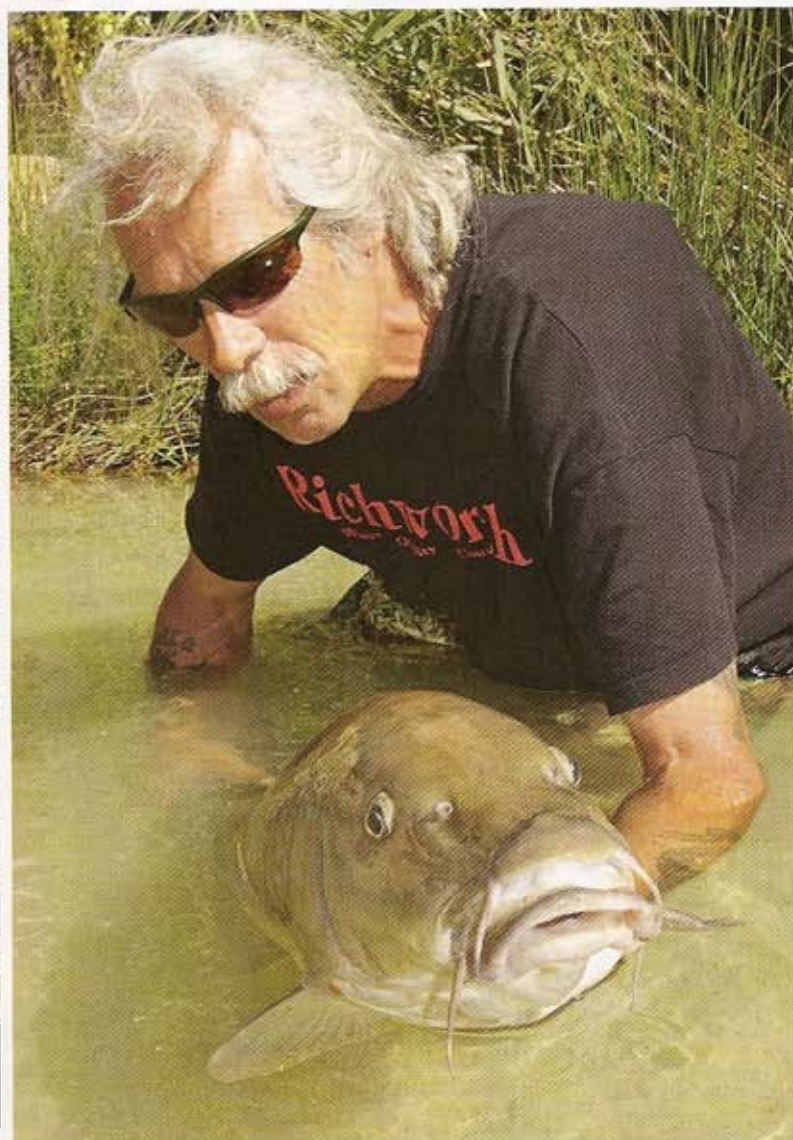
It was barbel fishing carp style and a Sky Pod was used to rest the rods.



I'm not normally a lover of braid but for instant contact with big fish at range it's essential and we were spooled up with 50 lb strain.



Pete had air dried baits to a rock hard finish to help them withstand crayfish attack; I fished a couple of 25 mm baits on a size 1 hook.



As soon as I saw it, I knew there and then that I just had to catch one – no matter how long it took!

the unknown is the greatest thrill of all, and Pete couldn't even say with any degree of certainty just how big the comizo grow.

He had witnessed fish caught to 36 lb but had recently seen uncaught fish which he reckoned were at least 10 lb heavier than the one he had netted that morning!

A 40 lb barbel in unspoiled surroundings with little or no angling pressure sounds too good to be true, but much of Spain's angling potential remains totally unexplored.

The River Ebro may offer spectacular fishing for giant cats but it's been hammered. Travel a little further and be prepared for some tough fishing and you could end up with something extraordinary.

As far as timing was concerned I'd arrived right at the start of the season as comizo are primarily a winter feeding species, with the best of the fishing between late October and April. With the water averaging 12 to 13 m deep, with over 20 m in a lot of areas, the system is well insulated. And it needs to be because, despite the southern latitude, frosts are regular and hard during the winter, with a massive diurnal variation which can see 20 degrees in the daytime plummet to minus ten overnight!

I was keen to quiz Pete on prospects, but there seemed to be little in the way of feeding patterns that he had been able to discern.

He had caught comizo with thick frost underfoot, in hot sunshine, in rain, in wind and in sunny flat calms!

On balance flat calms seemed to be a better bet

“When Pete opened the sack to reveal his comizo I was poleaxed. I had never seen anything like it before.”

than a big blow – strange given the behaviour of so many fish, and not particularly good news as a major storm was hitting Alicante and due to head our way over the next few days.

Unsurprisingly given the size of the waters and the size of the fish, comizo fishing entails carp tackle, and I had a Fox Sky Pod set up with a pair of 13 ft 3.5 lb test carp rods and big pit reels loaded with 50 lb braid.

Running leads and double 25 mm boilies on a size 1 hook to 25 lb Coretex were the order of the day.

Pete had air dried and hardened off a batch of DD Baits' kiwi and crustacean boilies to use as hook baits to withstand the crayfish, and after mixing up a bucket of chopped boilies, hemp and particles we boated out and baited a couple of clear spots at a

range of around 150 metres and carefully dropped the hook baits over the top.

The water clarity was incredible and, despite a strengthening ripple, I could see the bottom, most of it covered in thick onion weed, until we drifted over an area of clear, hard sand. It had started off as a small clear spot but, as Pete had baited it during the past few weeks, it had been enlarged and 'polished' by the hordes of roach and occasional carp, and possibly by the odd visiting comizo too.

With the wind picking up I had to attach extra weights to the heads of the swingers and turn down the sensitivity on the bite alarms, but finally, some six hours after landing, I was finally fishing for comizo...

■ Find out if Ian managed to catch a comizo in part two, next week.