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November 4, 2008

Angler's Mail

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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*.

Comizo dream is gone with the wind

THIS
WEEK'S
VENUE

LAS LAGUNAS DE RUIDERA, CASTILLA LA MANCHA, SPAIN.

Comprising 15 inter-connected, spring-fed lagoons covering several hundred hectares, the Lagunas are formidable natural waterways that form the source of the Guadiana River. Big carp, pike and roach are present in the deep, gin-clear water, but they are also home to the biggest of the Spanish barbel species, the comizo, which can top 35 lb. Deriving from the Arabic meaning 'The Great Valley' the Guadalquivir, at 657 km in length, is the fifth largest river in Spain, draining an area of 58,000 square kilometres before discharging into the Gulf of Cadiz and the Atlantic Ocean. The upper reaches remain un-impounded, unspoiled and totally wild; you are more likely to encounter a rare, Iberian Lynx on the bank than another angler! The system is home to the Andalusian barbel, *Barbus sclateri*, which although mostly small can reach double-figures.

IAN'S AIM

A big and rare comizo barbel is the ultimate aim of this week-long session but, after being blown away by gale force winds, a detour to catch an Andalusian barbel is a welcome change of target.

CONDITIONS

After a couple of days of pleasant sunshine, storm force winds and occasional driving rain batter the south west of the Iberian Peninsula, whipping the lagoons to a foam for the best part of three days. It's grim.



The wind was so severe it sent Pete's pod cartwheeling along the beach, smashing two rods in the process.

KERRRRRASH! The wind was so loud it was difficult for me to hear the branches falling around my shelter.

Thankfully, the shelter itself, due to several extra anchor points and some strategic positioning by guide Pete Staggs, was hanging on and had not yet been ripped from the ground and catapulted, Dorothy in Wizard of Oz-style, into the whirlwind.

There was sand everywhere. The force of the gusts was making a good job of putting the beach we were fishing from into suspension, and every bit of kit was being sand-blasted and coated by the abrasive grains. If it kept up like this, by evening I'd be scaling a dune in front of the bivvy to hit a take!

The lagoon itself had been totally transformed from the sunny, flat-calm idyll it had been a couple of days before when I had arrived in search of a comizo barbel. Now the reed-beds were flattened, there was a massive swell and white horses were breaking across the surface. It was an awesome sight. The waves would have made a Newquay surf dude green with envy.

I'd hoped the massive change in conditions would also signal a change in our fortunes, as a big blow back home usually moves fish with it, especially as in this instance it was a new wind and from the west. But Pete was not so confident. He had caught from the Lagunas in most conditions, including big winds, but more

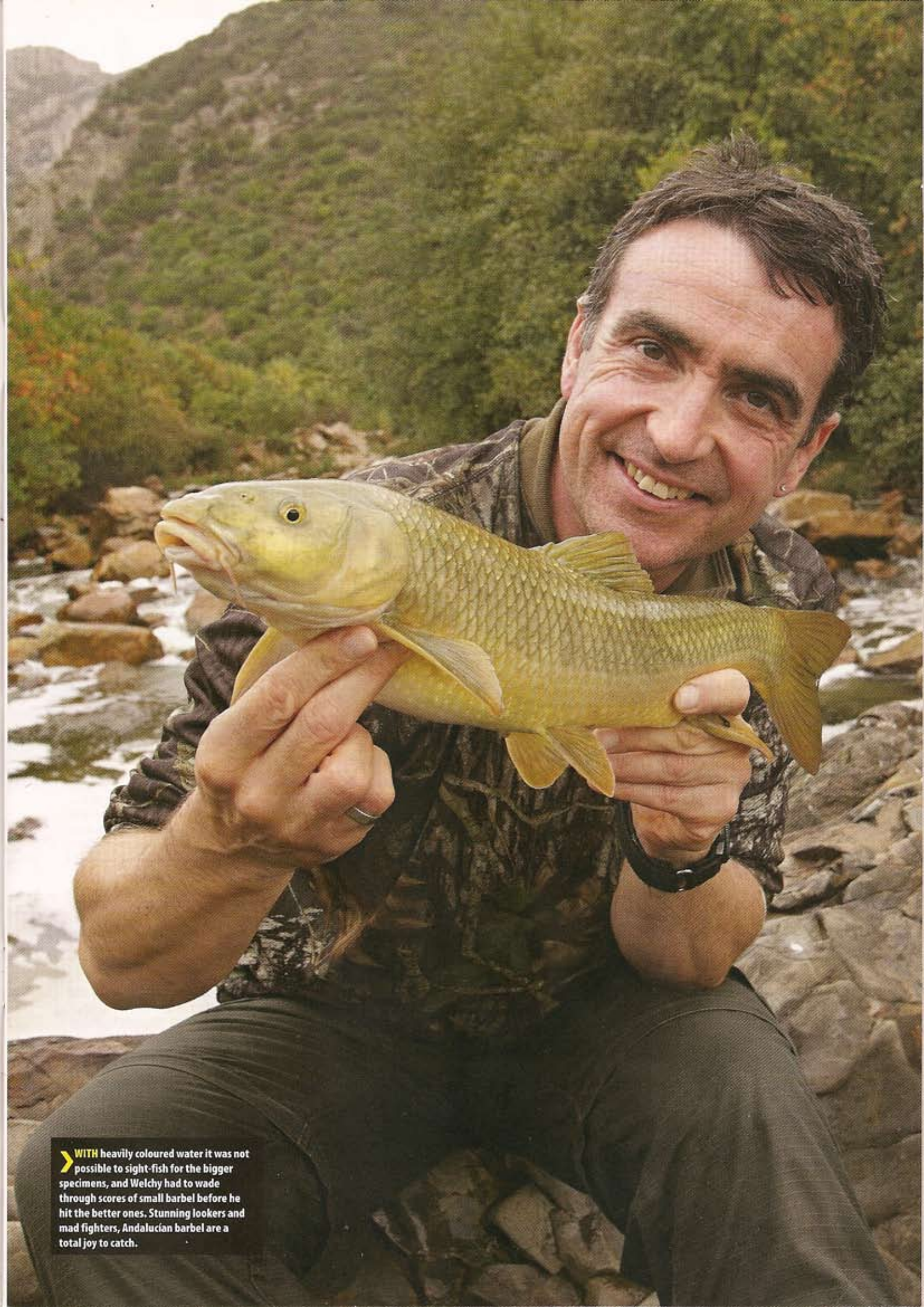
often than not the best of the comizo fishing came during long, hot and calm spells.

It wasn't just the comizo; the carp were noticeable by their absence as well, and if any fish was going to get on the wind it would surely be them.

My fishing partner Steve Buss had picked up a chunky, hard-fighting common on a double 25 mm boilie a couple of days previously. But that was the only bite since I had arrived, and despite the three of us scanning the water throughout the teeth of the gale there were no signs of fish moving.

Steve's tactics were fascinating, and based on a scaled-down version of the pebble rig he had developed when he was fishing





> WITH heavily coloured water it was not possible to sight-fish for the bigger specimens, and Welch had to wade through scores of small barbel before he hit the better ones. Stunning lookers and mad fighters, Andalucian barbel are a total joy to catch.



WEIGHTING FOR THE BUSS



IT'S ONLY ROCK 'N' ROLL!

STEVE BUSS used his Pebble Rig to bag this chunky common in windy conditions. The rig is perfect for snaggy water. It affords perfect camouflage, gives excellent hooking and puts you in direct contact with the fish with no lead to hook up in snags – and it beats the credit crunch, as pebbles are free!



The basic rig involves simply linking an elastic band to a Fox Speed Link and helicopter swivel.



The water in front of us was literally whipped to a foam during the storm!



Free offerings of hemp and maize with a grain of corn on the hook got the barbel feeding, and almost every swim brought bites.



Turtle disaster! In the UK we put up with the occasional crayfish on our barbel rivers. In Andalusia the nuisance species are bigger and meaner!

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 fainthearted, and a local guide is essential to put you on the right track. Even then it can be heart-breaking angling.

The upper Guadalquivir is a wild, natural river cascading through rugged Andalusian hills. Riffles, pools, falls, rapids, shallows, weed and reed-beds make every swim a new adventure, and basic techniques will bring loads of bites.

TRAVELLING AND GUIDED SESSIONS.

Ian travelled to Ruidera with 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.



for big cats up on the River Ebro at Mequinenza.

Simplicity itself, the rig involves banding a rock to a swivel to act as the weight for the rig – big baits and big fish requiring heavy stones and giant bands; smaller fish and tactics more modest lumps of rock and rubber.

Loaded into a PVA bag of freebies and dropped off via a boat, the rock provides a good, solid anchor for the terminal tackle, but pings off the band and puts the angler in direct contact with the fish as soon as it's taken. The result is better hooking with less chance of the lead bouncing the hook out, less snagging, less fish damage and, with the countryside littered with free 'pebbles', less damage to the wallet, too! I was impressed, especially when Steve showed me the scaled down version he was using for the carp. This could easily be cast, rather than requiring a boat drop-off, and was perfectly suited to use on a UK venue.

The wind was so strong that the pod holding Pete's rods succumbed to the force of the wind and cartwheeled across the sandy beach, until it met the immovable resistance of a concrete slipway. The result was nasty, as a pair of 3.5 lb Fox carp rods shattered on impact.

We retired to a local bar for much needed coffee, tapas and an emergency meeting.

I could tell by Pete's face it was not looking good. He had checked the forecast on-line, and a further hit of rain and squally weather was due

to move up from the south west and hit us hard during the next 24 hours. Thankfully, after that it looked like becoming more settled – by which time I would be getting ready to head back to Madrid Airport! I was desperate for a comizo, but reluctantly admitted it just wasn't going to happen in the current conditions.

Plan B was to head back to the apartment, spend the evening helping Pete and his family celebrate his birthday, and then make a three-hour journey into the border of Andalusia the following day, in search of one of the other Spanish barbel species, *Barbus sclateri* – the Andalusian barbel.

Not as big as the comizo, and rarely making double figures in the rivers, the Andalusian barbel was, Pete informed me, a terrific looker, a hard fighter, and one that inhabited one of the wildest, most unspoiled rivers in Europe.

Best of all, he reckoned there was no way we could fail to catch, and after five long days of blanking that would do for me!

It is difficult to find words to describe the upper Guadalquivir River system, but if you were asked to invent the most spectacularly perfect small river barbel fishery, this would be it. It was river fishing heaven, and then some! Stunning gorges contained a narrow, winding waterway comprising riffles, falls, shallows and small, deeper pools.

The only downside was that the heavy rain had coloured up the normally gin-clear water,



Use a band to suit the swim you are fishing – if you are using a big rock to hold in a powerful river then use a bigger band!



A double loop of band is all that is required if you are dropping your rig from a boat or bait boat.



If you want to cast the pebble, double wrap your elastic band to support the weight.



For boat work Steve places the finished rig and hook bait in a large, PVA bag of free offerings for perfect placement.



The Andalusian barbel is very similar to our common barbel at home, but it's easily distinguished by the beautiful yellow tinge to the belly.

"If you were asked to invent the most spectacularly perfect small river barbel fishery, this would be it."

so we could not sight-fish. Today it would have to be pot luck, and the way my luck had been so far I wasn't that hopeful!

My roving rig for the day was a light, touch leger outfit with braided main line and a simple SSG link leger above a 5 lb fluorocarbon hook length with the hook bait a single grain of corn on a size 12 hook. I started off in a slightly deeper, weedy glide below some rapids, and after feeding a little hemp and maize I flicked the rig exactly where I would have expected a common barbel to be holding up – a crease alongside weed two thirds of the way down the swim.

The bite was hard and instant, and within a couple of seconds I was swinging my first Andalusian barbel to hand, and a delightful creature it was, too, with a beautiful, creamy yellow belly, the main feature distinguishing it from its UK

cousins. Every cast brought a bite, and the swim only died after I'd had five or six fish, all of them small, but nonetheless welcome.

The wander along the river for the rest of that day will remain one of the most enjoyable sessions I have ever fished. Glorious sunshine, every swim breathtakingly beautiful and plenty of fish to be caught, with my best for the day a good one of around 5 lb to 6 lb and, most memorably, one of half that size that dragged my rod into the stream. It had Pete in stitches as I had to strip off and go in to retrieve it!

Sitting naked on a rock with my kit drying off beside me I'm sure I was not a pretty sight, but I was probably the only angler on the entire river, and every bite resulted in an arm-wrenching tussle with a stunning fish. Barbel heaven, indeed.

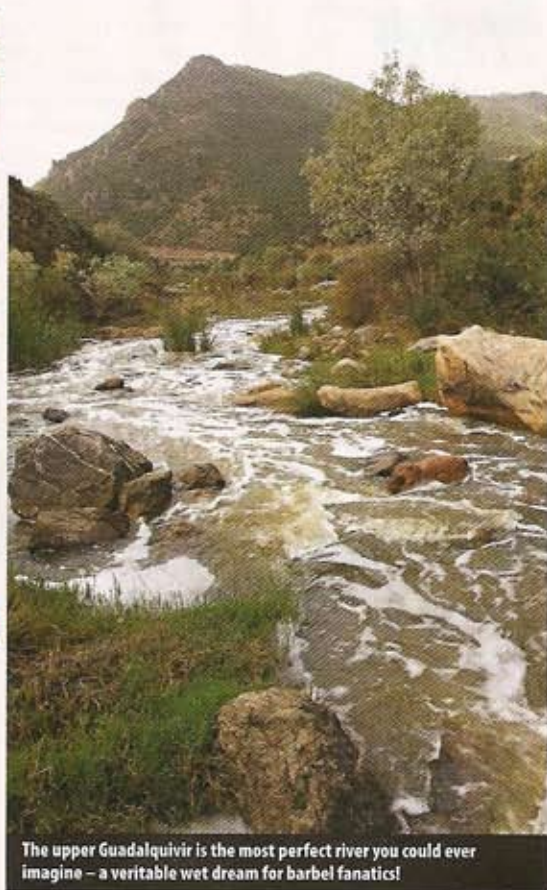
The lack of a comizo was a bitter blow, but

after barbel fishing of that quality I was strangely content as we headed back to Ruidera. As we reached the outskirts of the region the skies darkened, the lightning flashed and the Heavens opened in a cataclysmic downpour. A mighty storm was heralding the end of the stormy weather, and from here on it would be warm and calm again. But my Spanish time was running out, and I had only an evening and morning left to fish.

"Don't worry," said Pete, "It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings!"

I smiled. She wasn't singing yet, but she had warmed up and was making her way to the stage. I appeared to be powerless to stop her.

Next week: the clock is ticking and Welch is getting desperate – find out if he finally manages to bag one of those elusive comizo.



The upper Guadalquivir is the most perfect river you could ever imagine – a veritable wet dream for barbel fanatics!