

Travel UK

As fly-fishing lures new crowds, Estella Shardlow seeks trout and tranquillity on the River Windrush in Oxfordshire

This is not my natural habitat. It's early Sunday morning, mist is still gauzy over the bulrushes, and cow parsley fringes the riverbank as I follow a green ribbon of water upstream. The Windrush is a tributary of the Thames, yet it couldn't feel less connected to the stresses of London life. Ahead, half-obscured by a curtain of willow branches, a lone, khaki-clad figure waits beside a tumbledown shack. From its rafters dangles a hand-painted sign bearing the same message as my automated out-of-office email response: "Gone fishing."

As with many other outdoors activities there is surging interest in angling among the Covid-weary, particularly those who did not form part of its traditional constituency. Applications for rod licences rose by 15 per cent in 2020 – with women accounting for nearly a third of new applicants in the 15 to 44 age group – and Instagram is awash with millennials sporting waders and tackle.

Socially distanced fun is certainly part of the appeal of fly-fishing. It doesn't cost a fortune either: £6 for a 24-hour licence; beginners' kits less than £100. Besides that, frazzled urbanites are extolling its meditative, restorative benefits – it's the ultimate antidote to our always-on digital lifestyles. In April the NHS even began prescribing fishing as a mental health therapy.

As someone who struggles to silence their monkey mind I decide this is worth a shot. The River Test in Hampshire is one of the most celebrated

fly-fishing chalk streams in Britain, and the Spey in Scotland is legendary for salmon fishing, but I settle on a weekend in rural Oxfordshire at the boutique hotel Minster Mill (the Windrush flows through its 65 acres), where I can learn the ropes from Mark Purvis, the local ghillie. I've timed my visit well, he says with a grin: "it's duffer's

fortnight" – a window in early June when trout gorging on swarms of newly hatched mayflies are easy targets. I witness the action from the hotel's riverfront terrace the evening I arrive. Swirling clouds

of mayflies dip perilously close to the water, which flashes with silvery, speckled scales. Blofeld's piranha tank in *You Only Live Twice* springs to mind. The feeding frenzy is quite at odds with the terra firma serenity of wisteria-covered Cotswolds stone buildings and chilled rosé.

For my morning fishing session we're on the bank a little upstream, beyond the croquet lawn and tennis court. First up, this "duffer" has to learn some fundamentals. Dry fly-fishing involves casting a specially weighted line to land your lure oh so delicately, insect-like on the river's surface (in wet fly-fishing you sink the fly to the riverbed).

These hand-tied flies are miniature artworks, imitating the mayflies' lace-like wings and whiskery tails. "Deer fur is good because the hairs are hollow," Purvis says, sifting through his box of creations. "This feather is from a cockerel, and those are moose-hair fibres."

Purvis has tweaked traditional fishing lingo for the

KEEPING IT REEL



Women accounted for nearly a third of new rod-licence applicants aged 15 to 44 last year



Minster Mill, with the Windrush flowing past it



Marina Gibson is an Insta sensation

younger crowd he increasingly has in his lessons. Explaining different ways of casting the line, he describes the roll cast using a "back slash, forward slash" analogy, so I move my forearm at the angles of those familiar keyboard symbols. As for the overhead cast (which must go back before

it goes forwards), "imagine you're holding a phone to your ear".

Somehow, magically, several metres of line unfurl up and behind me; a pause, another flick of the arm, and it arcs forward, almost reaching the opposite bank. The fly kisses the water, with

the line settling behind it. I'm rather satisfied with the whooshing sounds and whipping strokes, but Purvis urges subtlety. "It's a delicate movement, not a lasso." Right, be more mayfly.

Indeed, this is the essence of fly-fishing – only by attuning yourself to nature

do you stand any hope of catching a fish. "You've got to be stealthy, move very deliberately," Purvis says. "Then everything else accepts you as being part of that landscape."

And not just trout, he says. In those opaque green depths you'll also find chub, roach and pike. There's also a thriving otter population, and kingfishers. "Deer will drink from the river," Purvis says. "The other day a grass snake swam right past me. The wildlife I see is as important as the fish I catch. I think of it as immersion in a whole landscape."

Left to my own devices, I soon discover the truth in this. The rhythmic casting allows my mind to become saturated by nature: ripples reflecting on bark; hawthorn and apple trees frothing with blossom; meadows dusted with dandelions and buttercups. A sudden plop snags my attention – not a fish, but a water vole taking a morning dip. Then a tapping makes me raise my eyes to a nearby branch where a woodpecker has settled. This is a more effective mindfulness practice than any app I've tried.

Oscar Boatfield, a co-founder of the British outdoors brand Bear, is emphatic about the mental health benefits. "You can go into something called a 'flow state' – a form of meditation – through the repetitive physical movement and intense focus on the position of the fly on the water," he says. "The mind blocks out normal thoughts and emotional chatter."

Adrenaline and cortisol levels drop. "It gives your mind and body time to heal without you even knowing about it."

So, do I catch any trout? Well, no – but that's hardly the point. Brushing back through the cow parsley and buttercups, far from feeling empty-handed I'm brimful of calm, green contentment. My phone stays in my pocket, the trout go about their elusive business and, matching my pace to the river's slow drift, I walk on.

Estella Shardlow was a guest of Minster Mill, which has B&B doubles from £180. Three-hour sessions for one or two people with the ghillie cost £155, including equipment hire (usually £35). Fly-fishing is possible at Minster Mill between April 1 and September 30 (minstermill.co.uk). Guests must buy a rod licence (from £6; gov.uk)

In April the NHS began prescribing fishing as a mental health therapy

15% rise in applications for rod licences in 2020



BLACKADDER HOTEL, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

With a dedicated Fishing Cottage, this estate clearly means business. As lovely as the four-poster beds in the main 16th-century building are, to get immersed in the rural setting you want this greystone bolt hole in converted stables on the banks of the River Nith. Bring your own gear. There's even a chest freezer in which to stash your catch – and you're likely to have plenty because the cottage overlooks the salmon-filled John Kerr Pool.

Seven nights' self-catering for four from £450; blackaddierhotel.co.uk

BOVEY CASTLE, DEVON

Aspiring fly-fishers staying at the grade II listed hotel can choose between the stocked estate lake and Upper Teign River, ten minutes' drive away. Borrow a basic fishing kit from reception for a fiver and settle in to catch salmon or trout on the edge of Dartmoor National Park. The hotel can arrange tuition with an instructor (£50 an hour). Doubles from £129; boveycastle.com

LOCHTUFFIN OLD FARMHOUSE, PEMBROKESHIRE

This dog-friendly 17th-century farmhouse near St Davids stands on a private nature reserve with two picturesque lakes, the larger of which is well stocked with rainbow trout; fly-fishing is exclusively for guests from April to October. You'll need your own rods and tackle, but rackets are provided for the tennis court – there's a gym, games room and hot tub too. Seven nights' self-catering for eight from £684; qualitycottages.co.uk