



HOW TO FISH

CHRIS YATES

'Will delight anyone who has ever
fished and anyone else who has
wondered what the appeal of
fishing might be'

The Times

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HOW TO FISH

'Chris Yates is god. *How To Fish* is likely to be his magnum opus'
Condé Nast Traveller

'A gem of a book on the philosophy of angling from one of the
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some kind of peace at the end of it all. A wonderfully elegiac book that
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transported, in your mind's eye, to the riverbank in the time it takes
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'I had a feeling that I would enjoy this book, even before I opened it,
but I never realised that I would enjoy it so much' *Anglersnet.co.uk*



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Yates is a photographer and a writer, but first and foremost he is a fisherman. He was originally inspired by the discovery of a monster carp in his village pond when he was five. Thirty years later, he caught what was then the biggest carp – and biggest fish – in England, and went on to talk about his experiences in books, in magazines, on radio programmes and for the BBC2 series *A Passion for Angling*. His numerous books include *Falling in Again*, *The Secret Carp*, *The Deepening Pool*, *Casting at the Sun*, *River Diary*, *Four Seasons*, *On Fishing at Sea*, *Reel Time* and *Nightwalk*.

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YATES



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*To Camilla, Alex, Will and Ellen, my patient children;
and also to Jason, who showed me the river.*

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With my silken line and delicate hook
I wander into a myriad of ripples
And find – freedom.

Li Yu, *Fisherman's Song*

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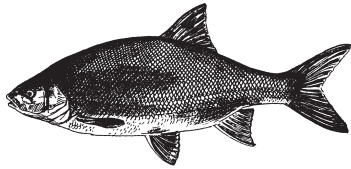
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FIRST
CAST



*The
River
Speaks in
Ripples*

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However eager I am to start fishing there is something about the first glimpse of a river that never fails to stop me in my tracks. Even on a wet winter's morning when I'm hurrying with all my gear across an open field a river will flag me down before I can find a sheltering tree and for a few moments we have a silent conversation.

First I must have the news, although, with a river, it's mostly old news: how the water has risen or coloured since the storm of four days ago; how the weed along a chosen pool has almost disappeared since a gang of swans mowed through it last week;

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how the flow has lost its energy after a month of clear skies. Obviously this kind of information is important, especially if it feeds my optimism rather than makes me wish I'd stayed in bed, but the factual stuff is dealt with in seconds; I must wait a minute longer for whatever else the river has to say.

I am looking at the water now, but it was a morning ago and at a different place that I had my first glimpse of it. I was standing in a sloping field overlooking this small lowland stream as it meandered between high banks overgrown with willow, sedge and alder. I could see that the level was low for the time of year and therefore knew the current would be correspondingly slow and the water probably crystal clear. There was an early morning breeze breaking up the reflections of the trees. A few fallen leaves were floating downstream, but no fishes rippled the surface, nor was there any sparkle in it as the September sun had yet to appear above the hills to the east. As I looked down on the sweeping bend below me something in my memory or my bones made me instantly decide that I should head upstream rather than down towards the more familiar water where I'd intended to go. I had never

explored the upper reaches of this particular stretch before, but it seemed that today I would be casting into new pools.

The slow breeze swam along with the slow current, making smooth ripples that said it was easier to follow the flow than go against it, especially first thing in the morning when everything must be effortless. Yet below the ripples there was this contradictory voice, a countercurrent, working like divination, but probably triggered by something less mysterious. I think the morning's weather and the morning's light had combined with the river to release the flow of all the countless other rivers I'd ever fished. One momentary glance and there was an unconscious welling up of historic waters, superimposing themselves one after the other on the present scene until there must have been an almost perfect match because why else was I suddenly trying to remember a different river that ran through a day similar to this one, but maybe ten, twenty or even thirty years ago?

Happy to be acting on a whim – or a seeming whim – I turned left and began walking upstream, keeping my eyes on the water as much as I could, although

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there were occasional willow thickets, hedges and ditches where I lost sight of it and had to turn aside to find a new path. Even where the banks were reasonably clear it was still sometimes difficult to see much of the river. Despite the first witherings of autumn there are sections where bulrush and lily beds remain like bristling forests and gently swaying swamps stretching from bank to bank. In the quieter glides and shallower runs, long streamers of ribbon weed are all yellowing at their tips, making them appear semi-transparent as they weave in the current, but they still obscure much of the actual riverbed and, as I watchfully made my way upstream, they were also concealing what I was looking for.

September: one of the loveliest and most generous months in the angler's calendar. Even if the weather doesn't change much after a hot, dry and miserly August, the lengthening nights, the heavy dews, the cooler mornings and evenings remind the fish that the summer is almost over and they must therefore grab what they can before winter comes. In a few weeks time, after the equinox and the first serious weather of the year, the river will be transformed from a chain

of quiet, secretive pools into a deeper, stronger and continuous flow. All the midstream vegetation will be swept away and the fish will have to change their habits and their haunts.

Changing habits and haunts at the end of summer was something I did all through my formative years, just like everyone else, so maybe my urge to explore new territory today was prompted less by a vague memory of another river and more by a conditioned reflex. Sixteen slightly intimidating Septembers, each one confronting me with new classrooms, new tutors, new books and new problems, must have left their mark. Alternatively, I'm seeking new water because of a genetic memory, an echo from those millennia when, every autumn, my ancestors followed the migrating herds southwards.

Heading upstream, I naturally had more chance of spotting fish as I was approaching them from behind; however, the rising sun threw a long shadow ahead of me and, at a turn in the river, it must have been cast across a group of chub because there was a sudden plunging splash. Until that moment, all I'd seen since I'd arrived were shoals of minnows flickering through

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the few weed-free, shallower glides and it was reassuring to be startled by such a walloping commotion. They must have been quite large fish – it looked and sounded as if someone had just heaved in a sack of potatoes – but I’m convinced they were chub. Several bow waves shot off in different directions, some of them sweeping into the reed bed on the far bank, which is typical of chub if they’re spooked. I crept up to where the ripples were subsiding and waited a few minutes to see if anything was going to reappear.

Years ago, when I was a chub devotee, I would have waited all day just for a glimpse of one of those creatures, but today I’m not really interested in them: I have another more resplendent fish on my mind.

Fifty yards after the chub hole, I came to a seductive willow-shrouded pool which seemed to possess all the features I’d been looking for: a shelving riverbed where a steady current slowed and divided around the remains of a sunken tree, the main flow deflected over to the far bank, the rest coming round in a slow idling whirl beneath the overhanging willows. There were some frayed late-season lilies and a thin weed bed, but the shade had obviously suppressed their summer

growth and, apart from the timber reef, the pool was reasonably free of obstructions. Despite the clarity of the water, the depth, the shade and the reflections made it almost impossible to see if any fish were at home, so I set up my rod and reel, tied on a hook, baited with a worm and cast out.

However impatient I am to get to the river, if I'm not completely familiar with it and it refuses to make any promises, hours can pass before I finally decide where to make my first cast. But once I've chosen the place it's a matter of life and death that I cast immediately. When I get the feeling that *this is the spot*, there's no fiddling about with fancy rigs or sophisticated presentations. I might sometimes muster just enough restraint to allow a float or a weight to be attached to the line, but if anything takes longer than about thirty seconds to set up I feel as if a prison door is closing on me. All my expectations, frustrations, all the pretence about being happy doing other things in the days while I wasn't fishing – everything is resolved as soon as the line is in the water and I'm reconnected with reality.

My bait slowly sank into the depths of midstream

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and I checked its descent by gently tensioning the line so that the worm would come round into the underbank eddy where I thought the fish might be waiting. First cast into an undiscovered, unknown pool; anything could be down there; anything could happen. The line twitched, began to tighten, fell slack, twitched, fell slack once more. Minnows? Chublets? Even before the line moved I sensed the river might've deceived me with this perfect-looking place; it was perhaps too obviously a lair or a sanctuary for a big fish. Later in the season when the heavier currents made any deep backflow more appealing, it would almost certainly hold something rod-splitting, but today the river's generally slow pace made it suddenly seem, contrary to my first impression, just too soporific. Finally the line made a steady decisive movement and I upped sharply with the rod tip – and reeled in a bare hook.

Almost certainly a minnow, I thought, or, more likely, a dozen minnows all fighting over one worm. I re-baited and cast again – the second cast less urgent, more leisurely, more considered than the first. Minnows, I told myself, were a sign of a healthy river and

despite their worm-whittling presence in my pool, there was still a chance that much bigger fish were lurking nearby. Once more the line began to hesitantly tighten and slacken as soon as the bait sank to the bottom. Then, again, the steadier draw, but this time I connected – and the curving rod tip told me it definitely wasn't a minnow. Something went round deep down in a couple of tight circles, but though my old cane rod remained nicely bent not an inch of line clicked off the reel and I eased the fish towards me. I was sure I recognized the soft thump of the tail stroke and its identity was confirmed when it swirled and skittered on the surface, showing a lovely blue flank. Mixed up in the spray, the bright red fins looked like radiating beams of light. It came over the net without any more fuss; I hoisted it ashore, dampened my hands on the wet mesh, quickly unhooked it, guessed it at a pound and a quarter and slipped it back into its home – the first roach of my season, but an accidental one.

Using such a universally attractive bait as a worm in such a richly diverse habitat as this river is a test of faith. It's easy if I can see the fish I'm after, but in a deep hole or in amongst the reeds there's probably

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only a one in five chance of connecting with whatever I'm after. Sometimes, especially late in the season, I like to fully embrace the serendipitous nature of the fishing by seeing how many different species I can catch using the same method in a series of randomly chosen swims; yet despite the low water, September is too good a month for such an unselective approach. I may be using a bait that's appetizing to every kind of fish in the river, but I have only one kind of fish swimming in my head. As long as I can keep it bright enough and don't allow it to sink down under a shadow of doubt, it will eventually rise to the surface and, like the lost river, find its perfect match.