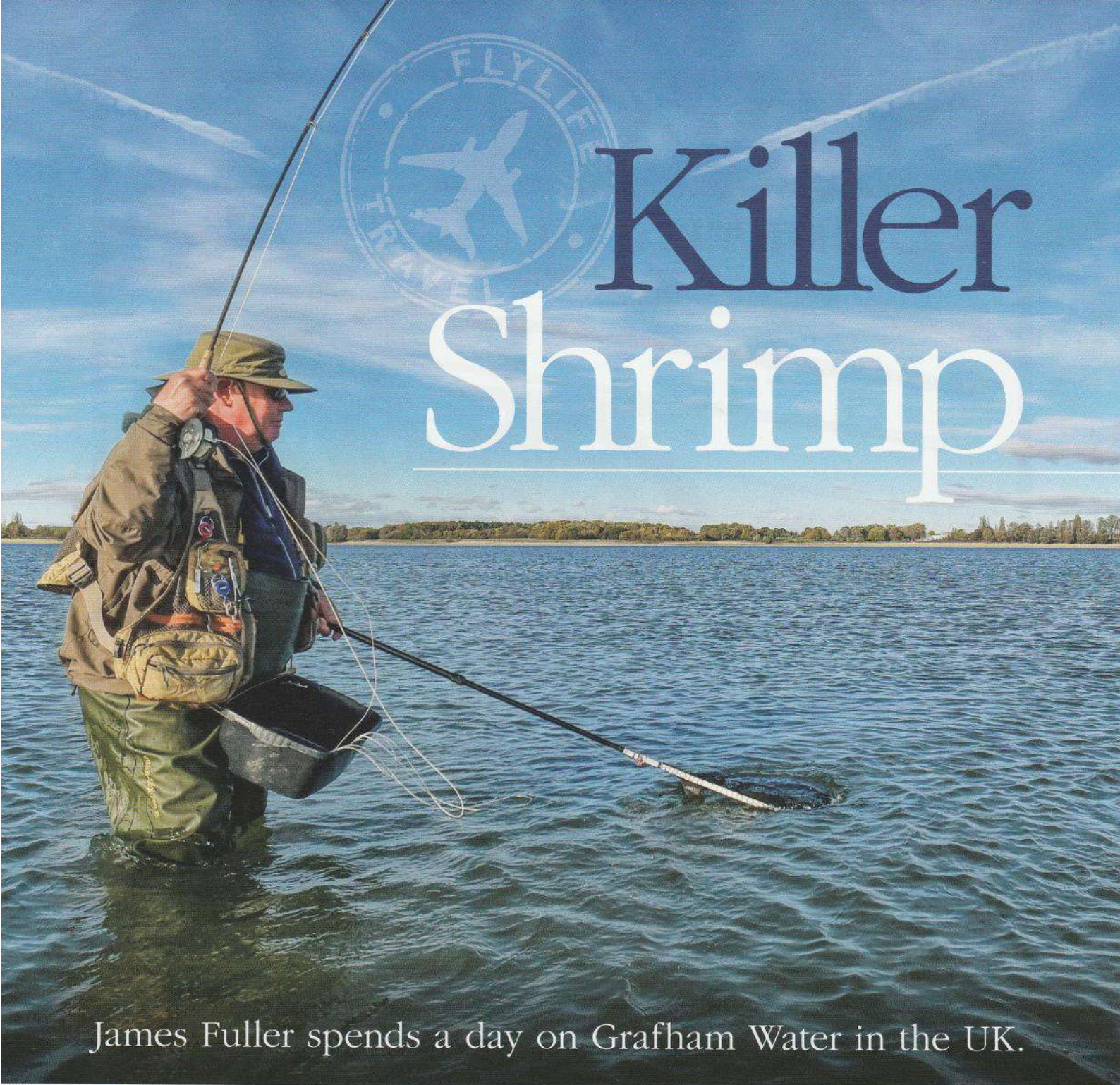




Killer Shrimp



James Fuller spends a day on Grafham Water in the UK.

On a cool autumnal morning beneath billowy skies, four wader-clad silhouettes make squelching, scrunching progress across a yawning expanse of mud and mussel beds towards the distant water's edge.

Drearly damp English summers are a bit of a standing joke, something to light-heartedly rib the natives about, but this year has been different, with generationally low rainfalls leaving many lakes, rivers and reservoirs at record levels of depletion. Premier UK trout fishery Grafham Water, located at the edge of the East of England's agricultural Fenland district, is no exception.

Invasive Species Alert!
KILLER SHRIMP
Chironomus tentaculatus

What is it?
A highly invasive non-native species that has spread from the Polish Capital Region of Eastern Europe. As a non-UK species it kills a range of native species, including many fish, and significantly alters ecosystems.

How do you identify it?

- Usually found among hard surfaces in water bodies where Zebra Mussels are present.
- New, indistinguishable feature is the same shape, sometimes on the tail.
- Can be kept for 20mins (at 10-15°C).
- May have a striped pattern (but sometimes not).

Help stop the spread of this species by:

- Inspecting and cleaning boots and kit before and after use.
- Inspecting and cleaning breathing trailers.
- Draining all bilge water from boats before leaving the site.
- Disinfecting angling kit before and after use.
- Making sure no lake water is taken away with your kit.
- Not transferring bait between water bodies.

If you find this species, please send a photo and details of the sighting to:
alert.nonnative@ceh.ac.uk

www.ceh.ac.uk

'It hasn't been this low since the summer of 1976,' says Grafham Water Fly Fishers' Association (GWFFA) Chair Mark Brinkman, as we traipse onwards accompanied by the whistling wings and chattering calls of mallard skating in to land. Of course, lack of water is relative; at 1500 acres and roughly 2.5 miles long by a mile wide, there's still enough to get your feet wet, it just takes a bit more effort to dip your toes.

I'm at Grafham, in the company of Mark and two other GWFFA committee members, Brian Calvert and Philip Sorensen, to experience an event which has become a highly-anticipated

...LOCATED AT THE EDGE OF
THE EAST OF ENGLAND'S
AGRICULTURAL FENLAND
DISTRICT...



Mark Brinkman landing a shrimp eater.

However they arrived, they're here to stay and, as the debate around their environmental impact continues, many anglers' views on them have become nuanced over the years. That's because, as the summer days shorten, the temperatures drop, and the weed dies back, millions of them become exposed in Grafham's shallows and the trout move in to feast. Gorging on this high protein diet they quickly put on size and condition, turning them into the nuggety, tough adversaries for which this popular venue is renowned.

'The bank fishing can be incredible at this time of year,' says Mark as we put our gear down 30 yards back from a lapping waterline. 'Always fish right from the edges all the way out, don't wade straight in, they do come in very shallow.'

As if to emphasise the point, Mark, a 40-year Grafham veteran who once

held the fishery record rainbow with a 10lb 10oz fish, relays an experience from a few seasons ago.

'I was fishing an area called Plummer Park. The water levels had dropped and we had a lot of subsurface weed near the shore. I'd waded out to get to clear water but was keeping an eye out around and behind me, as the trout frequently feed close in. Looking back I observed several good fish in the shallows, only a metre or so from the shore. They were repeatedly flipping onto their sides slapping their tails into the subsurface weed, then turning around and swimming back over the area picking off the shrimp they'd dislodged. It was great to watch.'

I tie on a foam-backed shrimp pattern with fumbly fingers. At an age where I should probably know better, I still enjoy that heightened sense of anticipation which takes hold

feature of the UK trout fishing calendar. For September ushers in prime 'killer shrimp' time.

The killer shrimp (*Dikerogammarus villosus*) originated in Eastern Europe but has spread relentlessly westwards across the continent in recent decades. This voracious predator measures up to 3cm and preys on a broad spectrum of aquatic life, including pin-fry. It alters the balance of any ecosystem it enters. The species was first discovered at Grafham in 2010, with a best guess that it hitched a ride in the bilge water of one of the many sailing boats which regularly compete here.



Killer shrimp swarming around waders while fishing.
Inset: *Dikerogammarus villosus* up close.

THIS VORACIOUS PREDATOR
MEASURES UP TO 3CM...

Killer Shrimp continued



Mark, Philip and Brian – the three amigos.

before the first cast on fresh water. Of course, stories like Mark's help; as does the sight of fish tailing and porpoising within casting range as they are now.

A few minutes after entering the water Mark is into a fish and, looking both ways down the shoreline it's not long before Brian and Philip are registering their respective firsts. It takes me a bit longer to hit my straps and there's some heartfelt manoeuvring of the 'guest' into favoured spots before my tally is underway. As usual, it's largely a matter of honing the recipe

of location, presentation and flies and, when the takes do start, they are frequently savage.

Heavy banks of cloud continue to shroud the sun, a riffing breeze rucks the surface, and a combination of wind and wave action stir the bottom close in, muddying the waters on the aptly named Sludge Bank. Perfect conditions. New Zealand's North Island is home for me now but the Fens is where I grew up; hundreds of years of family history in a town not 30 minutes from here. Had I not emigrated, Grafham would have been my local water.

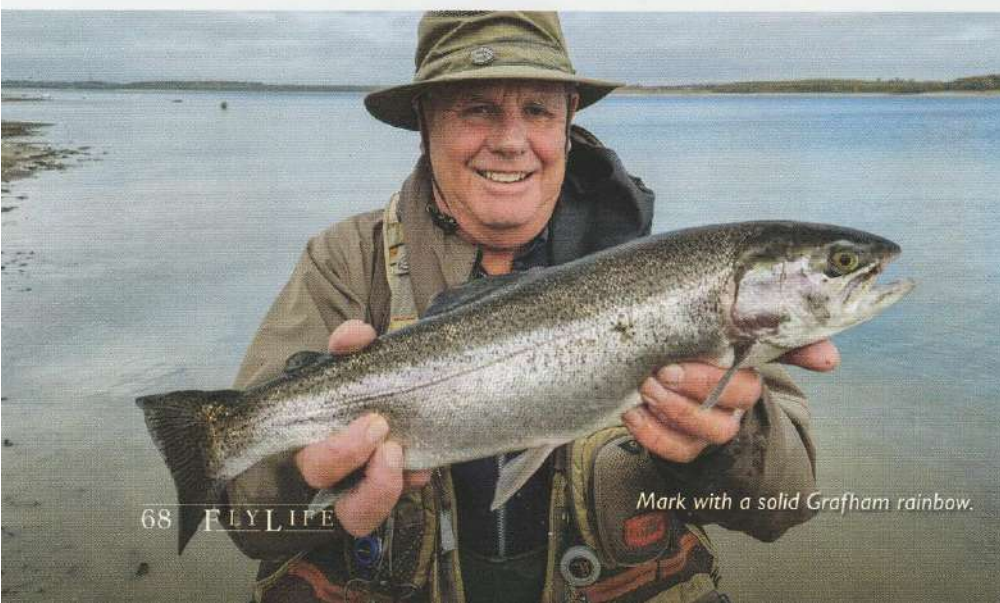


One man who has made this his home water is Brian who, now in his mid-80s, has been fishing Grafham for over half a century. He says the presence of killer shrimp has changed the angling landscape.

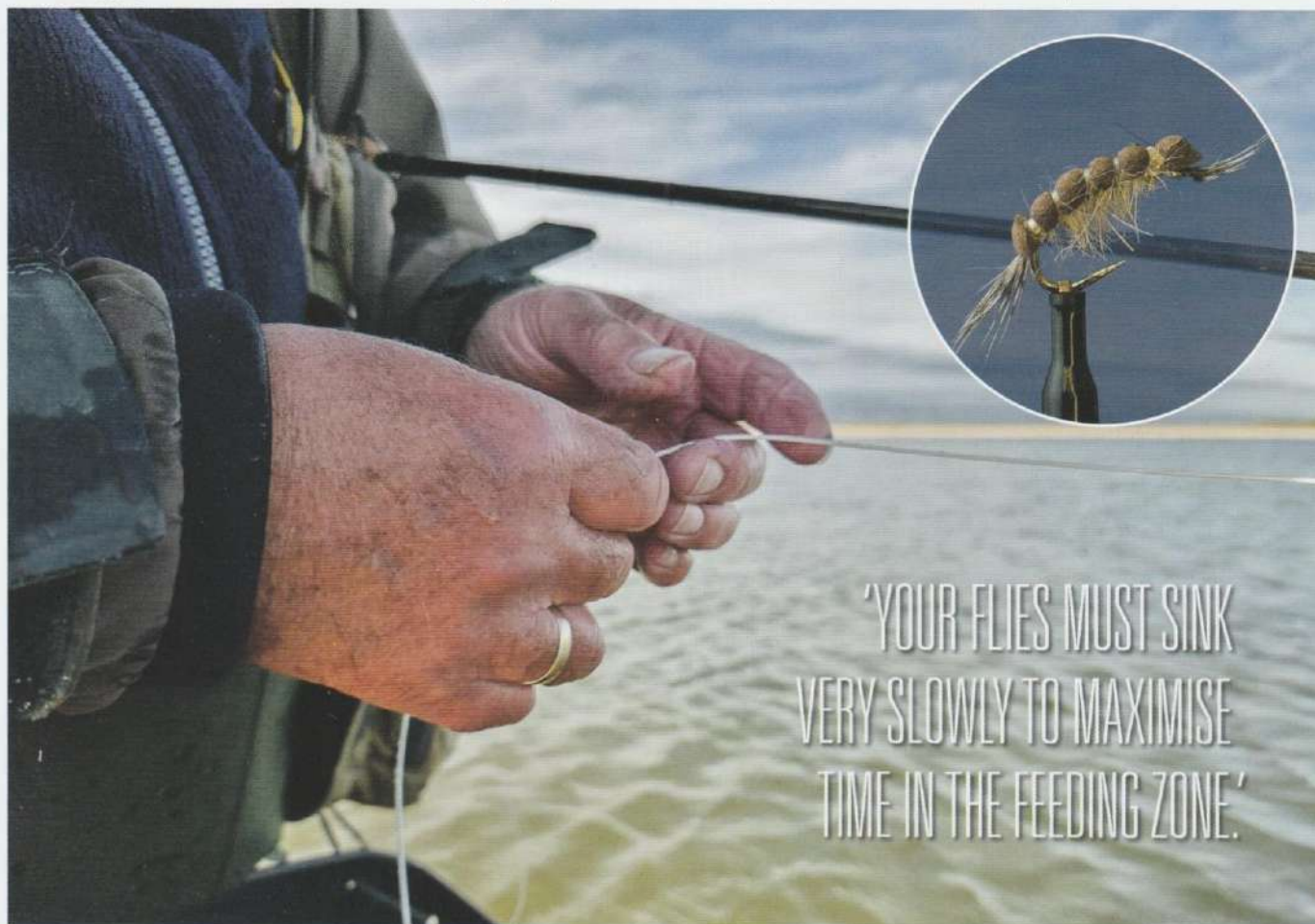
'The trout have turned to them as a major food source since they arrived,' he says. 'The shrimp appear to have become naturalised too, and hence subject to seasonal cycles, with some years being more prolific than others.'

And when the fish are 'shrimping' there's no need to over-complicate the job.

'Floating lines and small generic patterns such as Hare's Ear and shrimp copies are all that's needed. Casting small, slow-sinking patterns amongst visibly feeding fish with a very slow retrieve should bring success. And fishing the downwind shore is often most effective, since the wave action will disturb shrimp, attract trout and provide cover.'



Mark with a solid Grafham rainbow.



'YOUR FLIES MUST SINK
VERY SLOWLY TO MAXIMISE
TIME IN THE FEEDING ZONE.'

'Presentation is key,' adds Brian. 'Your flies must sink very slowly to maximise time in the feeding zone. If necessary, I fish semi-buoyant patterns using a 'washing line' approach or hang a shrimp beneath a dry. Though some shrimp are large, small artificials appear to work best, and sizes #12/14/16 are a good place to start.'

But the most important factor of all?

'Wind direction,' says the sprightly octogenarian. 'Wind is critical in determining where, or indeed whether, to fish. It is the most important single factor.'

I'm fishing a washing line set-up with a large foam-backed shrimp on the point, a smaller shrimp pattern in the middle and then a red-headed Diawl Bach on the top dropper. I have a couple of fish to the net and am slow figure-of-eighting my flies back when the point shrimp is slammed in a slashing take. Feeling resistance, the fish immediately sets course for the far shore on one of those opening runs you can do nothing about but laugh with joy. Many modern reels don't have the click-and-pawl drags of my childhood and, consequently, don't sing that wonderful song as line

is torn away. Is there a more magnificent sound in fishing? Today's drag systems are no doubt superior but, like electric racing cars, something sensory is lost.

By New Zealand standards these are not huge fish, averaging around 3lb, with some pushing 4lb, as this one does, and the odd specimen north of that. But they are strong. In our hyperbole-driven world, being taken 'into the backing' has become such an over-used expression it's now little more than shorthand for a battle with a decent fish. It happens less than many would care to admit but it genuinely happens twice for me today.

As fish continue to breach and feast in front of us there is no need to resort to a local tactic which has spawned its own name, and its own band of devotees, the 'Grafham Shuffle'.

With the shrimp tending to hide in and amongst small rocks on the lakebed, anglers wade out as far as they can in their chest waders and then begin shuffling their feet around to disturb the bottom. This moves stones, turns over rocks and forces the shrimp to swim out, becoming visible to the trout in the process. The angler then shuffles his way back to the shallows, exposing more shrimp as he goes, and drawing the trout in.



Fishing Sludge Bank on a calm morning
Inset: Shellback Shrimp.

Killer Shrimp *continued*



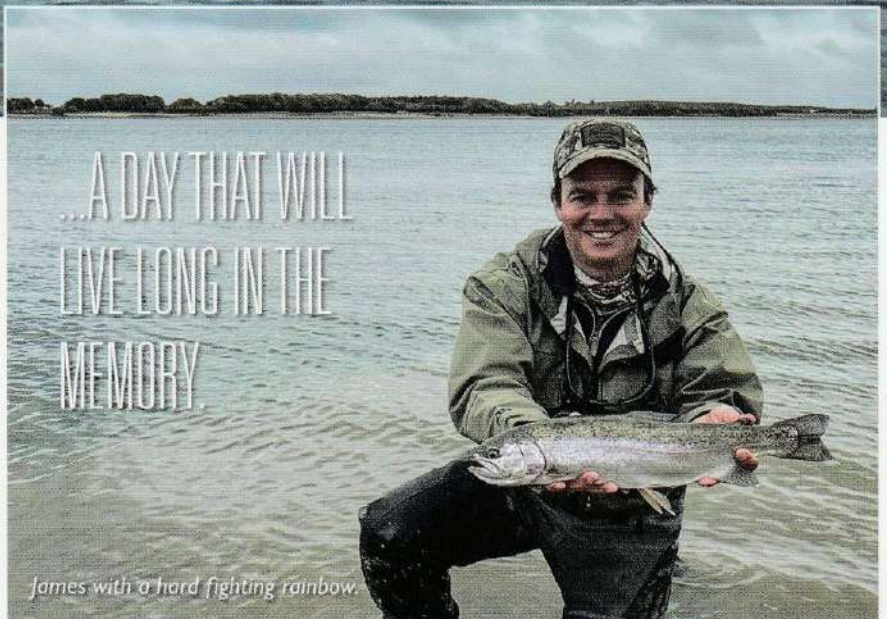
'THE GRAFHAM SHUFFLE IS PRACTISED BY QUITE A LOT OF ANGLERS AND IS HIGHLY EFFECTIVE...'

Philip putting the heat on a feisty specimen.

'The Grafham Shuffle is practised by quite a lot of anglers and is highly effective, if ethically a bit questionable,' adds Brian.

The regular firing of engines and changing of locations in front of the dam out to our right, together with the discontented murmurs which carry loud and clear across the water, suggest the boat anglers are not enjoying the same level of sport. For the land-based fisherman there's a tendency to smugness on such occasions, akin to the underdog getting the upper-hand. The truth though is that when the trout are in close like this, it's the bank angler, who fishes light and moves with purpose — fan-casting and searching water as he goes — who holds the aces.

What we're enjoying is just one of the many faces of this superb fishery. Historically known for its buzzer and top of the water angling, in June pin-fry feeders can provide electric sport and then, come autumn, targeting those fish locked in on maturing fry takes precedence. For added variety there are the challenges of fishing off the dam, or loch style from drifting boats, and the pursuit of predators such as pike, zander and perch (using fly or jigging rigs) has also become popular in recent years.



...A DAY THAT WILL LIVE LONG IN THE MEMORY.

James with a hard fighting rainbow.

Whilst Grafham might be best known for its hard-fighting rainbows, there are some monster browns in here as well. The record is nearly 20lb and Philip had an 8-pounder from the bank just days before my arrival. He is amongst the fish again today, and his rod describes a near permanent arc whenever I glance his way. We all have our share though, with over 40 fish between us, and all but two of them returned for another day. In the finish we give up before the fish do.

As I drive back towards my childhood home, rerunning the day's highlight reel in my mind, I'm treated

to one of those sunsets for which the Fens are famous. It brings with it a nostalgic pang of connection, of fishing and hunting memories shared beneath such skies with a beloved dad lost over a decade ago. With a vast open sky as its canvas and a slow-sinking sun as its medium, nature illuminates striated cloud with a palette of celestial yellows, burning oranges and resplendent rouges. Thank you Grafham, and thank you Mark, Brian and Philip for one of those days when conditions, fish and company combine to produce a day that will live long in the memory.

