



Come and catch a two-pounder

I'M NO FISHING snob, but I just can't get over the feeling that something is missing when I draw a tatty rainbow trout over the net. If I feel a touch of sadness for those ragged-finned creatures that can expect to enjoy but a few unfettered hours of freedom and a snack of snails and midges instead of an hourly shower of grow-faster pellets, then the feeling experienced when I caught a salmon in a muddy hole in the Midlands, of all places, could be fully appreciated only by a contrite mass murderer.

Its skin had been stripped clean of scales on its "migration" down the M6 in a tanker from its cage home in a Scottish sea loch, and its apologies for fins looked like tent pegs after a thousand Boy Scout jamborees.

I must confess to a blinkered and slightly not-of-this-world view of what makes a worthy quarry. This took firm root during a childhood in the Welsh hills, when a pounder plucked from a tumbling stream was worthy of a mention in *The Weekly News*. And a pound grayling? That was a target I wasn't to achieve for another 20 years.

So far, thank God, no one has thought of stocking small waters with pond-reared grayling. If someone has, don't tell me or I will use my favourite rod for a bean stick and take up golf. And I hate golf.

By now, it should be quite clear that I prefer catching grayling to anything else sporting an adipose fin. What seems like 100 years ago, I read in *The Compleat Angler* that grayling were sometimes found with grains of sparkling gold in their stomachs

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— and that was it for me. Fanciful, certainly, but could this be why they are so keen on goldhead bugs? Probably not.

The invitation to “come and catch a two-pounder and possibly something even bigger” was something not to be missed by a self-confessed grayling junkie. A child never waited for Santa so eagerly as I did for the day to dawn.

Flies were tied, and dreams were dreamed of crystal rivers, frosted leaves and bankside bushes dripping with blood-red berries.

It wasn't to be. An overnight gale had stripped the trees and the rising upper Wye resembled a runny Dundee cake more than a river, so thickly was it filled with leaves.

But despite the conditions — it poured and blew as well — half a dozen pounders splashed to the net in the first couple of hours. And if anyone has any doubts about a grayling's colour vision, I suggest they think again. For what else could have tempted them to swim up through a four-foot-deep wall of golden leaves and unerringly pluck my size 18 Red Tag off the surface?

Spot a rise, wait for a while to let the grayling get down to the bottom again and then pitch the dry-fly a foot above the disturbance and up they came every time with a typical tiny rise complete with bubble.

Great stuff, and the hours sped by as grayling were hooked, played and released into the stream. But then my strike was met with something I had never experienced with a grayling before. There was no splashing, no kicking — just a heavy throbbing



Leaves and yet more autumn leaves litter the river.

weight that refused to budge an inch but felt as if it were on the brink of doing something very drastic very soon.

“You’ve hooked a salmon,” said my companion. “This should be worth watching!”

The Orvis eight-footer doubled over, and whatever I’d hooked ripped off almost the whole of my fly line in a lightning charge upstream. After a brief pause the whole lot sped back past →

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continued



John Wilshaw plays a leaping Wye grayling.

← me. I wasn't in control at all. Instead of trying to recover line on the reel, I should have hand-lined it all in like a reservoir fisher. But I didn't, so I had to watch the line being towed through a jumble of boulders, over a little waterfall and into the pool below.

I wished the fish had broken my 3 lb point there and then instead of rolling to display its great black forked tail, which I swear was as big as my hand.

How big was it? Certainly 2 lb-plus and possibly three.

Such massive grayling are certainly there for the catching on Richard Gipps's 1½ miles of the Glaslyn estate water near Llandrindod Wells in mid-Wales.

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Although lightly fished, Richard's water had produced no fewer than 11 fish to 2½ lb in the weeks before my visit. Grayling topping the pound aren't considered worthy of mention.

I'd tied up a copper-headed bug — trendy grayling fishers have changed all their gold-heads for copperheads — with a fan of grey partridge fibres for a tail, hare's ear fur mixed with

pearly twinkle for a body and a dashing little tag of red floss under the throat.

Only once or twice did I manage to penetrate the dense leaf raft, my leader suddenly jerking upstream as the bug was grabbed by a big grayling. A bug with promise.

Why are the Glaslyn estate grayling quite so big, and why are there so many of them? The water and the rich feeding are obviously ideal, but Richard's sensible bag limit of two fish a day means that a high proportion of big fish are returned to grow even bigger. “Most of our anglers don't kill any fish, anyway, so keeping a good population of good-sized grayling in the river isn't really a problem,” said Richard.

The Glaslyn estate was once owned by Richard's grandfather

before briefly passing into the hands of nuts-and-bolts giant GKN, who thoughtfully constructed sturdy metal walk-ways along tricky parts of the bank.

Fine, but how do I get a day's fishing on the water, I hear you ask? The answer is you can't, but what you can do is rent one of Richard's five cottages for a week. Then you can fly-fish for the big grayling, salmon and brown trout, the latter regularly caught up to 3 lb.

Over-fished the water certainly isn't, as all but a few of the visitors to the cottages are walkers or birdwatchers, who come in search of peregrines, ravens, buzzards and red kites.

FACTFILE

Glaslyn Estate, Llanwrthwl, Llandrindod Wells. Tel: Rhayader (0597) 810258. The estate is two and a half miles south of Rhayader and

10 miles north of Builth Wells off the main A47. Hereford is 48 miles, Cardiff 77 miles, Birmingham 82 and London 185 miles.



