

A Lesson In FEEDING

Simon Willsmore explains the careful thinking behind his various groundbait approaches for silvers.

It never ceases to amaze me how minor variables can have extreme effects in angling. Feeding is one key area of our approach that you can change for better or worse, particularly when it comes to groundbait. Only experimentation will help you understand what's happening underwater, so I have spent a lot of time considering how best to feed with groundbait for different circumstances.

Do you throw or cup it? What and how much feed do you introduce? What about the consistency? This is without even thinking about the best mix to use.

I've brought you to Willows Lake, near St Albans, to demonstrate various ways of

feeding that have stood me in good stead over the years...

BASE MIX

The groundbait you choose to feed is obviously important. You need to be confident that the recipe is right for the venue and species of fish that you're targeting. A mix also needs to perform how you need it to, with regard to carrying particles and breaking down. I've settled on a particular mix that I use for silvers on a range of venues throughout the country. By sticking to this, I've learnt how to feed it in different ways to suit my needs. It consists of a 50/50 mix of Sensas Gros Gardons and Lake. The Gros Gardons is very sticky and full



Practice makes perfect when it comes to throwing balls!

of attractive hemp particles, with a distinct aroma that roach seem to love. You can smell somebody mixing it up several pegs away! Lake is much softer and creates an attractive cloud and carpet effect – ideal when bream and skimmers are the target. By mixing these two together I create a mix that I can squeeze into different consistencies to hold varying amounts of feed. I generally try to mix it slightly on the dry side, so that when I've added any damp particles the groundbait is perfectly versatile.

PLANNED ATTACK

Another big debate that anglers have is whether to throw or cup their groundbait. There's nothing complicated about this decision; you simply need to consider the session and tailor the feeding accordingly. If you're looking for an instant response on difficult days, balling it with very little feed is devastating. Any inquisitive fish will home in on the noise, but with few free offerings present they have no choice but to take your hook bait. When looking to catch some vital early fish, this is a great way to feed. You can then accurately introduce smaller top-up balls with a pole cup to pinpoint fish in a small area. By regularly feeding small feed-rich balls after every fish, this approach is deadly for bream and skimmers.

QUIET APPROACH

In some circumstances you can be confident that there are already plenty of fish present, and you're looking to build a swim through the day and get the fish competing. In these

circumstances I like to feed my initial bait with a pole pot to ensure that the important base feed is exactly where I need it. I will also introduce more particles in the groundbait if I'm expecting to catch straightaway and I don't want to throw any of these feed-rich balls off target.

I have found that balling in an initial bombardment of groundbait can actually spook better fish when they are already present. Balling it can also attract a smaller stamp and have the opposite effect to how it works on difficult days.

Once the initial bait has been introduced it's a case of finding the best way to top up, as I'm about to explain...

PLOPPING

One way of feeding that has brought me great results is what I call 'plopping'. This is basically feeding small, one-handed balls at regular intervals by hand. It's a great way of building a swim quickly, allowing you to feed all the time. The method is better suited for catching fast, when bites are coming all

the time. Fish become used to the plopping noise of feed going in and by loading the groundbait up with hemp and casters, you gradually build a bed of particles on the bottom. I'll often feed like this for the early part of the session to get the fish competing and to build the swim.

Plopping is a great tactic for roach and hybrids and you can feed in several ways to catch them. Hard balls will pull fish to the bottom, while softer ones break up on the way down and enable you to catch on the drop. If any bigger bream or skimmers arrive there's nothing to stop you changing your >>>



After this early skimmer, Simon was unsure about how best to start feeding.

ANGLER FILE

SIMON WILLSMORE
Age: 44
Lives: London
Sponsors: Drennan, D & A Tackle, Quad Box
Pole: Drennan Acolyte

VENUE FILE

WILLOWS LAKE
Location: Willows Farm, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL4 0RY
Day tickets: £7; concessions £6
Contact: 01727 822106
Web: www.willowslakes.com

feeding and cupping balls, as I've already explained. Like with most things in fishing, there are no hard-and-fast rules and you'll often need to feed in several ways throughout a session to get the best from a swim.

COVERING OPTIONS

Willows Lake is an impressive 22 acres and full of quality silver fish. I'm fishing a single swim at 13 metres and looking to catch roach and hybrids to begin with. Then, by building the peg throughout the day, I'll hopefully connect with skimmers or a bonus bream or two later.

I'm going to feed an initial six balls with a pole cup, containing a few chopped worms, with plenty of casters and hemp. I like to keep an open mind about topping up and will see how the session progresses before I decide what to do. My initial balls are nipped together with just two squeezes. I want this bait to break down after hitting the bottom and begin to release particles and attract fish.

RIGS

Presentation is another key aspect. This doesn't have to mean complicating issues with an array of top kits, so I've assembled just two rigs for this session.

The first is for fishing on the deck and incorporates a 0.75g Drennan G-Tip 2 float. This has a reasonably round body, enabling me to hold the bait still on the bottom. Shotting is a bulk 15 inches from the hook with two No9 droppers spaced evenly below. The last of these sits just above my 8in trace. I set this to fish three inches overdepth, to give me the chance of a bonus fish among any roach.

My second rig features a 0.5g AS3 pattern, which has a slim body and slightly thinner bristle. This offers less resistance to fish that are taking on the drop. I shot this with tapered No9 shot in the bottom half of the rig, which are spaced further apart towards the hook.

I like to use a stiff 0.16mm Drennan Supplex main line when expecting a busy day. This is hard-wearing and minimises tangles! Hooklengths are 0.105mm Supplex to barbless size 16 Milo T213 hooks and my elastic is yellow Hydro.



Changing your feeding throughout a session often produces the best results.



Vary the consistency of your groundbait to suit.



Potting feed-rich balls and particles is devastating for big fish.



Choose a mix that you're confident in and learn how to mix it to produce various effects.

APPLYING THE THEORY

The start is rather slow and I'm beginning to think that I may have been better off throwing some balls in to trigger an instant response. The first bite comes after 10 minutes or so from a chunky 4oz hybrid, which already makes me think that plopping balls will be the best way to feed. Another similar-sized fish follows and over the next 15 minutes I begin to get regular bites from small roach.

As I'm about to throw my first small top-up ball, I hook a better fish that pulls out several feet of elastic. It turns out to be a skimmer of just over 1lb and makes me reluctant to feed any more bait without having another look! Roach and hybrids follow, so I decide to begin introducing hard, walnut-sized balls. The early skimmer is a positive sign for later in the day but in the meantime I'm going to get my head down and enjoy catching these smaller fish!

You can't really improve on a fish every drop-in but you can improve by thinking about the size of fish that you catch. After introducing several soft balls, it's clear that the bigger fish are indeed off bottom and I've had several better roach to 8oz, along with some feisty hybrids, which really rattle around when you hook them!

HOOK-BAIT TRICKS

The best hook bait has been a single red maggot. It's incredibly versatile and much more durable than a caster. After missing the occasional bite, I've changed how I'm hooking it and have started to connect with more fish. I've done this by threading it all the way up the hook.

I learnt this from some really good bleak anglers when I lived in Italy and it can be devastating for silver fish in the UK. This is why I use a fairly big hook. As the whole of the maggot is mounted, a fish either takes

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CONSISTENCY CARE

I've caught well using the bulked rig for the early part of the session. My feeding has certainly worked and I'm getting bites every drop-in now. However, I've begun to miss the occasional bite and on several occasions I've caught a better-stamp fish after getting a hold-up. This shows that the fish are really competing and coming off bottom, so I'm changing by feeding softer balls and using the lighter on-the-drop rig.

the lot or leaves it. Because it's harder for a fish to burst, you can catch up to 10 fish on the same bait, too.

THINKING AHEAD

My peg is looking strong three hours into the session. My only worry is that the regular plopping of balls might be hindering any better fish moving in, especially with the roach and hybrids darting around. With this in mind, I'm going to ease off the feed and introduce a ball after every three fish to give any bigger ones a chance to settle. >>>

Feeding softer balls and fishing on the drop improved the stamp of fish!

GETTING IT RIGHT

A

Simon's floats and hook choice for quality silvers.

B

Build a swim by throwing regular feed-packed balls.

C

A threaded maggot greatly reduces missed bites.

D

Try a worm head if tiny fish pose a problem.

E

Simon caught some late skimmers on double caster.

F

Yellow Hydro made for a balanced setup.

After 15 minutes I'm back on the bulked rig, with the fish settling on the deck much better than before. There should be a real carpet of feed on the deck now. I've also started to put chopped worms in my balls and already had an 8oz skimmer.

This is a sure sign of better fish moving in, so I'm cutting out the throwing completely and have switched to a double-caster hook bait. There are still plenty of small fish present and after several more roach I hook another good fish, which turns out to be a bonus skimmer of around 2lb.

POTTY TIME!

These few better fish have given me a nudge to go all out for quality fish. I've laid extra line on the deck and I'm accurately potting in a small worm-rich ball with loose hemp and casters every 10 minutes. I can tell there's a different stamp of fish present and even with a maggot hook bait I'm not catching many small fish anymore.

It's worth making the effort to hold the bait static when looking for skimmers and try to be as accurate as possible to place the rig over the small balls of feed. I've also taken a shot off the float to leave slightly more bristle on show. This allows me to read bites from bigger fish and in the closing stages another three skimmers make for a very satisfying finish!

LESSONS LEARNT

I've ended the day with a fantastic silver-fish net of around 20lb. More importantly, I hope I've given you an insight into different ways of approaching a swim through the course of a session. Had I fished for big fish all day by potting bait, I'd have probably caught less than 10lb. By the same token, I could have caught a small roach every drop-in by feeding regular balls by hand, but would only have managed a similar weight.

I feel that potting the initial bait was the right decision in the end, although I could have also started plopping in small balls from the off. The smaller fish really came to this feeding technique and I managed to improve the stamp further by feeding soft balls and fishing on the drop. The build-up of bait in the peg has paid off and when the better fish settled I've adapted my feeding further to finish with several bonus skimmers. For me, there's nothing more satisfying than trying to understand what's happening under the water. By getting your groundbait and feeding right and actively adapting throughout the day, you can get the best from every session. ■

Place the pole between your legs, and stand up when 'plopping' balls.



Getting the feeding right is essential for quality bags of fish like this!

