

Don't miss the boat

Waking tench will be keen to binge on your feed right now – don't wait for summer to go after them...

Words and photography Kev Green



Bob modestly declared one tench a seven when it was clearly over eight pounds

Don't miss the boat

with Bob Roberts

ALARM clocks were set for the crack of dawn. Gear was primed, swims were pre-baited and an air of anticipation cloaked the nation's lakes.

The date was June 16th and the annual mission for thousands of anglers was about to begin as they rubbed sleep from their eyes and went in search of their first tench.

When the old close season rules shut lakes through April, May and the first half of June the vast majority of us had to wait until half the year was over before we caught a tench.

Unless you were one of the lucky few who fluked a winter specimen before the season ended on March 15, you had to wait until summer to catch one.

How times have changed. Since the close season on lakes was abolished in 1995 the biggest opportunity it's given us is the chance to catch spring tench.

Fish that traditionally 'appeared' in June and July do nothing of the sort if they have the chance. In most fisheries they wake from their winter slumbers much earlier and go on a more determined feeding binge than many anglers realise.

Despite the fact it's 17 years since the close season was abolished a great many fishermen still miss the great tench turn-on.

As if carrying a hangover from the old days, they wait until trees are full of leaf and the warmth of summer is cooking the water before they make a move.

The sad fact is they've already missed the best time of year to catch tench.

One man who never misses the golden period that's arriving as you read this feature is our regular diarist, Yorkshire all-rounder Bob Roberts.

A tench disciple who has spent years moving heaven and earth to catch early season specimens, Bob has realised that spring – not summer – is the best time to catch them.

To allow him to extol the virtues of early season tenching we arranged a day out so he could reveal his key tactics.

As you'll see he relies on a simple feeder rig but he didn't cast very far to find his fish...

The simplest of feeder rigs

Sitting on a low chair beside a quiet Northamptonshire club lake we found Bob loading a large inline Drennan swimfeeder with a fresh and lively concoction of red maggots and casters.

Readying himself to make his fifth cast of the morning and with three red grubs already impaled on a size 16 Gamakatsu GP106 Wide Gape hook attached to a 4in hooklink of 10lb Drennan Sink Link braid, the rig was the epitome of simplicity.

The feeder had been threaded on to the mainline before a swivel holding the hooklink was attached. The rubber grommet on the end of the feeder neatly locked on to the swivel to semi-fix the two parts of the rig together. It was a rig anyone could set up in a few seconds.



The short hooklink almost guarantees fish will hook themselves

"I've seen and used dozens of feeder rigs for tench but this is now my standard set-up and I can't dream up anything to beat it," he explained.

"Tench love maggots and casters and a feeder packed with them takes some beating. The beauty of this set-up is that it is so simple to tie, doesn't tangle and even hooks the fish for you. What more could you want from a feeder rig?"

Dunking his filled feeder for a split second to stick the grubs together with water and reduce the number of baits that spill out on

the cast, he lobbed out the enticing package with a casual underarm swing.

Landing on the surface just 30 feet from the bank the heavy metal base hit the water first. Bob then feathered the line peeling off his reel to let the feeder sink in a smooth arc.

Flicking out a second rig five yards to the right of the first, both Daiwa Infinity specialist rods were placed on bite alarms and light bobbins attached to the lines.

Settling into his chair Bob explained the topography of the swim: "There's no reason to whack the feeder into the middle. Tench

"The beauty of this set-up is that it is so simple to tie, doesn't tangle and even hooks the fish for you"

How to tie Bob's inline tench feeder rig



1 You need a Drennan Bolt Blockend feeder, size 16 Drennan Carp Method hook, size 9 E-S-P Uni-Link swivel and 10lb Drennan Sink Link braid



2 Thread the tail rubber down the reel line, followed by the feeder. The line runs through the tube running down the centre of the feeder



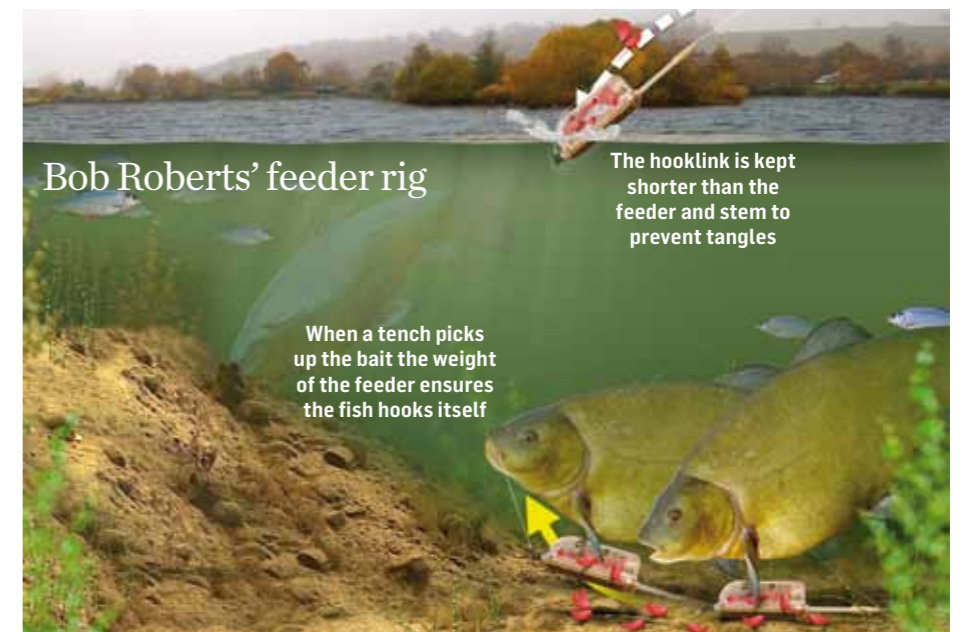
3 Use a grinner knot to tie the hook to braid. Hold the hook next to the feeder and cut off the link so it's fractionally shorter. This avoids tangles



4 Tie swivel on hooklink using a Palomar knot. The swivel fixes inside the soft grommet on the end of the feeder



5 Bait the hook with 2-3 red maggots and don't overfill the feeder. It's ready



Bob Roberts' feeder rig

The hooklink is kept shorter than the feeder and stem to prevent tangles

When a tench picks up the bait the weight of the feeder ensures the fish hooks itself

Don't miss the boat

with Bob Roberts

prefer to feed close in and the margins drop off quickly at this lake. I'm lobbing into 11 feet of water in a deep gully that runs round the edge of the water.

"If I cast further out I'd land the feeder on a shallow plateau. I've no doubt that tench will come in close, it's where they want to feed."

The words had barely left Bob's mouth when an olive tench lazily rolled on the surface above where he'd just cast.

Flashing its butter yellow belly as it turned before noisily slapping the water with its broad tail, the fish dived straight down on the maggots that had crawled from the feeder as a stream of tiny bubbles duly appeared on the surface.

"Any time now..." said Bob with a smile, a prediction that received further credibility when the mainline flickered at the point where it entered the water. Fish were grubbing around and brushing his line.

Self-hooking set-up

When the bite came, some 10 minutes later, there was no mistaking it.

One second we were passing the time of day and chatting about the lake, the next the bobbin slammed against the rod and the alarm screamed.

There was no need to strike as the short hooklink combined with the heavy metal base of the feeder had done the job of hooking the fish.

Picking up the rod and smoothly bending into the running fish, Bob set the hook before he let line tick off the carefully adjusted drag on his reel.

It was a measured start to a big-fish battle and as the powerful tench charged along the marginal gully line it pulled into clumps of fresh weed.

Keeping steady pressure on the line to 'cheesewire' it through the weed Bob slowly applied anchors to the fish. When he felt its power begin to sap he slowly started to pump the fish back towards him.

Although the fish repeatedly turned over in the deep margins Bob had the upper hand, his strong feeder kit was boss and within a few minutes a huge fish sounded on the surface.

"That'll do nicely..." whispered Bob, pushing out the net and wrapping mesh around his whopping prize.

"I've haven't brought any scales with me



Maggots quickly find their way out of the feeder around the hookbait to tempt hungry tench



The best of ten fish banked on a simple feeder rig proved that spring really is the best time for tench

so we'll just have to make a best guess," he offered. "What do you reckon? Will you give me seven pounds?"

Seven pounds! He was being modest – this beast was at least 8lb if it was an ounce and over the next four hours another nine big fish followed the route march into Bob's landing net.

With all the tench topping 5lb and several over 7lb, they were magnificent specimens. As they hadn't yet spawned they were nicely fat and hadn't beaten themselves up in the throes of reproducing.

As Bob had proved, waiting until summer to chase these beauties would simply have been a missed opportunity.

"Spring is the time to go tenching. The weather does have an influence but April and especially May are the best times to catch them.

"The quantity of natural food hasn't reached a peak so, as they gear up for spawning, they'll readily turn to anglers' bait instead and multiple catches are a real possibility," he said.

"But above all spring tench are 'fresher'.

They move around an awful lot and often feed at all times of the day. In summer many fish tend to be less mobile and often hold up in weed. Spring fish are positively active and go on the hunt for grub."

Take your chance

By early afternoon and with 10 tench banked and others still digging for the remaining maggots, we ended the photo shoot.

Laying six of the best on a soft, wet unhooking mat we marveled at the size and silky beauty of each fish. They were as good an example of tench as you'll ever find and they'd all fallen to the simplest of rigs packed with the most basic bait.

If you're one of those anglers who leaves tench fishing until summer then it's time to change your mindset.

Be in no doubt, these fish are already waking from their winter hibernation and there's only one thing they want – food, and plenty of it. Just make sure it's yours they go for!

