





General Franco, fishing one of his country's northern rivers.

IN FRANCO'S FOOTSTEPS

When he wasn't being a right-wing dictator, Spain's General Franco loved his fishing. Philip Pembroke has visited some of the General's old haunts...

LEÓN province is said to boast of some of the oldest and best trout rivers in northern Spain. Richard Ford, the famous travel writer went one step further, indeed and described its fishing grounds as amongst the best in all Spain, including the famous Lago Sanabria, the lake in San Martín de Castañeda – “A crystal loch like the filled crater of a volcano, where the trout are noble in size, inexhaustible in number, and when in season, pink as chars”.

I resolved to find out the truth for myself one day and can now report that while you may only fish Richard's “crystal loch” at weekends and on public holidays in the trout season, there are 28 major rivers to choose from, nestling in the wide, shallow valleys that score its extensive flood plains. No wonder León is steeped in angling history.

In 1624, Juan de Bergara published a best selling book called *El Manuscrito de Astorga*, in which he talked about the art of making 33 imitation fly lure patterns from the unique feathers of León's famous cockerels, called the *Pluma de*

Gallo de León which are bred especially for this purpose.

Alas, the majority of Spanish anglers prefer spinning when they fish, so they tend to ignore *tramo libre pesca sin muerte* - free fishing stretches where only flyfishing is allowed and catch-and-release prevails.

One exception is local ace Pablo Castro, who offered to show me the ropes on his local favourite stretch of the Torío River in early May.

This river flows from north of León south into the Duero River basin and offers a fantastic free stretch of catch and release fishing, where you just turn up and cast.

It is an easy 30-minute drive north from Leon on the LE 311, through the Torío valley. Take the first signposted right turn through the village of Pedrún. The stretch extends for 2.5 km upstream to Pardavé.

Pablo and I parked by the bridge and fished a *tablada*; a deeper water behind a small weir. Pablo cast to the boulders by the far bank - using a small brown dry fly lure called a *Pardon* [see ‘Flies’ panel] - and immediately caught and returned two small, yet beautiful wild brown

trout. He explained that their anal fin often has a white edge that stock trout mostly lack.

Pablo is a member of Spain's national flyfishing team and makes catching fish look easy. From my own perspective, I would describe the fishing as challenging but rewarding, not least because of the refreshment breaks that saw us retire to nearby Matallana for a *bocadillo jamon y cerveza* – local cured ham and a refreshingly cold beer, invaluable in countering the torrid Spanish heat!

In most cases, local fly fishermen use techniques similar to those used in the UK. Spinning and bait-fishing are more traditional in Spain, with flyfishing a comparatively recent development, so fly anglers there are heavily influenced by English-language satellite TV angling programmes.

For an alternative location, I chose the town of Benavente, a relaxing 90-minutes drive south from León, along the N 630 main road. Here there are three good rivers to fish, less than 20 minutes from town.

In the morning I spotted some larger trout to 1.5kg that were jumping 200m downstream from the N 525 road bridge



Small but perfectly formed: wild browns average just over 1lb.

“...there are also large pike here...up to 7kg...”

→ FLIES

Seca Pardón – indispensable dry fly lure for spring in mature rivers and at start of summer in mountain streams. Fish when you observe unmistakable hatchings of emergers (*efémara*) at noon.

Seca Pardón fly lure is a brown/olive dry fly lure of basic design, dressed as an emerger. It is very buoyant and visible, and is fished during hatches of *efémara*. Hook size 12-14. Most effective from start of season up to May.

The *Pardón* corresponds to a subimago insect. UK flies that correspond to it include the Olive Emerger.

Other flies I tried include the Black Gnat, a killer for barbel in shallow water. Spot the trout or barbel, then cast to its head and expect a take.

The local insect life features Emergent *Rhithrogena* in April/May and Mayfly hatches in May and June..

There is abundant insect life here in summer: *pardónes*, mayfly and *perlidos* insects groups abound, including *trictóptero* - sedges. There are big hatches of winged nymphs. Multitudes of winged ants or *hormigas* appear across the surface of the water on rainy days.

over the Órbigo River at Santa Cristina, a 10-minute drive west from Benavente.

I cast from the gravel beach area below the weir into deeper water towards the island on my right, using a caddis imitation dry fly lure.

While my luck wasn't in on this occasion, anyone looking to widen his ambition on better days should note that there are also large pike here, growing fat on the trout that are stocked in abundance.

The Orbigo and nearby River Esla are the best locations to flyfish for pike. Since anglers have been advised to stop killing any pike they catch, pike stocks have thrived and can go up to 7kg.

Trout, meanwhile, average 0.5kg caught weight for wild browns, with rainbows in the same rivers being slightly bigger, more so if you fish for them in the *embalses* (reservoirs).

For pike fishing, I used a Spanish fly lure that is beyond description other than it resembles a small marlin fly lure with pink feathers. It can be bought at Jose Cenador's tackle shop in León [see factfile panel for details].

I used a general-purpose 6-7wt rod



Pablo Castro works the crystal waters of the Torio River.



Viva España: free fishing and not a fluffy donkey in sight...

THE AUTHOR

Philip Pembroke writes guidebooks about fishing in Spain, Portugal and France. He can be found at spainfishing.com

with matching floating line. Other techniques I have used are nymphing, using a golden hare's ear (ballasted) and small nymph dropper. The back up fly for anglers all over Spain is the sedge fly (red deer hair caddis).

After lunch in a popular *chiringuito* (snack bar) situated upstream from the bridge by the factory in Santa Cristina, I drove across the bridge, took the first left turn and headed 7km down to the Tera River, located at Mózar.

This destination had been recommended to me by the manager of the shoe shop in Benavente and in the space of an hour, I watched a small boy catch five fish by the road bridge, a rather better return than my own!

Day tickets for this stretch can be obtained from the bar across the road from Camping Río Tera. Being a lowland river, the Tera offers its best fishing in late season, September and October, where high water levels are preserved in *tablas* behind the dams.

On my final day I drove west from Benavente up the flat Tera River plain along the A-52, towards the town of Puebla de Sanabria, situated in the beautiful Sierra de la Segundera.

Anglers may fish the beautiful Lago de Sanabria here, and the surrounding rivers: the Truchas, Tuela, Bibey, Forcandura and Trefacio.

Throughout my time in Spain, I found local anglers especially kind when it came to sharing their time and advice with visitors.

The Spanish are known for their hospitality towards strangers and the local anglers don't disappoint. Just a little bit of spoken Spanish will take you a long way.

The Orbigo River, where both trout and pike await.



It's not all bull: storks are also something of a Spanish trademark.



FACTFILE

FISHING

The trout season on free fishing waters in León and nearby Benavente, starts on the first Sunday in April. Catch and release stretches extend the trout-fishing period usually to the end of September.

The regional fishing licence costs €8.25 per year and also covers Benavente. It is available, along with day tickets for the *cotos de pesca* - stocked fishing reserves - from the *Medio Ambiente* (Department of Environment) in León at Avda. De Peregrinos, s/n 24071-León. Tel: 987 296159, Fax: 987 296125

Email: cazaypesca.le@jcy.es

The building is located just behind the Parador Hotel, situated by the Bernesga River. Nearby, there is a tackle shop at Avenida Gran Via de San Marcos, 53, Email: josema777@gmail.com. Friendly proprietor Jose Cenador sells León's famous cockerel feather fly lures.

ACCOMMODATION

Benavente is a pleasant place with a restored historic centre offering a generous selection of refurbished bars. I stayed at the Parador Hotel, having booked my room via Keytel International in London Tel, 0207 761630300 email: paradors@keytel.co.uk

On a fly-fishing holiday in northern Spain I would budget on spending €12 for a good lunch (menu de día) at any bar/restaurant that you can find close to the river.

Accommodation is easy to find: ask for *camas* - bed and breakfast - in any town or village.

Benavente and León have a wide range of accommodation. At upmarket Paradors, you can expect to pay €65 per night for a double room bed and breakfast and €35 for set menu evening meal.

Mid-priced hotels average €45-60 per night and even some of the budget hostel accommodation can be surprisingly well-appointed. Expect to pay less than €30 per night for a double. I would advise you to ask at the local tourist office first.

When eating out, León has a wide choice of restaurants to suit all pockets, while in Benavente look out for Restaurante Los Remos, a good fish restaurant just a short walk from the town centre (C/ Cartagena N, 1, 49600 Benavente Tel, 980 636 698). Expect to pay around €15 per person all in.

BUDGET & FLIGHTS

Your budget for a two-week fishing holiday in northern Spain should be between £800 and £1,000.

Budget airline flights are available from main UK airports to Valladolid, Salamanca and Asturias airports, all of which have budget car hire facilities that are best booked in advance via the Internet.

Letters

WRITE TO US: Letters, Trout Fisherman, Emap Active Ltd, Bushfield House, Orton Centre, Peterborough, PE2 5UW or email: beverly.winram@emap.com

DISTINCTION



1st A FEW days after Christmas I embarked on a journey to my favourite trout fishery in the Yorkshire Dales.

The fishery holds a good stock of golden, rainbow and brown trout and it was extremely busy with an exceptional influx of young anglers trying out new equipment they had received as Christmas presents.

With all the bad Press young people get for wearing hoods, hanging around the streets, and getting up to anti-social behaviour, it was nice to see these youngsters taking advantage of a great sport such as the wetting of a line

and presentation of the fly on a lake.

Maybe the teaching and learning of the humble fly fisherman shall continue to grow for many years to come.

I for one am glad to see the young coming in to the sport.

John Tomlinson, Bramley, Leeds

Ed. I hear more authorities are using fly fishing as a tool to help rehabilitate young offenders too - a very positive step. To do our bit, Trout Fisherman is planning a Junior Troutmasters Final in 2009. See my Welcome column.



IMPRESS: AD AND BOTTOM LEFT PIX ARE REPEATS

MONTHLY PRIZES



MAKE A NEW YEAR RESOLUTION

2nd I WAS touched by Bob Clark's article regarding the demise of Essex fisheries (issue 373).

I set myself a challenge in 2006 to catch a trout in each month of the year in 2007. Setting the challenge got me out and fishing on warm but wet Sundays in January and February, breaking the ice in December and November and being incredibly grateful for a relatively cool summer.

As a consequence of the necessity to catch a trout I have fished eight different stillwaters and three different rivers. I have explored and enjoyed four new stillwaters I would not have normally travelled to.

By far the highlight of the last few months was catching a rainbow on a dry Daddy at Moorhen Fishery and my final fish of the year that fell to a black nymph at Dever Springs.

I would encourage all anglers to set up resolutions and challenges to keep their fishing fresh and also keep the fisheries busy, especially in the lean winter months.

PS. This year's challenge is to fish nine new stillwaters!

Bruce Hope-MacLellan, by email

GOOD NEWS FROM BAD

EVERY cloud has a silver lining they say. Well, some very dark clouds over the River Wandle certainly had silver linings. Though I have never fished the Wandle, and probably never will, I have taken an interest in this urban waterway since seeing it on TV.

After a devastating pollution incident an agreement was reached that will see more than £500,000 being paid by Thames Water to restore and improve the river over the next five years. The incident was transformed from a disaster into a triumph for the river by Thames Water's genuine desire to put right the damage they had caused and by action invoked by the ACA. Having been neglected by all but a few, the river now has the funding it needs to become a sustainable, wild urban fishery.

The money will restore habitat, restock fish and pay for a local schools' education programme. What a turnaround. It shows what can be achieved and I think congratulations are due to both Thames Water, and of course the ACA for their sterling input. It gives us all hope that our waterways can be protected for future generations.

K. Reid, by Crieff, Perthshire



Philip Pembroke's Spain - ideal for the independent traveller.

THE INDEPENDENT FLYFISHER

3rd I WOULD like to pass comment on Phil Pembroke's excellent article 'In Franco's footsteps' (issue 373). This article really fired my enthusiasm and made me feel that I too could go there under my own steam and fish there.

All too often articles are written about far-off destinations, which though maybe spectacular, are unattainable targets for most of us.

Phil's was different. Writers usually use and recommend a guiding service, well and good, but this doesn't help if you want

to go 'independent'. No guiding service advertised or recommended here, Phil just points you to the local font of knowledge, the tackle shop. How to get there, a brief outline on costs, recommended gear and some vivid descriptions and pictures are what I look for in such an article. Well, they were all there, and more besides.

If the magazine continues to produce a sprinkling of such articles I will be very happy and back for more.

Now, where's my Spanish phrase book...?
Kev Bryder, Callander, by Stirling

FISHERIES PAY THE PRICE

I FELT sorry for Bob Clark of Essex who found his local fisheries shut when he fancied a day's trout fishing (issue 373), but it is the same in Sussex and Kent.

Next year will be my 21st year of owning trout fisheries. However, of all the trout fisheries that existed in Kent and Sussex when I first started, only 15 percent remain.

Many existing fisheries are losing money. Some have tried raising their prices but this has not worked, possibly because many fly anglers are retired and live on fixed incomes.

Hopefully we will not lose any more fisheries this winter but I would not bank on this.

For some reason trout fisherman think that the money they pay is all profit for the fishery, but this is not the case. From a yearly perspective, modest advertising, memberships etc. will amount to £4000 a year (£80 a week). Insurance is a must and can cost up to £3000 a year depending on rod numbers (£60 a week). Maintenance (repairs, grass cutting, weed killer, generators, aerators, petrol etc) probably another £6000 a year (£120 a week). Rent for lakes £5000 each, if two then £10,000 a year, (£200 a week).

This amounts to £460 a week without taking into account wages for the owner or the cost of the fish. Trout of good quality and acceptable size, including

larger fish, cost on average £4 each.

If some of the 'occasional' anglers fished more regularly, perhaps more fisheries could stay open.

Gary Martin, Brick Farm Lakes, Sussex

GUILT-FREE SUCCESS

IN his letter 'Culture Clash' (issue 374) Richard Mann seemed upset after talking to an angler who had caught and released over 50 rainbows in three hours. "That is not fishing sir!" he said.

Had all the other anglers that day caught this amount? Or had the angler in question just worked out what fly and line to use to his advantage? Should this person feel guilty for his success or that others had not worked it out?

An example I can use is when I went fishing this New Year's Day. By lunchtime I had five fish, and my buddy had two. It then went very quiet and looked as if sport was over for the day.

Then the rain stopped, temperatures rose and fish started to show. My buddy switched to an intermediate and a Hothead Cat and took 19 fish in less than three hours. I was on a floater and struggling, but as soon as I made the switch I too began to take fish. If it had not been for my mate working out the method I would have probably stuck with my floater and missed some great sport.
Andy Richmond, Irvine, Scotland