

FISHING

Florence's fly fishing secret

Andy Buckley recounts the landing of an unlikely fish in an even more unlikely location.



“...this fish would weigh somewhere between 155 and 165lb... one of the largest freshwater fish ever caught on fly in Europe.”



Andy Buckley (left) with Joe Petrow and his enormous fly-caught wels catfish

Suburban Florence at 11pm isn't your typical scene for a fishing story – which is fine, as this certainly isn't your typical fishing story. Tucked away opposite an abandoned mill house about 20km from 'il Duomo' and Michelangelo's David, our scene is an unlikely one for a fly fishing adventure, as is our quarry.

A city with a rich history and culture, Florence may not (yet) be at the top of many game anglers' destination bucket lists, but a glance over the edge of the glorious Ponte Vecchio bridge may surprise many. The River Arno snakes lazily through the heart of the city but holds a macabre secret known to few – a duck-eating menace that has spread through many European river systems, devouring anything that it can get inside its cavernous jaws: the wels catfish. It

is still unknown just how big the Arno catfish get, but the largest recorded fish from the city centre is 255cm, roughly 260lb, and it is suspected that there could be significantly larger siluro lurking in the mysterious depths.

Until recently, the wels catfish had been considered a fish for the bait angler, but in recent years a small and dedicated band of game fishers have taken to developing methods of catching these leviathans on fly rods. One of these pioneers is Oliver Rampley, owner of a company called Fishing in Florence. Educated at the University of Oxford, Oliver worked in London for eight years before settling in Florence to start up his niche business guiding fly fishing clients in pursuit of catfish.

We had arranged a meeting with Fabio, a Florentine friend of

Oliver's who is considered one of the most prolific catfish catchers in Italy. He spoke freely about observing wels hunting small bleak which were spawning in shallow water during the previous week (Oliver's mobile rang almost hourly with updates and sightings by local anglers), and suggested the mill area as a good spot for the night. Oliver and I spent the afternoon sheltering from the harsh sun whilst rigging 80lb leaders, sharpening the hooks on our flies, and talking tactics.

We met student Joe Petrow outside our favourite bar at around 9pm. Only in Florence for a semester, Joe is a fanatical fly fisher – one of the new breed of young American anglers who will fish any place, any time, given the opportunity. Our transfer took us promptly to the decaying mill

where we carefully clambered down the steep bank before settling ourselves amongst the large boulders at the water's edge. Looking out across the broad weir at shoals of panicked baitfish scattering across the surface, Oliver confidently asserted that he could just tell that something big was going to happen later that night.

Joe took up a position at the head of a powerful side-pool, Oliver headed for the top of the weir, and I made my way towards a large and ominous-looking back-eddy. We cast our 12wt outfits in the gloom using unweighted flies similar to those used for pike, but to no avail. An hour after sunset we entered the prime feeding time for the larger catfish and Oliver and I were a little concerned at the lack of action. We made the decision to switch to smaller, weighted flies. ♦

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Joe's rod was rigged up first with a small but heavy black fly, which he began to pitch across the current. Oliver was scrambling back towards my position when we heard the call echo across the pool. "Fish! Fish!" yelled Joe, not with the joyous enthusiasm of an angler who might have hooked a bonefish or a trout – his voice was filled with anxiety and panic. We turned our head torches to his position to see a rod truly doubled over and a young angler holding on for dear life as his reel protested.

Joe played that fish for nearly 40 minutes as she used her weight and power to lumber across the pool. Each time a yard of line was gained it seemed to take five yards back, and we all genuinely doubted the likelihood of landing such an epic creature. Eventually, though, the fish began to tire and we got our first glimpse of the monster in the inky black of the river which was now only lit by one solitary street lamp high above our heads.

Ten minutes later and the fish seemed beaten. Oliver took up a position directly below Joe and at the first opportunity took hold of the lower jaw of the siluro which instantly bucked and thrashed and threw Oliver to one side. Oliver steadied himself, tried again and got the grip he was after with his gloved hands – the writhing

leviathan was ours! Joe puffed his cheeks and wiped his brow as Oliver and I carefully drew her onto the unhooking mat where we could finally take a closer look.

Measuring 173cm, this fish would weigh somewhere between 155 and 165lb. It is not only the largest freshwater fish ever caught on a fly in Italy, but one of the largest freshwater fish ever caught on fly in Europe. The tiny fly seemed so insignificant in that enormous head, but it was lodged firmly and precisely in the fleshy corner of its mouth. We took a few minutes to revive her before she defiantly sulked away into the darkness. Three anglers stood silently, each aware that he had just witnessed a historic capture.

This fish was not only a victory for Joe, but also for Oliver and his commitment to pioneering an entirely new path for the adventure fly fisherman. Anglers like Oliver, Rudi Heger of Germany and Spanish expert David Tejedor are cracking the code of a game fish that is like no other. If, like me, you appreciate the diversity and challenge of fishing with flies, then I would encourage you to take a step into the unknown and seek a new adventure in one of the world's most beautiful cities.

Forza Firenze!
www.fishinginflorence.com



Oliver Rampley with a wels catfish of slightly less epic proportions



12wt rods and reels are the order of the day



Big flies tied on saltwater hooks and 80lb mono leaders are recommended