

Anglers hooked on fishy tale of the one that got away

Brian Clarke on the mysterious case of the 'walking whopper'

THE Environment Agency (EA) has launched an investigation into how one of Britain's most famous — and potentially valuable — common carp, last known in the River Nene in Northamptonshire, came to be caught from a lake in the same county a few days ago.

The fact that the 41-pounder taken from the river near Nassington is the same fish as the 41-pounder taken from the lake at Thorpe Waterville, several miles upstream, seems to be established beyond doubt. What is of interest to the EA is how it apparently managed to swim upstream through several locks on the river, and then to cross the land bridge between the river and the nearby lake, without human help.

The transfer of fish from one water to another without an EA licence was made a criminal offence, with fines up to £2,500, some years ago in an attempt to curb the widespread and lucrative black market in carp for angling. Tonnes of native fish are known to be moved from water to water each year by thieves and

unscrupulous dealers and large numbers of foreign fish are smuggled into Britain each year from mainland Europe.

Although government measures have made such transfers more difficult, the market still thrives — and for obvious reasons. Carp are Britain's largest freshwater fish and by far the most difficult to outwit. Some anglers become obsessed with the challenge of catching a whopper and will pay up to £100 a day to fish a water known to hold one, even though the fish may rarely, or never, be caught again.

Sources say a 40lb common carp could fetch £10,000 and more in the marketplace

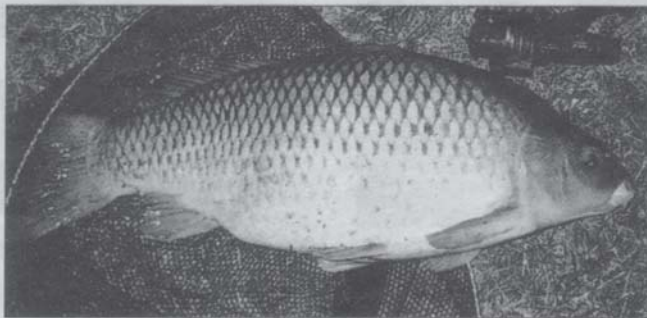
'A 40lb common carp could fetch £10,000 because of the repeat business it would attract'

because of the repeat business it would attract.

"Hedges" — once discovered, the fish was given a name, like all huge carp — became famous when it was caught near Nassington on June 16, 2002. It weighed 41lb 4oz, a staggering weight for a common carp to achieve in the wild. It was taken by Glen Woolner, a local river expert, and, because of its extreme rarity, it was officially witnessed, weighed and photographed by staff of *Angling Times*, coarse fishing's weekly newspaper. It was known to be still in the Nene in 2003 because it was caught again that year.

Then, a few days ago, reports began to circulate that a 41lb 10oz common carp had been caught from the lake at Thorpe Waterville. Kevin Green, editor of *Angling Times's* carp supplement, said: "When I got the pictures in, I knew I had seen the fish before. We went back through the files and compared pictures of the Nene fish with pictures of the lake fish. They were one and the same."

What Green and his team found were identical scale patterns and minor body blemishes on the fish in the two sets of pictures. "All very big carp acquire these features," Green said. "They are as individual to fish as fingerprints and birthmarks are to humans. We found the same small notches in the tail, the same spot above a fin, the same small lump on one lip, the same mark on a gill cover. There was just no doubt





about it. It was like looking at an old friend."

The Thorpe Waterville lake is run by Chris Berry, an expert carp angler who took over management of the water and its 70-man fishing syndicate in May this year. He said yesterday that he had no idea how the fish might have got from the river into the lake. Berry told *Angling Times* that he had caught the fish from the lake

himself in September. "There's no denying it — it was in the Nene," he said. "I've no idea how it got from the river into the lake."

Richard Ingham, the EA's national fish movement enforcement co-ordinator, said: "I can confirm that no agency consent was given for the movement of this fish from anywhere, to anywhere. Our investigations are continuing."

The move from river to lake was not the first of Hedges's adventures. The fish is known to have been in a lake near Tansor, also in Northamptonshire, in 1998. That year the Nene broke its banks, washed into the lake and carried the fish back out with it into the main flow. It eventually took up station in the Nassington area — until a few days ago, its last known location.