

## Cat Chat - Keith Lambert in Conversation with Kevin Maddocks

The name Kevin Maddocks is legendary amongst today's carp and catfish anglers, his contributions to both branches of specialist angling are huge. Many of the long term CCG members will be well aware of his input to the group as the founder member but after he stepped back into a supporting role within the group several years ago, newer members may not know that much about his thoughts, opinions or achievements.

Keith Lambert visited Kevin in his 400 year old Bedfordshire cottage to record an informal, some may say controversial chat which hopefully will be of interest to all members; old and new. You might not agree with him but it'll make you think.

**KL.** When did you first start catfishing Kevin and what attracted you to it when you were such a well known carp angler at the time?

**KM.** I was a mad keen carp angler in the early eighties when I started to hear stories about these mystical fish; the catfish. I well remember hearing about the chap who hooked what was surely a monster fish that just sat on the bottom and wouldn't move. This appealed to me and the thought of a hard fighting species intrigued me. I have always liked a fish that could fight hard; the greatest part of angling for me is the fight which is why I don't fish for pike, although I have tried it. The idea of there being a species like a catfish that could give a real account of itself made me want to try and catch one and the first place I tried was at Claydon.



**KL.** Of course, if you were to start catfishing now, it would be a lot easier. There is far more literature, information, videos etc. than was available to us in those days, where did you get your help and information from?

**KM.** That's right, there was virtually nothing available at that time, people just didn't write catfishing articles or books about them then; there just wasn't that much interest in them. So I decided to take the bull by the horns and fish on my own to see how I got on. The early Claydon days were magical for many people, and I was no exception. I am sure many of

today's catfish anglers will fondly remember sitting in their cars in the top car park waiting for first light and then virtually running down the hill to the lake to get a swim. Even though I hadn't cat fished before, I was still confident; my carp angling success had ensured that.

I caught my first catfish on my first trip to Claydon, it weighed about 4lb and I remember being totally mesmerised by it, I had never seen such an intriguing looking fish. I sat opposite a chap who caught a couple of fish that day, so I went round for a chat which was the first time I met Bob Baldock.

**KL.** I seem to recall that Bob was one of the very few experienced catfish anglers around at that time. Did meeting him fuel your passion for catfishing?

**KM.** Oh yes, most definitely. Bob was a very successful catfish angler and caught some cracking cats from quite a few very hard waters. Don't forget that there were relatively few waters with cats in at this time and Bob had done well on many of them. Chatting with Bob soon made me realise that we shared a similar perspective on fishing for cats and we fished at Claydon together quite a bit after that. It was during those sessions that I met some of the other catfish anglers of

the time and I decided to see if we could get other people interested in catfish by forming the Catfish Conservation Group.

**KL** . I remember the very first meeting in 1984 at that little hall in Heath and Reach and the terrific response we had, what are your memories of that meeting and the subsequent formation of the group.

**KM**. Well Keith, I was extremely impressed with the response we had and realised that the group could do well. So despite the fact that we had absolutely no members at all, I took the decision to personally fund the production of the first ever high quality catfishing magazine – *Whiskers*. This was circulated amongst the press and some high profile anglers of the time and we got plenty of good publicity. We very soon after had 200 members. Probably the first ever club to be launched with a professional mag and no members!

**KL** . I remember at the time Kevin that we were viewed with a little animosity from some of the Leighton Buzzard anglers fearing that we would descend upon their waters and add undue pressure to them. What was done to try and expand the catfish scene away from the big three; Claydon, Tiddenfoot and Rackley Hills and try to ensure that there would be enough catfishing to go round?

**KM**. Yes Keith, you're right, not everyone felt that we were doing the right thing but we were determined that these magnificent fish should become more widely available to anglers so one of the first things that Bob and I did was set up meetings with what were then the Water Authorities, MAFF and of course English Nature. The aim here was to try and encourage them to consider stocking catfish into new waters and to look positively at catfish stocking consents. We even took Dickie Carr; a well known eighties match angler to Claydon and sat him next to Bob. Bob caught catfish whilst Dickie filled a net with roach, bream and other small fish. This story was published by The Anglers Mail and helped us when we spoke to the authorities. It is unfortunate that these days the EA and DEFRA don't take such a positive view of catfish in our waters. We did however manage to get catfish stocked into more waters and even convinced a fish farmer to grow and breed them. We made a lot of progress in those early years and every new issue of *Whiskers* contained a list of more and more catfish waters.

**KL** . Yes Kevin, I remember seeing all the new waters appear on the list and this certainly attracted more members as well as taking some of the pressure off the established waters. What came next for you?

**KM**. Well I had always been interested in baits and rigs from my carp angling and I decided to apply some of these principles to catfishing. Claydon seemed as good a place as any to try out new methods and baits and I tried a lot of experimenting. I had played around a lot with flavours and liquidised baits whilst carp fishing, and found that squid made a good boilie. And I was confident that it was likely to be a good catfish bait too. I believe that I was the first angler in the country to use pieces of squid for catfish and I caught with it on my first trip to Claydon. Squid very soon became the No.1 bait.



I looked at our rigs and methods too before deciding that for the type of baits we were using the best rig was simply a freelined bait and both Bob and I enjoyed many successful trips to Claydon using freelined squid. We also looked long and hard at one of Bob's rigs for livebaiting and after a

few modifications we caught scores of fish on what was later published as 'The Bob Baldock Polyball Rig

**KL.** What about post Claydon days Kevin, didn't you have a go at Tring for a while?

**KM,** Yes, that's right, after catching fish to over 30lb, I had decided that I wanted to catch a really huge catfish; which at that time would have been about 40lb and I didn't feel that would happen by fishing at Claydon. As the UK catfish record had come from Tring I decided to give it a crack despite the fact that it had a ridiculously low stocking density. So Bob and I decided that we would fish hard at Marsworth for a season. Unfortunately, the going was really tough and although we managed a few small catfish, the really huge fish that I wanted eluded me although I was sure that there were fish in there that could be over fifty pounds.

Woburn Abbey too became a regular stomping ground and I know Keith that we shared some lovely days fishing in these magnificent surroundings catching catfish of over twenty pounds, but not the really big fish that we were convinced existed there. I was really enjoying my catfishing in those days despite getting pressure to continue carp fishing from various companies who used my name to promote their products. Even the small fishes that we caught at Woburn were pretty special fish and even today I think that catfish anglers really appreciate any catfish they catch. A carp angler would throw a two pounder back with disgust but a catfish angler will still be happy to catch a cat of any size.



**KL.** That's right, I think this is because despite the sterling work carried out by the CCG and the impressive spread of the species nationwide, they are still a pretty rare fish and everyone of them is still considered a special capture.

If we can move on a couple of years or so Kevin, I am sure you remember in the early days the impressive photographs that we published in the magazine of those monstrous great cats that were caught on the Continent. They were a great inspiration to me at least, and I guess it was inevitable that we would start to venture abroad to further our catfishing.

**KM.** Yes Keith, they were an inspiration to us all and of course we had to give it a go. Don't forget though, these were pioneering times; it is difficult for today's travelling anglers to appreciate what we had to do in order to have success abroad. It is always miles easier to follow than to lead and that as you well know is what we did. In those early days, we had nothing to go on, we had to find everything out for ourselves; methods, areas, baits, rigs, rules, licences - everything. Research became as important a part of our trip as anything else. It was very hard fishing – we didn't even know if some of the waters even held good catfish; a big difference to today's catfish anglers who only need to turn up and be virtually assured of fish. I don't think that a lot of guys could even begin to imagine the work that we had to put in to gain even a little success. It is difficult to describe, but it was so much more difficult to pioneer those waters which is what we were doing. We must also remember that there were no specialist catfish anglers – most of the big cats that were caught were accidental captures or by people fishing for food.

I am a pioneering angler at heart and the extra enjoyment gained from having a triumph on a venue that we have started on from scratch made it all worthwhile, it is a shame that people can't turn back the clock and experience this for themselves rather than fish known waters with known methods very often for known fish.

**KL** . I agree totally Kevin, you and I have fished abroad together for many, many years now and what fantastic times we have had. The pioneering aspect was for me too a really important part of our fishing. But it wasn't all success, was it? Do you remember the CCG trip to what was then Czechoslovakia in 1985? We didn't stand a chance!

**KM**. Fortunately, I can look back on that trip now and laugh, you are dead right, we were totally inexperienced, under prepared and had completely unsuitable tackle. Not being able to night fish was a handicap too. At the time though we thought we would empty the place!

**KL** . You know, thinking about it, I am not sure that we would even be successful now, even with twenty odd years experience behind us; such was the nature of that venue.

Following the Czech trip, we started taking a look at France and the River Seille; I guess you have fond memories of those trips?

**KM**. Certainly, the nice thing about those early trips was that you never saw another catfish angler from one day to the next and we virtually had the places to ourselves. The Seille was no different and we slowly started to get to grips with the place. The main thing we learned was that British style fishing was useless. You needed good live baits to have any chance of success and we spent a lot of time trying to buy or catch decent livelies. Our rigs needed upgrading somewhat too; It amuses me now when I think about the hook links that I used to fish with that I made from two strands of Millward's fly line backing knotted together because one strand might get worn through in a long fight. Nowadays of course we are spoilt for choice.

**KL** . Do you remember the time when we were staying in the Hotel in Tournus as there was no night fishing allowed (and there was no way the CCG party of 20 would get away with it) I had to sneak buckets of bream into our room each night and keep them alive in the shower so that we would have baits ready for the early morning start!

**KM**. I remember that good lives were always at a premium and I was useless at trying to catch them; I took up carp fishing to get away from float fishing!

My main memory from the Seille of course was when I caught the 79 pounder which at the time, was the largest cat ever caught by an Englishman. It seems incredible now to think that at the time we all thought that this was such an incredible capture, it would be years before anybody ever caught a catfish of such huge proportions. Nowadays of course a cat of that size is barely worth a mention. How things have changed.



**KL**. Okay Kevin, if we come back to the fishing abroad a little later, can you tell us a little about your days at Withy Pool and how that developed as a leading catfish water?

**KM**. I was fortunate to take over Withy Pool (known as Maylins in those days) in 1985 and it needed a lot of work to get it up to scratch it was certainly nowhere near the fabulous water it is today. My intention was to develop it as a top carp water even though it had held catfish for a long time.

**KL** . Do you know the origin of the Withy Cats Kevin?

**KM.** Some years after Claydon was stocked with catfish (1952 I think) they had grown well and were spawning like mad and the controlling club decided that the numbers should be thinned out by killing any cats that were caught. Top specialist angler at that time Peter Frost told me that anglers were moving the catfish out of Claydon as fast as possible and seeding waters all over the place including Arlesey Lake , Airman Pit and of course Withy Pool. Apart from one authenticated 'double' we didn't know what fish were there when we purchased the property. As I said, our plans were really to develop the carp fishing there, the catfish were just a bonus.

**KL.** I suppose the development of the carp fishing and with it the increase in quality baits going in helped the catfish growth rates too?

**KM.** That's right, the water held a lot of crayfish too and that helped and very soon we were catching nice catfish as well as the large carp that the water was famous for. The catfish were spawning well too and we managed to remove good numbers of little kittens every year which were grown on in our fish house and then sold to other fisheries for stocking their waters. Some of them I pushed up to double figures before re-stocking them back into Withy. I was fascinated by rearing these little fish and pleased that we were able to supply some of the demand that the CCG had generated for more catfish waters. At one stage, Pat Noble of the Anglian Water Authority (as it was called then) was helping us to try and breed catfish and he came along and injected some cats that we were holding in the stock pond with hormones. Nowadays the very same water authority is doing exactly the opposite – trying to get rid of catfish. They ought to make up their minds exactly what they do want!

**KL.** Over the years Kevin these fish grew on well and you had some good catfishing but I think it is fair to say that nobody really expected it to produce a cat like the one that Robert Coote landed in August 1985

**KM.** You're right, the rumours were flying after that capture and people were saying that I had put a big fish in. But anyone who fished there regularly knew there were really big uncaught fish resident. There were many snags in Withy and really big fish were lost by anglers every single year. So it was a bit annoying that people were trying to undermine the fish, even though nobody expected it to be 5 7lb.

**KL.** That fish which became known as Goliath continued to grow until Richard Garner caught it at a weight of 62lb which is the official British record which as we all know has now been suspended. What is your view on the circumstances surrounding this decision?

**KM.** Well, one thing is for sure, that fish grew to that size in Withy Pool, it wasn't stocked at 60lb or 70lb, and it grew to that size whilst living there so it is a fair and worthy fish to hold the record. The problem as we all now know is that the sizes of illegal fishes that were being imported were making a mockery of the situation, such as the fish over 100lb that was put into an Essex Lake and I think the BRFC had little choice. I do though think it was a shame and I would like to see a catfish record re-introduced at some time. It was unfortunate that they didn't involve the CCG to help with sorting it out although I do think it is a very difficult situation though.

**KL.** Along with running Withy Pool, you had a very successful publishing business producing angling titles and videos; I suppose it was logical that catfishing would feature too?

**KM.** Beekay, our publishing business was well established at that time and catfishing was growing fast so it was the obvious and sensible thing to publish catfish books and to make catfish films. This also gave me the opportunity (or excuse as my wife called it!) to spend more time abroad pioneering new venues. I know Keith that you were part of this scene and think you would agree that they were great times?

**KL.** Absolutely, the travelling that we did in those days was phenomenal, and being the first catfish anglers to fish many of today's popular waters was certainly special Those early sessions

on the Saone for instance will stick in the memory as well as fantastic trips to Russia, Italy and of course the greatest trip of all: Kazakhstan in August 1999.

**KM.** Yeah, they were real adventures of course, you just mentioned the Saone , well what a place that was, we had overlooked it for far too long but by the time we tackled it I think we were just about ready and we enjoyed some great fishing.

**KL.** Unfortunately Kevin space doesn't allow us to fully cover many of our European adventures but can you just give us the highlights from some of these trips?

**KM.** Well the highlights were being able to tackle fantastic and huge catfish in places like The Ebro, The Saone, The Volga, The Po, The Danube and The Illi and of course our group of anglers that combined to put in the hard work required.



**KL.** Yes and of course not just the venues, for me very often the methods that we needed to use were often the biggest part of these trips. Cast your mind back Kevin to the early days with the Klunk, what an adventure that was.

**KM.** Yeah, I keep using this term pioneering but I feel so strongly that's what it really was and with it came methods that were totally alien to us such as boat fishing and as you say fishing with the klunk. As I am sure you recall we learned this method in Romania on the Danube Delta fishing with hand lines and the exciting bit was returning to England and starting to buy and make our own Klunks. You in particular Keith I remember were especially keen on making and using the Klunk. The research we put in was great fun; using them in the bath, testing them in the garden pond and then finally having the guts to actually go abroad and use them with our own

tackle rather than the hand line. All of this could so easily have been a total waste of time but we were so keen that we just had to do it. Fortunately it was successful and we managed to perfect the method by using it with a good echo sounder and watching the catfish respond on the screen more importantly fishing from a drifting boat something that had never even been considered before. These were exciting times; we were the only anglers in Europe fishing in this way. It is easy to pick up on something that has been proven as successful but here we were learning things ourselves. These are the sorts of things you will remember until the day you die. It was fantastic.

**KL.** I know exactly what you mean Kevin and I will always remember those trips in the knowledge that we were really achieving something special. What a stark contrast to many of the catfish venues and captures of today.

**KM.** I don't think that many of today's catfish anglers could put up with all the work and effort that we were putting in years ago. In many ways it is just too easy to catch a big catfish nowadays; look at Spain for example.

**KL.** I know Spain was a particular favourite of yours Kevin, did you always believe that it would become such a great venue?

**KM.** Oh yes. Spain has always been interesting. The growth rates and their spread have been well documented and I have always believed that catfish will grow really huge there. It was great to be amongst the first on there and we learned a lot and enjoyed it immensely but as soon as the crowds arrived along with commercial fishing, it was no longer for me. It intrigues me though why despite all the angling pressure in certain spots that they keep getting caught, that they haven't moved away and that they can still keep growing. I have always believed catfish to be a bit thick - well pretty stupid actually! but I still don't understand why they behave as they do. Anyway I have always thought that everything is right in Spain to produce massive fish and I truly believe that fish of 500lb will one day be possible. If Russia can produce cats up to that size, then Spain certainly will.

**KL.** Much has changed in the European catfishing scene over the last ten years or so. What is your view on the fishing in Spain at the moment with the way pellet fishing has revolutionised and possibly devalued the catfishing there and the increase in the number of commercial ventures over there that have created a new breed of 'instant' catfish anglers?

**KM.** I am not surprised by the success of 'pellet fishing'. I was the first to introduce this with the KM Nuggets and what a fantastic bait it is, but I have mixed feelings here really. On the one hand, I still believe catfishing to be a wonderful sport and I get great pleasure from watching people catching huge cats and enjoying themselves. But I also have the opinion that when you have worked so hard to pioneer a water and spent maybe two years planning a trip with all the work that goes into it and built up a knowledge of the species that there isn't really the feeling of achievement anymore, I have to admit that when I look at the effort that went into catching the World record – well you know Keith; you were part of it; it frustrates me a little to see guys going to Spain and landing 200lb plus fish without putting in any effort at all. Some of these anglers have never fished abroad before and I even heard of an angler who's first ever catfish on his first trip abroad was more than 200lb! Overall though I think that despite having it put on a plate for them, this style of catting is still a good thing because it opens up a whole new style of fishing to anyone who can afford the price of a trip and lets them experience the full power of these magnificent creatures.

**KL.** You mentioned the World record fish Kevin, maybe you could share a little of the main points from that trip?

**KM.** The whole point of this trip was to assemble a group of some of Europe 's best catfish anglers and to try and have a crack at setting a new and realistic World catfish record. The IGFA record at the time was in the region of 80lb or so. We had all caught many; many catfish larger than that and thought that we could establish a new record to properly reflect the state of European catfishing at that time. You may remember we were all confident that between us, if we worked together we would achieve this. So after two years planning, a trip of close to 5 weeks was set up and to cut a long story short I was the angler fortunate enough to land a fish of 202 lb. Larger fish had been caught but nothing this big had ever been claimed as a new World record.



**KL.** What's your view on the big Spanish fish that are being spoken of as World records Kevin?

**KM.** It is no good claiming a fish to be a World record without complying with the IGFA standards and then getting it ratified as a record. I think we are getting a bit carried away with people claiming almost every week to have landed a World record. Even if we speak of unofficial world records then they fall way short of some of the fish caught in Kazakhstan , Italy and possibly even France .

**KL .** Would you encourage anglers to claim these records officially?

**KM.** Yes, in my opinion people need to claim these records although complying with the IGFA rules isn't easy and I would encourage anglers to find out exactly what is required. I would also be happy knowing that these fish have been correctly and accurately weighed too, I am sure that there are a lot of inaccuracies especially as there is pressure on guiding services and commercial interests to produce ever bigger fish.

**KL.** Changing the subject Kevin although still with a European link, with all your foreign experience behind you and everything that you have achieved, can you still manage to separate your Euro fishing from your UK fishing?

**KM.** Without a doubt. Of course I have enjoyed my times abroad but this hasn't affected my attitude to English catting at all. I would happily go fishing with you tomorrow and try to catch a twenty pounder. Even if I caught a four pound fish I would be thrilled and I really mean that. Catfish are still my favourite fish even though I rarely fish for them now. I am currently enjoying a good spell of carp fishing again but I will come back to catfishing at some point in my angling career.

**KL.** On the subject of English catfish Kevin, you still operate a very successful syndicate fishery at Ringstead. Most members will recall the super catfishing at Crackers Meadow. I understand though that the EA are giving you some stick over them being there, perhaps you could elaborate?

**KM.** A couple of years ago, The EA invited me to apply for a licence to keep catfish which I did and they subsequently refused! I was then asked to remove the catfish from the lakes. As far as I am concerned permission was granted by them to have the catfish in these lakes when Duncan Kay, the previous owner stocked them – he still has the paperwork and if the EA wish to take it to court that is fine, my legal advisors have informed me that I shall win.

We don't have the space to go into all the ins - and - outs of the EA's current attitude to catfish but I wish they would finally come up with some proof that they are harmful to our fisheries. We have proved that catfish don't have a significant impact on other species and the environment but they have never come up with proof to the opposite!

**KL.** Some members will know that you kindly granted the group a fish-in at Crackers Meadow in 2005. I understand that this event was hi-jacked by the EA without your permission, how did you view this?

**KM.** I wasn't at all happy, I was away in France at the time and they came onto my property and erected signs around our lake warning anglers not to return any catfish that were caught. At no point did they contact me or my bailiffs prior to the fish-in to discuss this. They have also never written to me about it since so they are acting like a bunch of cowboys in my view!

I felt they acted in a totally unprofessional manner which seems to be the way they behave these days. Some members claimed they were put under pressure from EA representatives and this isn't the kind of thing I like to see at an event where anglers should be enjoying themselves. It also showed that the EA are monitoring the activities of the group which I am not sure as a public body comes under their remit.

**KL.** It is just as well there weren't any cats caught then Kevin.

**KM.** Yes, shame.

**KL.** Finally Kevin, what are your expectations for the CCG in the future, do you think that we still have a role to play in specialist angling especially in the light of the EA's recent negative attitude towards catfish.

**KM.** I'd like to think that the CCG will carry on for a long time to come yet. The things that the group has achieved to date show that it is a worthwhile cause. And as you say there is still work to be done in conjunction with the authorities. Over 600 members shows a good stable core of keen catfish anglers. The only problem I could see is if there aren't any new people willing to come in and help out with the running of the group. Fresh enthusiasm is always necessary if a group such as ours isn't to just fade away.

**KL.** Well I'd certainly go along with that Kevin. It's plenty of work alright.

