



PLAY THE BANJO

Autumn is the time when Tom Pickering gets cute with his fishing and the Banjo feeder is his No.1 instrument for catching carp...

Words: Kev Green Pics: Mick Rouse

CASTING like a bullet and delivering a pinch of pellets with the accuracy of a sniper the Banjo feeder is a precision-made fish catcher.

The brainchild of angling innovator Andy Findlay this brilliant tactic is sweeping all before it right now and one man who has fast become a master Banjo player is Tom Pickering.

The former World Champion is famed for being a no-nonsense Yorkshireman who isn't easily impressed by new gadgets and trends.

The only time he'll change his fishing is if he can genuinely see a benefit. But when he first saw the Banjo he knew it was such a eureka! moment.

"I was in a meeting with Andy Findlay at Preston Innovations and I said 'we need a mini Method feeder that allows you to deliver a really small amount of bait'.

"Then Andy reached over and handed me his prototype Banjo. In his modest way he just said 'have a look at this...it might be what you're looking for...'

"I couldn't believe it, my eyes went out on stalks! I instantly knew it was perfect for the job – it would allow me to offer a mini dinner plate of pellets. I knew it would change my feeder fishing."

With the Banjo now moved from

prototype to product Tommy knows the Banjo will play a major role in his fishing in the coming months.

To see how he uses it we joined him on the day-ticket Bonsai Lake at North Lincolnshire's Garbolino Lindholme complex (www.lindholmelakes.co.uk, 01427 872905).

WHAT IS THE BANJO?

The Banjo is an evolution of the flat Method feeder. Whereas the flat feeder sports a flat weighted base sprouting a few narrow ribs to stick groundbait or pellets on to, the Banjo has a similar base with a round bowl built on top of it.

With a vertical sidewall running around the disc of metal forming the base of the swimfeeder, packing it with bait is easy as the bowl effectively retains the feed and protects it from the force of the cast and the impact of the water (see sequence right).

"The most important thing when fishing any type of Method feeder is that the bait it's loaded with must reach the bottom intact.

"With the Banjo it becomes far easier to land the pellets on the deck in one ball – the sides of the feeder hold in the bait and so you always know your presentation is spot-on.

"The hookbait will always be sat in the middle of a small ball of micro pellets – it's the perfect presentation and makes such a difference to your catch rate."



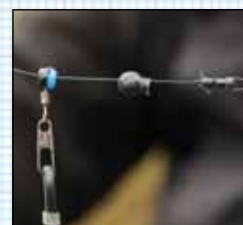
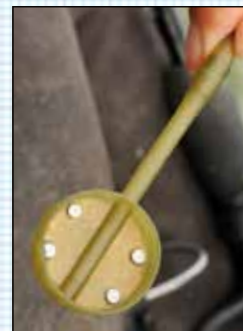
ANATOMY OF A BANJO FEEDER

- Preston Innovations' Inline Banjo feeder features a small round plastic bowl with a weighted base and a stem for stability in flight. The feeder sides retain the hookbait and freebies

- The weighted base ensures the feeder casts accurately over long distances and that it always lands on the bait facing up. It is available in two sizes (large and small) and three weights (15g, 30g and 45g). They cost £1.99 each

- Tommy uses a 4in hooklink of 0.13mm (4lb 12oz) Preston Powerline tied to a size 18 or 16 PR36 hook. The hook is knotless knotted to the line with a bait band trapped inside the hair loop. A 6mm Fin Perfect pellet is trapped in the band

- Here's the basic rig. Tommy ties a Korum Quick Change bead on the end of his mainline to make it quick and easy for him to change the hooklink



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LOCATION CASTING

If easy loading of bait and keeping it intact until it hits the deck is the key advantage of the Banjo, then it's ability to be cast with pinpoint accuracy runs it a close second.

Tommy believes fish location is more complex than many anglers are aware of and, in the swim he'd chosen, he explained how fish move through different depths at different periods of the season.

For a start he pointed out one island isn't the same as another: "In this swim the margins of the reedy island on one side of the swim are about twice as deep as near the grassy island on the other side.

"In the warmer months the carp often get really close to the shallow island and you can catch them almost in the grass, but as it gets colder the

Accurate casting increases the effectiveness of the Banjo

fish definitely prefer the water near the deeper island.

"The carp back right into the reeds as they die back and, more often than not, casting close to that island will be most productive in late autumn and winter.

"If it gets really cold, usually in January or February, then the fish often move again, coming away from the island altogether and sinking into the deep channel between the islands.

"The beauty with the Banjo is that it casts well even in a crosswind so you can cast it wherever you want it. I don't know of another feeder that casts as easily and as accurately as the Banjo.

"It always lands baited side up, too. When the fish want just small portions bait this is exactly what you need."

PERFECT PELLETS

Turning hard pellets into soft and sticky baits to go in the Banjo is something anglers struggle with.

Anglers trying to soften their bait often end up with pellets that are too wet and soggy – resembling a lump of paste rather than individual baits.

After much experimentation Tom's developed a pellet-doctoring recipe that guarantees results.

Lindholme has an 'our-pellets-only' rule which means you must purchase your bait on site.

While many feed/carp pellets are identical or nearly the same, if you use a very different bait then you may need to tweak Tom's guidelines to suit (sequence right).

However, for most 2mm-3mm feed/carp pellets his directions won't be far off the mark.

PREPARING SOFT BANJO PELLETS



1 – Tip 2mm-3mm micro carp pellets into a bowl. In summer/ autumn Tommy uses a whole 750g (two-pint) bag. In winter he halves the amount



2 – To two pints of pellets add a spoonful of Sonubaits Stiki Pellet, a binder activated by moisture that makes the softened pellets stickier



3 – Sprinkle Stiki powder on the dry pellets and ensure it's well spread so all the baits have a dusting



4 – Tommy didn't used to rate flavours but he now sees them as a major edge to customise plain pellets. He pours out a capful of Sonu Tiger Fish...



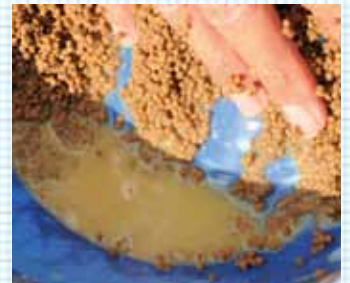
5 – ...then spreads the rich smelling liquid over the dry pellets and Stiki powder



6 – Add half a pint of lake water and mix it through the pellets. The Stiki powder is now activated



7 – Stir the wet pellets to distribute the flavour, water and Stiki powder. Much of the water is quickly absorbed



8 – Thanks to Stiki powder the baits will be sat in a milky solution. Leave the pellets to stand but stir every two minutes until the liquid is absorbed



9 – After 10-20 minutes the pellets become soft and sticky. If you're casting into shallow water up to 3ft this is ideal



10 – If you're casting into deeper water it's advisable to stiffen up the pellets a bit more by adding another spoonful of Stiki Pellet



11 – Stir the powder through the damp pellets and you'll instantly feel the baits becoming stickier



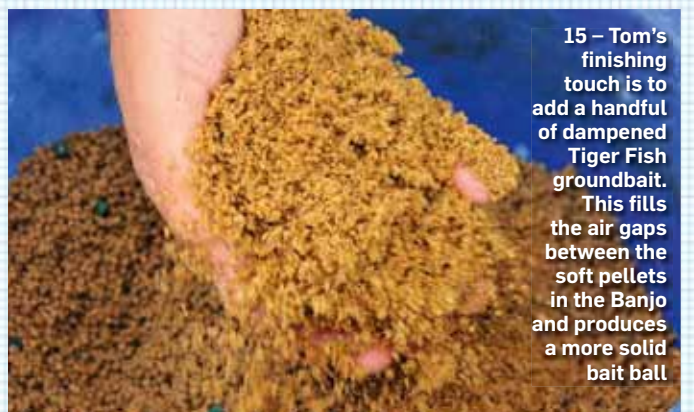
12 – Tommy's test for knowing if the bait is right is to squeeze a handful of pellets in his hand...



13 – ...they should form a solid ball that can be rolled around in your hand without breaking up



14 – Stuck firmly together with the Stiki Pellet it should be possible to break the ball in two without the pellets collapsing



15 – Tom's finishing touch is to add a handful of dampened Tiger Fish groundbait. This fills the air gaps between the soft pellets in the Banjo and produces a more solid bait ball

PACKING THE BANJO

Another key advantage of the Banjo is how easy it is to regulate the amount of feed you load on to it.

The sequence (right) shows two ways of loading the feeder to produce different sized bait balls.

One method uses the specially made Preston mould that allows quite a large and rounded bait ball to be formed for occasions when the fish are feeding well and are in the mood for a hearty scoff.

The other tactic sees Tom load the feeder with just enough pellets to create a flat 'plate' of bait. This is neatly padded down with the tip of his thumb.

This produces a smaller meal that's better in coldwater conditions when fish are more restrained in their feeding.

PLAYING THE BANJO

On the day we visited Lindholme a chill wind was ripping the surface of the lake bringing with it an ominous sign of things to come.

Searching his swim to locate the fish Tom found them sheltering near the reedy island. With accurate casting made easy with the Banjo he was able to land each payload of pellets on a sixpence.

In itself this was a major plus point for the tactic as in such a strong crosswind accurate casting with just about any other type of feeder would have proved very difficult.

Tom's reward was a procession of carp that produced unmissable rod-wrenching bites. As the fish dug into the plate of pellets and sucked up the hookbait they hooked themselves against the weight of the feeder.

On a cold and difficult day when the fish weren't ripping up the bottom the Banjo played a merry tune.

And in the months to come an awful lot more anglers will be learning how to play the Banjo.



With the bait on a short hooklink carp soon come calling

TWO WAYS TO LOAD THE BANJO



1 – The Preston Banjo mould has been made to make loading pellets easy, but it does produce quite a large ball of feed



2 – Load the base of the mould with a thin layer of the Stiki Pellet treated micros



3 – Place the bait banded 6mm hook pellet in the centre of the feed



4 – Add a few more pellets to top it off then lay the Banjo upside down on top of the pellets and press on the metal base



5 – Press the release button on the base of the mould to pop out the pellet-loaded feeder



6 – Here's the finished feeder, loaded with a neat dome of pellets that will tumble on to the lakebed within a few minutes of casting



7 – To make a smaller Banjo bait package place the hookbait in the base of the feeder



8 – Fill the Banjo with micro pellets – it should be slightly overfilled with bait



9 – Press down on the bait with your thumb to pack the soft pellets into the Banjo



10 – The finished snack, a flat dinner plate of pellets that is ideal when fish are feeding cautiously

