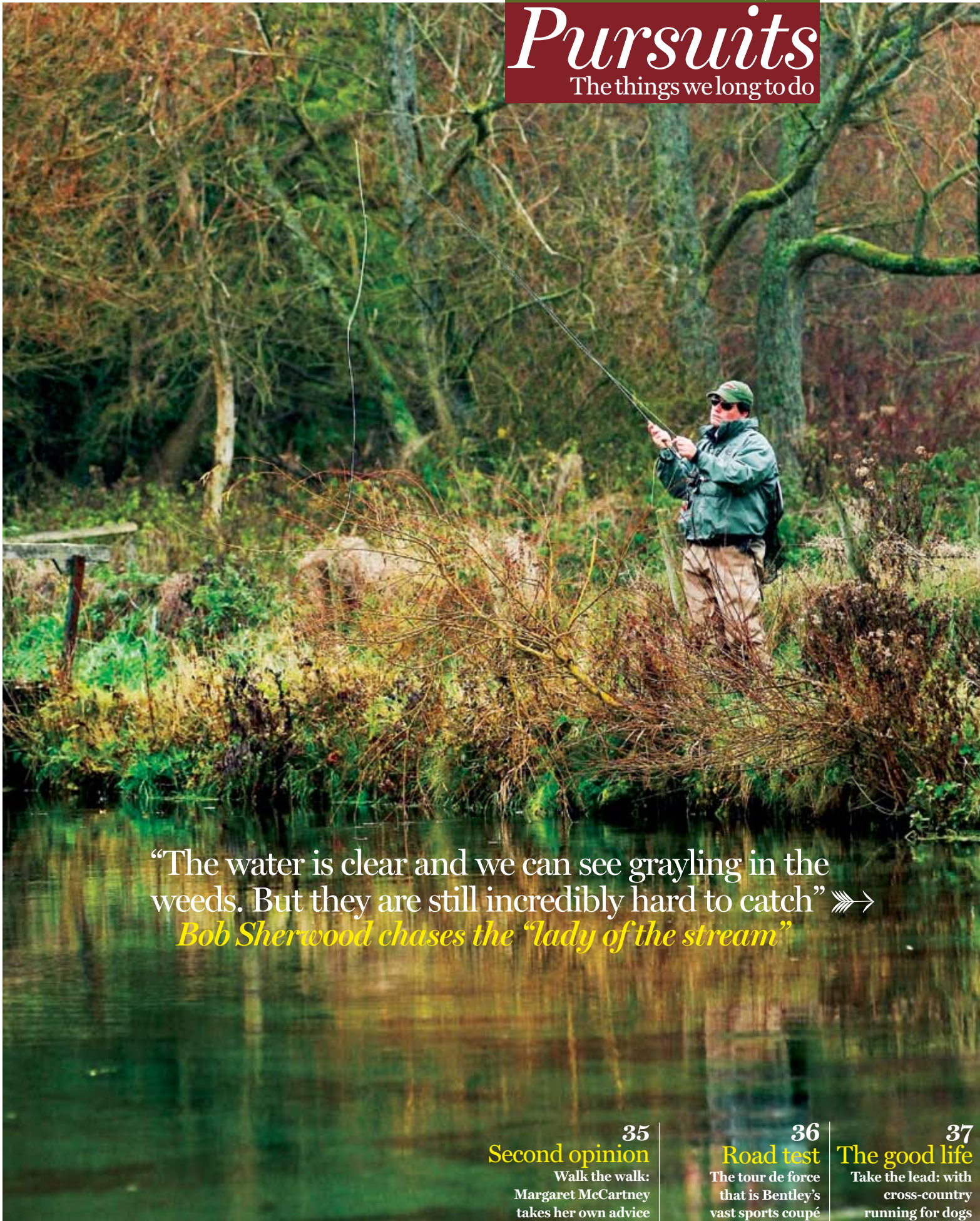


Pursuits

The things we long to do



“The water is clear and we can see grayling in the weeds. But they are still incredibly hard to catch” ➤➤➤
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➤➤ Chalk streams look different in the winter. These limpid rivers of southern England are almost synonymous with summer,

conjuring images of wafting weeds, lush green banks and clouds of hatching insects. But now the trees have shed their leaves, the bankside vegetation has died back and the weak sun struggles to illuminate the gravel bed.

The trout season is long over, but there is another quarry that thrives in these gentle but food-rich waters. It is still in season, and this is the best time of year to tackle it.

Anglers call it the “lady of the stream”, but with its ability to disappear in even the shallowest, clearest water, and to vanish temporarily from whole stretches of river, the grayling seems to me more like the ghost of the stream.

Winter’s bleak skies and short, dark days are good for a spot of ghost hunting. The fact that it is often possible to get on to some of fly fishing’s most celebrated rivers during the off-season – waters that are all but inaccessible or eye-wateringly expensive during the spring and summer – is another powerful draw.

I have been invited by Orvis, the fly-fishing-tackle company, to fish two of its beats on the Hampshire chalk streams, the Test and Itchen. These particular beats are normally closed in winter, so my fishing partner Nick and I have a rare opportunity to try for the undisturbed grayling.

Wading up to the head of the “Ginger Beer Beat” of the Test at Kimbridge, I find a fast, bubbling pool that gives the stretch its name. The deeper water here just screams grayling, and within a few casts my favourite freshwater shrimp imitation is grabbed and the end of my line darts forward.



|||||
***Not to be
 outdone, we
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 water’s edge***

The glint of silver below the surface suggests a grayling fight and the fish soon relents, and is unhooked and released. The colder temperatures of winter tend to concentrate the grayling and where you find one, there are often more. At one point I hook four fish in four casts.

Though they tend not to be as spectacular in their fighting prowess as trout, grayling can seem either ludicrously easy to catch, or incredibly picky in the gentle currents where they can see every fault in the presentation of the fly. As truly wild, indigenous fish, they have a lure for me that artificially stocked fish often lack. And they are beautiful.

At first glance they appear silver, but held beneath the surface for an instant they reveal a surprising blush of golds, blues and pinks on their heads. But their prime characteristic is the outsized rainbow of a dorsal fin, richly red and deeply spotted, which gives them such traction in the current.

Ignored by most chalk stream anglers during the trout season, the grayling has risen in status from a fish that was once considered vermin on these rivers. Indeed, recalling an occasion when he caught 63 grayling in a couple of hours, Frank Sawyer, the renowned riverkeeper on the Wiltshire Avon, wrote in his 1952 book *Keeper of the Stream*: “I could easily have killed a hundred that afternoon, but I got sick of the monotony.”

The next day on the Itchen at Abbots Worthy near Winchester, Nick and I are not about to get bored with the monotony of catching fish. After our bountiful day on the Test, we are struggling. It’s not that there is a shortage of fish. The Itchen is even clearer than the Test and we can see grayling moving between the fronds of weed. In places, this river is an aquarium. The fish are bigger, too.

Pointing out a spot where a 2½lb grayling was caught last summer, John Slader, Orvis head ghillie, tells us: “You might have got more on

(Left) Julia waiting for a "pull"; (below) a "good, chunky grayling", with its distinctive dorsal fin



THE DETAILS

Orvis offers day lettings on two beats of the Test and one on the Itchen, all of which are renowned for fine dry fly trout fishing; www.orvis.co.uk



the Test but the big ones are here in the Itchen."

The fish have been undisturbed since the end of the trout season, and they are obviously unsettled by our presence. They ignore our nymphs, even though we all but bounce them off their noses. When one does rise to take an insect from the surface, I cover it with a dry fly, and get the now-expected rejection.

Only as the fly skates round at the end of its drift do I get a solid pull. An out-of-season brown trout has snaffled it, and puts an unexpected deep bend in my light rod as I try to stop it powering under the far bank. It's an inevitable hazard of winter grayling fishing, but the trout is quickly released and the barbless hook ensures it comes to no harm.

I hope Nick hasn't spotted this fluky capture, so I can pretend it has taken the dry fly properly. But he has, and his laughter lets me know it.

By lunchtime, only Nick's wife Julia (who, rather conveniently, works in the local Orvis store at Stockbridge) has saved our blushes by taking a grayling on a tiny dry fly. Not to be outdone, we go into full commando mode, sneaking, even crawling, up to the water's edge.

The first fish I target, which certainly hasn't seen me, takes the shrimp on the first cast less than a foot out from the bank. Above me, Nick is also playing a fish. And then another one. Confidence returns and we both manage fish nudging 15in in length. These are good, chunky grayling, but not the monsters we've heard about.

At the top of the beat, near where the river flows incongruously under the M3, the fast broken water hides both fish and angler and gives us grayling after grayling as the light fades.

We've not found the mythical three-pounders, but we have rekindled a fascination with a sometimes overlooked fish. Nick, who lives in the heart of chalkstream country but has neglected grayling in recent winters, is particularly fired up. When I phone him a few days after our trip, Julia tells me he's back out on the river, hunting ghosts. ■

Bob Sherwood is the FT's London and south-east correspondent and a qualified fly-casting instructor.

pursuits@ft.com

Second opinion

By Margaret McCartney

“When I suggested, a while back, that walking was fabulous for health, I thought I was giving readers of this column sound advice.

All the evidence suggests that it's good for mental, physical and environmental health, as well as being something many people find pleasurable. Who, I thought, could object?

Well, the man who wrote to tell me that he had tripped over his walking stick and fractured his ankle certainly did. (Sorry about that.) As did the lady who became so enthused by the prospect of reaping all those benefits I had mentioned that she decided to walk everywhere, only to have her bunion become infected – requiring antibiotics and surgical drainage. (I do apologise.) So too, the distinguished editor who,

I understand, is still requiring treatment for foot pain. (Again, *mea culpa*.)

In my defence, I like to think that the benefits to those people who took up walking at my urging outweigh the personal cost to those who sustained painful injuries.

My point is that a newspaper column is not – nor can it ever be – a consulting room. In this column I strive to make it more, rather than less, apparent where medical uncertainties exist. I hope that it also goes some way towards challenging opinion that is not

based on evidence, and perhaps encourages readers to be sceptical of people trying to sell us things.

In the end, though, I have to admit that as I learn more about medicine, it becomes increasingly apparent that it is the cheapest things that tend to work best. Tap water, for example, is better than bottled (not only is its quality highly assured, it is also better for the environment). Home-made food tends to be both cheaper and lower in salt and fat than most take-away or preprocessed meals. And isn't it better not to squander lots of money on gym membership or personal trainers when a perfectly good workout can be effected on a regular old pavement?

Perhaps not. I suspect that in taking a leaf out of my own book, I could make some useful New Year's resolutions. How on earth can I assume that anyone has walked any beneficial yards at my behest when I have no evidence to support that claim? And if I follow my own argument that one should question anything that claims to be a universal panacea, I must accept that even something as wonderful, cheap and accessible as walking might still result in unreasonable side effects for some. Next year, then, I will try to be cautious about even the most seemingly sensible suggestion.

Happy New Year.
Margaret McCartney is a GP in Glasgow.
margaret.mccartney@ft.com

For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at blogs.ft.com/mccartney



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