

Catfishing with Leeches and a 'Pivotal' New Rig!

Keith Lambert

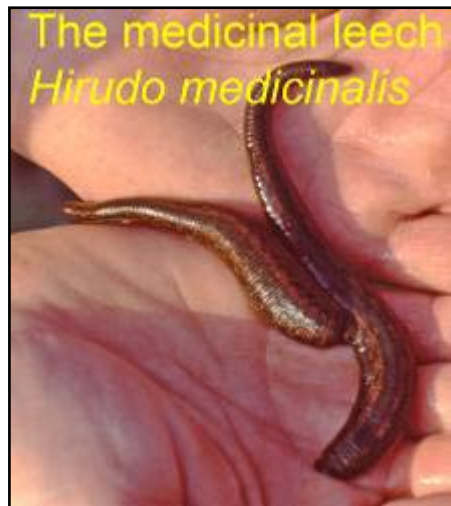
The Wels catfish is one of the fish world's greatest and most adaptable scavengers and will eat almost anything! Like many fish, the bulk of its diet will consist of the easiest or most commonly available food source and this will vary from water to water. Heavily carp fished waters will see large quantities of boilies and pellets introduced, other waters may be heavily stocked with crayfish or mussels all of which are food items readily eaten by catfish. So how do we make a decision when it comes to selecting a bait for targeting a species with such eclectic tastes? Well, for me at least, one bait reigns supreme; livebait. There is not a catfish alive that won't take a lively even where their diet may largely comprise angler's baits and other natural food items. Despite their well documented scavenging tendencies they are by instinct, natural born predators. On many venues however the use of livebaits is banned. Why fishery owners create waters specifically for catfishing and then stop you using the best and most natural method to catch them has always angered me and is something that influences me strongly when I come to choosing fisheries and clubs.

There is a bait however that complies fully with any restrictions and can offer a really great alternative to baiting with a live fish – the European medicinal leech; *Hirudo medicinalis*. Leech fishing can be a very effective and at times devastating method for catching catfish and is a technique that I have been using for many years. The best thing about fishing with them is that they can be considered a catfish exclusive bait, I don't know if it is their unique swimming action or the scent of blood that makes them attractive to cats but one thing's for sure they can be a very valuable catfish bait that other species ignore. I have heard of one angler catching a carp on them and a Hungarian friend of mine once caught a pike on a leech but they are very, very rarely taken by other species and personally, I have only ever caught cats with them. I know American predator anglers sometimes use a type of leech principally for walleye but these are generally used as a 'lure' that is cast and retrieved (a bit like a jelly worm) rather than static legered which is the most popular method used by English catfish anglers.



My first experience with leeches came in 1991 at Schnakensee, a large and popular day ticket lake in Bavaria. This venue drew anglers from all over Southern Germany to fish for its good head of catfish that ran to about 150lb which in the early nineties was a huge cat by any standards. One of the commonly used baits were 'Blutegals' (blood leeches) these were purchased from the on-site tackle shop and despite their high price of 6 Deutsch Marks each (about 2 quid in old money) anglers crammed as many as they could afford onto big catfish hooks and legered them as far as they could cast. Despite this somewhat crude approach I witnessed several catfish captures and many more lost by anglers using them and I resolved to bring some home and try them at my local catfish waters. To be honest, I didn't find them very successful on most of the venues I fished and they were so prone to tangling that I soon gave up and returned to the more popular baits of the time.

Around the early nineties I spread my wings even further and started fishing for cats in the old Eastern Bloc countries including Russia and Romania and it was here that I encountered many specialist catfish anglers; tales were often exchanged (usually in some form of pidgin English as we had few common languages) and the subject of bait was covered fully and enthusiastically, one of the recurring themes was of course the use of leeches and how they were highly regarded as a catfish bait 'par excellence'; my interest in them was soon rekindled. Back in England, I decided to give the little suckers a proper go and managed to get hold of some horse leeches from a friend who collected them in a local stream. These were generally bigger and tougher than the medicinal species and I thought would work well – wrong! I don't know why but despite using them on and off for many seasons I have still never caught a catfish on a horse leech. I am not saying that you can't catch on them but just that for me at least they have been totally useless. At the time I didn't realise that the bait itself was the problem and just assumed that fishing with leeches didn't work well in the UK, again I shelved them and returned to my old favourites.



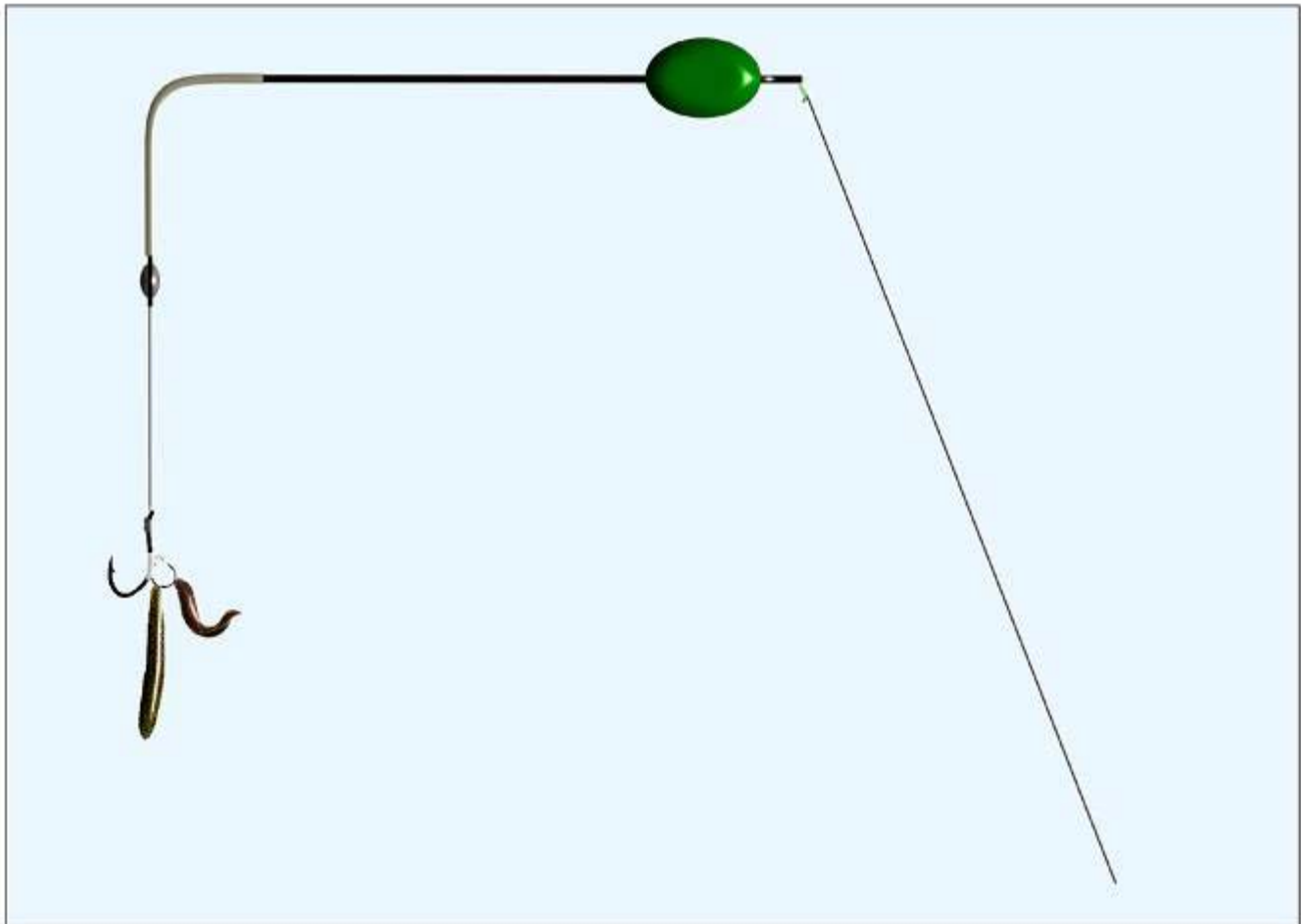
Some years later, I was again becoming intrigued by the leeches and decided to have another crack with them only this time I would use the medicinal kind and I was determined to persevere with them. I ordered some from Biopharm in Wales who are the World's leading producer of leeches for the medical profession and have been supplying them since Napoleonic times. I wasn't at all happy with any of the rigs that I had previously seen or tried so my first aim was to 'invent' a rig that gave a decent presentation and was as far as I could ensure tangle free.

The first version was a variation on the standard popped up worm rig that my friends and I had used successfully for years. This was a very basic leger rig which featured a hook length with a small cork or poly ball on it (later versions had the ball tied to a lengthened hair rig). This was pushed up onto the eye of the hook to provide buoyancy and with the help of either split shot or tungsten putty it was anchored to fish about a foot off bottom. The hook was the finest (yet still relatively strong) large hook available at that time which was the Cox & Rawle Uptide Extra sea fishing hook. Two or three leeches were lightly nicked onto a size 2/0. After fishing, it was sometimes possible by carefully crushing the barb to remove them with only a small amount of damage. This enabled them to be re-used which was important as they cost around £6 each – that's about 20 quid for a hook full! A few cats were caught on this method and although I still had lots to learn, my confidence in leech fishing was slowly growing. Tangles unfortunately were still commonplace and I was getting far too many wasted sessions where I reeled in a ball of bait, rig and anything else the little buggers could attach themselves too. As a friend of mine so correctly put it "An attached leech is a useless leech"! I needed to look again at rigs.

The target I set myself was to devise a rig that would present a bait at any depth (although usually close to the bottom) that was as near tangle proof as possible and allowed the leeches to swim rather than just hang limply or curl up in a snotty ball, most importantly they shouldn't be able to attach themselves to the hook link, mainline or any submerged debris like weeds, or leaves. After some thought, I realised that the best way to keep the baited hook away from the mainline was to incorporate some kind of boom which if used with a shortish hook link would prevent the leeches from swimming back on themselves and reaching the mainline. A couple of mates of mine Trev Pritchard and Rich Gardner were also trying leeches at around this time and had some success on a rig that looked like a little mini dumbbell rig of around 3" or so and involved covering the entire hook link with silicon tubing which was pushed over the eye of the hook, this stiffened everything up and helped stop some of the tangles. Personally, I was never entirely happy with this rig or other similar styles that I have seen since, primarily because when you submerge a dumbbell rig, contrary to popular belief it doesn't sit horizontal but pops virtually upright with the hook link hanging alongside it; this to my mind is not a good presentation. I have actually read accounts where some anglers recommend fishing standard livebait dumbbell rigs submerged – it doesn't work!

The dumbbell style of rig was still on my mind however so I messed around with it and by adding a weight at the hook end it could be more or less balanced so that it sat parallel to the lake bed and the hook length was automatically 'thrown' away from the mainline, if the hook link was shorter than the length of the dumbbell, there is no way that the leeches could get back to the mainline and by using a stiff

mono, it became almost impossible for them to reach the actual rig body too, - progress was being made. After several outings with the new rig, I encountered another glitch. Depending on the size (and therefore weight) of the hook and the number of leeches, the amount of weight added to the rig needed to be altered to achieve the correct balance and horizontal presentation that I was looking for, I needed to tweak things a little more and decided that rather than vary the weight, I would look at the rig body itself. The 'dumbbell style' rig was replaced with a length of stiff 'boom tube' of around 6-8" that had a single foam ball or egg on it. This 'popper' was slid tightly onto the tubing but could with a good push be moved up and down the tube to create a counterbalance against the weight. I could now adjust the rig infinitely and by sliding the buoyant foam body closer or further from the weight it acted as a fulcrum which allowed the boom to pivot and achieve any angle that I wanted on the rig regardless of hook or bait size. I don't think that it is imperative to have the rig completely horizontal but it works well in this manner and is easily achieved just by changing the pivot point. I was more than happy with this presentation and as long as the cast was 'braked' gently just before it hit the water, I found it to be almost 100% tangle free. Obviously the cats were also happy, as I started catching consistently and from a variety of waters too. I christened this rig the Pivot Leech Rig for obvious reasons.





The new rig was working well although I still needed to tweak it a little more.

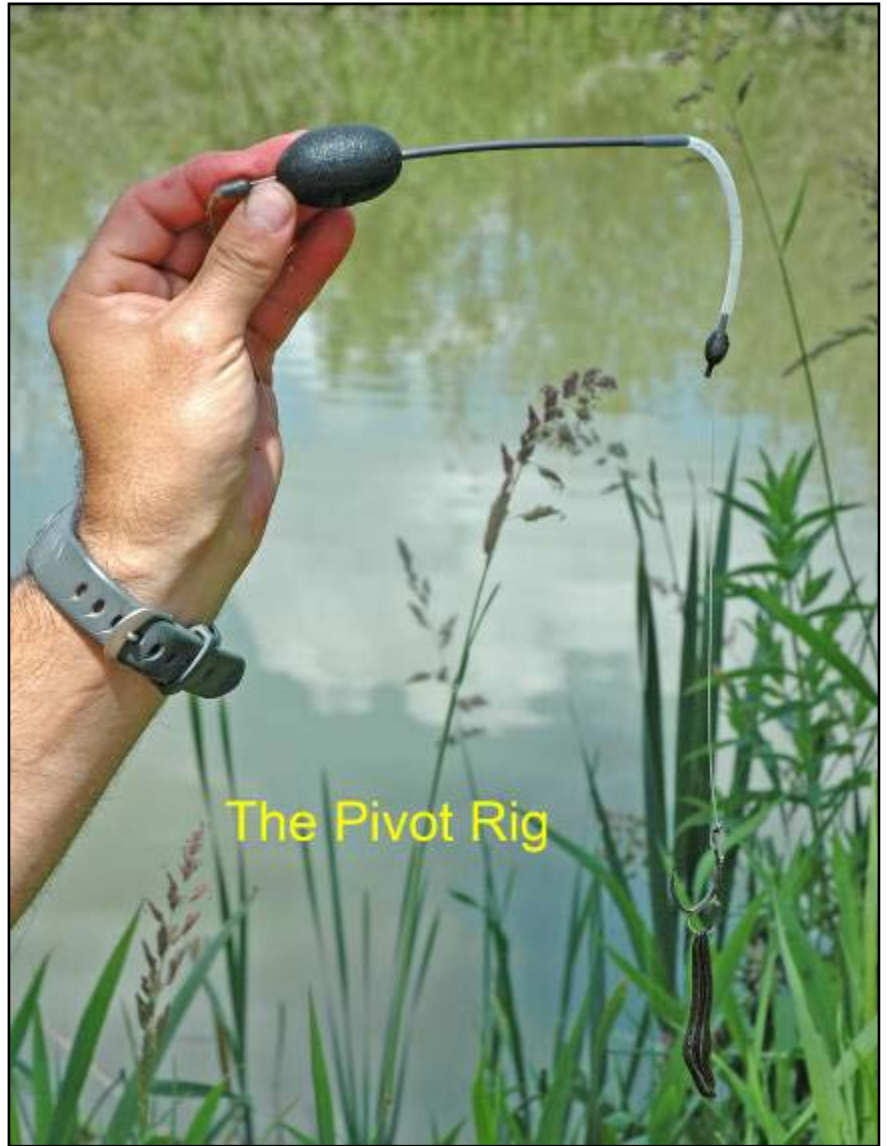
When I fished the Pivot close to the bottom, I sometimes found that the leeches; which are incredibly strong swimmers for their size managed to tip the rig up a little which enabled them to reach the bottom. I only discovered this when on one particular lake I fished I was finding clay on my hook when I retrieved it. The answer was to trap the rig body in place with a power gum stop knot and to tie up a hook link of around three feet which meant that when I tightened up to the lead the whole rig would pop up about 20" and the baited hook which hung below the buoyant boom would end up around a 10" off the bottom, even 'super leeches'

couldn't drag the rig down into the mud from there! Of course the rig doesn't have to be fished close to the bottom; it can be very effective when allowed to pop up to mid-water or even in the surface layers at certain times of the season the beauty being that it will always sit at the angle that you have set it at by using the foam body as the pivot point.



The last modification I made was to the hook. I was never really happy with the lightweight Cox & Rawle hook which as I mentioned earlier, I was really only using to try and salvage the expensive leeches after fishing. At around this time however, I noticed that carp anglers were often using quantities of very small baits such as maggots which were being attached to the hooks in multiples using a new item on the market called a Maggot Clip – this was exactly what I was looking for and I quickly purchased all available sizes of the ones made by Korda. The clips were in effect a small and neat ‘round safety pin’ with a very light and sharp needle that could be just nicked into the sucker of a leech causing minimal damage and allowing removal and re-use of the baits above all it allowed me to use a quality catfish hook.

After much experimentation I found that the larger size clips could be ‘piggy backed’ onto the shank of a decent sized and strong hook such as the



Maruto Eagle Wave. These were held securely in place with a small length of shrink tube and I now carry a good selection of ready prepared hooks and clips which can be used for leeches, worms and even small livebaits.



This modified Pivot Leech Rig incorporating the leech clips is pretty much the one I still use today although I up-rate the hook link material every couple of seasons as bigger and bigger cats are targeted. I currently use 44lb Catfish-Pro Toughlink fluorocarbon which is suitably stiff and very durable. I am pleased to say that I have enjoyed quite some success with this rig and method over the years and now see my rig or at least versions of it being copied or used by others – although mostly wrongly or poorly I should add which is why I thought it time to spill the beans with this article! I am sure that other anglers will modify this rig further still and if it works for them then great but I can assure you that The Pivot Leech Rig is a proven fish catcher and another very useful weapon in the catfish angler's armoury – good luck with it.



63lb - Pivot Rig Success



Everything you wanted to know about the European medicinal leech (and probably a few things you didn't!)

- The medicinal leech is the only species found in the UK that is capable of sucking human blood.
- Medicinal leeches are amphibious and can move overland between ponds and marshes.
- Leech saliva contains anticoagulants (Hirudin), anaesthetic and possibly antibiotics.
- Medicinal leeches carry both male and female sex organs and mate on land.
- Hirudotherapy is widely used in medicine to restore blood flow after surgery.
- Wild medicinal leeches are protected in the UK. Only farmed leeches are used for catfish bait.
- The medicinal leech has suckers at both ends and five pairs of eyes at the 'head' end.
- The natural diet of the medicinal leech is the blood of amphibians, birds and mammals.
- One meal (which may take over an hour) is sufficient to last a leech for six months.
- Wild medicinal leeches find their food by reacting to shadows and vibrations.
- The Hirudo leech has 32 brains, 3 jaws and 300 teeth
- Leeches can increase their body size up to ten times with one meal of blood.