In the UK there exists a fundamental division between coarse fishing and game fishing in freshwater recreational angling. Coarse fish are opposed to game fish in a rather neat binary opposition. The former are species such as carp, tench, rudd, bream, pike and perch, together with a host of others. The latter, game fish, are primarily just two species: trout and salmon. A social division mirrors this difference in the type of fish caught. Coarse fishing has traditionally been associated with the working classes and game fishing with the middle or upper classes, although such a division is now fragmenting. Types of rods used and techniques also differ fundamentally, as do types of bait. Coarse fish are taken with ‘natural’ bait that may be any mixture of bread, worms or any number of other materials (see below) whereas game fishing is undertaken by using artificial and preferably hand-made flies with a myriad of forms (for a discussion of the semiotics of fly fishing see Van Den Broek 1984; see Douglas 2003 for a discussion of the gendered and class basis of fly fishing). Coarse fishing in which the fish are kept in nets and then returned to the water, irrespective of size, rather than being eaten, is a peculiarly British cultural tradition and as far as we are aware does not occur elsewhere in Europe apart from Ireland.

Fishing on the heathlands is exclusively coarse fishing and takes place only on the Squabmoor reservoir, located in the southern part of the Pebblebed heathlands. This reservoir was constructed between 1864 and 1867 to provide drinking water to the rapidly developing seaside resort of Exmouth, replacing local boreholes providing brackish water (Delderfield 1948). This supply was replaced in 1909 by borehole
supplies from Dotton, near to the River Otter. Since then this facility has been used solely for recreational purposes, principally coarse fishing.

The reservoir, approximately triangular in shape, is 500 m long and 250 m in width at the widest point.

The dam at the southern end has drowned a shallow valley with a stream flowing south through it to reach the sea at Budleigh Salterton. Covering four acres, it ranges in depth between 2 m at the shallow and narrow end to nearly 9 m by the dam wall. There is a small overflow channel at the western end. Today the reservoir is managed by South West Lakes Trust. Daily or season fishing permits are available for purchase. Around twenty-five persons have annual season tickets; others purchase daily or twenty-four-hour permits on an irregular basis. Coarse fish present include carp, crucian carp, tench, bream, roach, rudd, perch and eel. There are also a few trout left from an initial stocking of the reservoir as a trout fishery. There are fifteen swims (fishing places) around the narrow end and both sides of the reservoir, together with others along the dam wall. So there is a maximum capacity for about fifteen persons, or more if they share a swim. Usually there are no more than ten or so present. Fishing is permitted throughout the year and by day or night. There are small car parking facilities off a minor public road crossing the heathlands 500 m to the north and next to the dam wall, approached by

Figure 10.1  Squabmoor reservoir looking north
a rough track from Dotton Farm 750 m to the south-east. Regular anglers prefer this place because they can keep an eye on their vehicles, prone to thieves on the other car park, which is out of sight.

This tranquil and beautiful spot on the heathlands is popular with not only anglers but walkers and also cyclists and horse riders. There used to be a path going round the entire lake but it has been blocked off on part of the western side after an accident when a disabled person slipped off the muddy bank into a considerable depth of water and had to be rescued. Groups other than anglers are not permitted to use the track running beside the reservoir on the eastern side because of erosion but follow a higher track running along the valley side with views across the water. The RM do not train in the vicinity of the reservoir, although their presence on East Budleigh Common to the north can often be heard. The main problem the anglers had in the past was from mountain bikers speeding down the eastern side of the reservoir, a route that has now been blocked off with stiles. Their contemporary problem is with dog walkers exercising animals off the lead and actively encouraging or permitting their dogs to go into the lake. This is the main potential source of conflict today.

The principal user group consists of local anglers from Exmouth, only a few kilometres away, who come to fish here on a regular basis. People also come to fish here occasionally from elsewhere in Devon – Exeter, Newton Abbot and Plymouth – but also as far away as Cornwall and Bristol in the south-west, and beyond – Birmingham and London – mainly during holiday periods. Some camp out overnight in small tents beside the water’s edge. Their rods are fitted with alarms and they wear monitors on their belts or in their pockets so they can be woken up at night should a fish decide to bite.

Although there are a wide range of different kinds of fish at Squabmoor it is the presence of the carp (common carp, Cyprinus carpio) and Crucian carp (Carassius carassius) that provides the main attraction for both the anglers who live in the vicinity and those who travel here to fish from further afield. The common carp is originally from central and eastern Europe but has been domesticated and reared as a food fish in ponds across Europe since the medieval period, and in the UK have become naturalized since then. As a sport fish they are highly prized, because of their size and the skill required to catch them. The UK has a thriving carp angling market with a number of specialized magazines, such as Carpology, books and dedicated websites such as CarpForum and Carpfishing UK. To dedicated carp specialists the carp is no ordinary coarse fish but has an elite status and importance, with special rods, bait
and tactics being used, and indeed the sport has its own heroes, myths and stories (e.g. Lane 2011 and Green 2014).

The local Squabmoor fishing community have an intimate knowledge of the reservoir where they fish and actively work to enhance the locality and maintain the fishing. They have built most of the swims (fishing places) next to the reservoir, shoring them up and covering them with bark chippings, providing the materials at their own expense. It is here that they pitch the tents they use for night fishing. Apart from the RM, Squabmoor fishermen are the only people allowed to camp out on the heathlands. Together with the bailiff, who also works on a voluntary basis, they police the area informally. Fishing here is mainly a male pursuit although wives and girlfriends may accompany them sometimes. The locals have individual names for their swims: ‘Birches’ or ‘Dead Man’s,’ ‘Sheriff’s,’ ‘Flyn’s,’ ‘Boards,’ ‘Pines,’ ‘Snags’, etc.

These are named either after the physical characteristics of the place, such as the presence of birch trees or pines, or in relation to individual fishermen. ‘Dead Man’s’ is named because the ashes of a dead fisherman were spread here, ‘Flyn’s’ after another fisherman who loved this place, etc. A map on a signboard by the reservoir, produced by a local fisherman, details sixteen places.

A map by one of the fishermen is a detailed drawing of the Squabmoor reservoir showing the depths of the lake and named fishing
Figure 10.3  Geoff’s map of Squabmoor
places, together with the car parking area and tracks running alongside it. The largest fish and their names and weights are listed on this map.

There is no best swim. Whether or not one might be successful at one swim or another is heavily dependent on the season and time of day, and fishermen tend to move around between them rather than returning to just one favoured spot. In the winter, between November and April, the fish tend to go down to the warmer bottom parts of the lake and become largely inactive. During the summer they will move around a lot more and rise to the surface. Some local fishermen also walk elsewhere on the Pebblebed heathlands occasionally but for all this is their favourite and most important place, where they spend a great deal of their free time. Some have fished here on a regular basis for twenty or thirty or more years. A passion for fishing at Squabmoor is also generational. Their fathers first took some of the contemporary anglers here to fish. The daughter of the current bailiff was even conceived here and a swim is now named after her!

The intimacy of the fishermen’s knowledge of this stretch of water extends from the surrounding banks down to the depths of the reservoir. In general terms the eastern side is deeper than the western side. Running approximately down the centre is a narrow gravel bar where the water is less deep. Some, such as a fisherman named Geoff, have made detailed depth recordings of the entire bottom surface of the lake, recorded in notebooks and on plans. This is secret and personal knowledge essential for successful bottom fishing.

The affection for Squabmoor relates on the one hand to the quality of the experience of fishing that it provides and, on the other hand, to the place itself. The carp here are said to be particularly wily and difficult to catch, partly because the larger ones have been caught so many times. A fisherman can come here on many occasions and have no success. Precisely because of this the Squabmoor waters offer a real challenge and a test of the fisherman’s experience and knowledge. To actually catch a carp here is then no mean achievement and directly reflects the individual prowess of the fisherman and their skill: ‘It’s a hard place to fish, it’s not an easy place. You can sit up here weeks on end without a fish. I think I’ve had seven sessions, twenty-four-hour sessions, without a fish, which is good because if it were easy you wouldn’t do it’ (Richard, fisherman).

The place itself is equally important. Locals regard it as ‘their’ fishing place and are proud of the improvements they have made and the way they have maintained it. Despite the fact that people do come to fish here from beyond the immediate locality Squabmoor is still a relatively secret and unknown place in the wider UK carp fishing world. They also
An AnThropology of lAnDsCApe

consider it to be a small and intimate place, unlike larger and better-known carp lakes, nestling in the midst of an AONB. Fishermen come here to be away from the crowd and for the peace and quiet the area affords. They enjoy the scenery and the wildlife that surround it: deer, squirrels, coots and moorhens, kingfishers and other water birds, dragonflies: ‘I wake up and look out at this and this is my front room. What a fantastic front room … I think it’s fantastic, absolutely fantastic’ (Anthony). While the fishermen are here ostensibly to hook the carp, the location effectively hooks them. They enjoy the landscape as much as the fishing sitting out by the lake.

Fishing at Squabmoor combines bonds of friendship and sociability between those who come to fish here on a regular basis. There is no fishing club as such but those who come to fish here regularly behave informally like members of a club, chatting to each other on a regular basis and helping each other out. This is combined with a keen competitive edge whose principle aspect is secrecy:

If I’m fishing and everything is going well and I’m catching fish, my bait, my rig, my location is working, I don’t want to give my secrets away. I’ll help anyone. But when you have something that works you don’t want to give that away because the fish start getting wiser and wiser but if you keep it to yourself or just a couple of you, that tactic will work longer.

(Squabmoor fisherman)

Baits used include fishmeal-based boilies, maggots, sweetcorn and halibut pellets. But which particular bait works varies according to the season, fishing technique, and the location of the swim. While some fishermen at Squabmoor purchase ready-made bait others prefer to mix their own, according to secret formulae including additives such as casein (milk protein), anchovy, liver powder, semolina, egg albumin, bird food mixes, brewer’s yeast and even peppers and spices. The aim of these additives is to give off as strong as possible a food signal to the carp and make the bait irresistible to them, stimulating the really big fish into feeding. Carp have good vision, more sensitive to changing light levels than humans, effective hearing capable of detecting frequencies from 60 to 6,000 Hz, a keen sense of smell, an excellent sense of taste and can feel a hook and not take the bait. The visibility of the bait and its smell, taste and colour may all be significant considerations in bait mixes.

Bait may only be one small factor in success. Other variables include the way the bait is presented, the type and size of hook and line and the
The wATery pursuiT of ‘peTs’

rod used, weather conditions, wind direction and water temperature. Taking all these factors into consideration carp fishing can seem akin to a form of alchemy, well suited to modern myth-making. There is no such thing as the best rig, or equipment, that can assure success. Carp tend to feed in places where they feel safe. As a consequence a ‘hot spot’ where there have been successful catches in the recent past may go completely cold. The fascination of carp fishing thus involves a battle of wills between the fish and the angler. It involves both material resources (rod, hook, bait type, etc.) and immaterial knowledges relating to such matters as the particular location, surface and underwater vegetation and characteristics of the lake bottom. Acute observation of surface signs may be useful: these include feeding bubbles, swirls or water movements on the lake surface. Observation of where and how other people are fishing and the tactics used will also be invaluable, as are camouflage and concealment tactics on the part of the angler. In this respect there is a certain symmetry between the RM and the Squabmoor fishermen, with the difference being that the enemy that the RM engage in their fire-fights and training exercises on Woodbury Common is fictional, while the carp are real.

The carp fishermen at Squabmoor know, more or less, how many carp live in the lake: between seventy and ninety. Of these about twenty are large carp, over 20 lbs in weight. They have no equivalent knowledge of any other species of fish. Size is paramount in carp fishing, rather than quantity: the greater the weight of the fish the better it is deemed to be. The ultimate prize is to catch the largest fish in the lake. The really big carp all have proper names and are referred to as the ‘A Team’. They are the ‘Big Common’, weighing in at 35 lb 8 oz, ‘The Pig’ (30 lbs 10 oz), ‘Bob’ (29 lbs 8 oz), ‘Silver Common’ (28 lbs), ‘Lumpy’ (27 lbs 8 oz), ‘The Leather’ (27 lbs) and the ‘Middle Common’ (26 lbs 8 oz). Geoff has caught all these over the past few years and the weights refer to the last time they were caught by him. He, like other experienced local fishermen, has lots of photographic records of the fish he has caught and a log where he records the catch, details of the location, water temperature, depth and so on. Carp can live for fifty years or more and each has its own individual characteristics, differing in terms of shape and size. ‘The Pig’, for example, has a slightly deformed mouth, looking somewhat pig-like. ‘Popeye’, one of the smaller carp, has distinctive eyes that stick right out. Unique scale patterns distinguish other fish. Local fishermen can tell exactly what fish it is because of its size and weight and the scale patterning along the body, which can vary considerably. Common carp tend to have an even and regular scale pattern whereas mirror carp (a genetic mutation)
have irregular and patchy scaling making them unique and distinctive. For example, ‘The D Scale’ in Squabmoor has distinctive scales in the shape of the letter D. Some have a continuous line of scales along their lateral line, others may be covered in differently sized scales. Some with ‘starburst’ patterns have hundreds of tiny scales around the tail or belly; others may have one or more giant scales that may be clustered together. Leather carp have only a few scales.

Some of the large carp at Squabmoor are more than thirty years old. The two largest common carp originate from Cannock reservoir in Staffordshire. They were introduced here in the 1980s and have been here ever since. If an important and large carp is caught it is weighed and a photograph is taken of it held by the fisherman, witnessed by the bailiff or a friend or fellow fisherman in the vicinity to provide verification. It is then examined, treated with antiseptic cream if injured or damaged in any way with sores, leeches or cut marks, and then released. The carp have difficulty in breeding in Squabmoor but the fishermen do not at present want to run the risk of having it restocked, given the potential this has to introduce diseases or stress for the original fish. The more carp in the lake the less each fish would have to eat and they would not grow so large.

The carp in the lake with their own personal names are treated like pets. Fishermen are concerned if they do not look healthy, use cream to cure their ailments, and take pride in seeing them grow larger and larger:

They’re like my babies! Yes they are! If someone catches a fish and they’ve got sores on it or whatever and its down in weight it’s a worrying time and everyone starts to worry … my boy is catching fish that I was catching twenty years ago. And when one of the big ones does die it is very sad, when any of them do really. It’s a sad time because to me it’s history. Yes, it’s history. You are losing part of history.

(Anthony, fisherman)

If a fish doesn’t get caught for three or four years it goes on a missing list. Fish found dead are buried by the bailiff in a graveyard (unmarked) that he has established to the south of the reservoir.

The fish are not only distinctive physically. They also have their own characteristics. Some fight differently from others when hooked; some like particular areas of the lake at different times of year; some are extremely wily, others a bit dim: ‘Fish are like humans: some are clever and some are stupid. And we are all different sizes aren’t we? Big people
and small people and some in the middle. And it’s like that with fish. Some fish will never grow up to be big fish’ (John, fisherman).

**Conclusions**

The most significant thing about fishing at Squabmoor is clearly the manner in which the biographies of the fish are linked to those of the fishermen. Their histories and lives are intertwined and this is both a personal and an emotional relationship: the fish are precious. This is only possible in the intimate arena of a small lake. Most do not go sea fishing or game fishing for trout or salmon because it requires a different ‘mentality’ and the relationship with the fish caught is necessarily of a different kind: it could not be personal. To catch and eat one of these carp would be quite abhorrent and some fishermen commented with disgust and incredulity that people from other ethnic groups, such as Poles, did not share the same attitude: they ‘just eat them. It’s not about the money. They just eat them’ (Mark, fisherman). Elsewhere they said they’d been to carp-fishing waters with fences and security guards and signs on a gate saying ‘No Polish or Eastern Bloc’.

The lake, through time, becomes part of the bodily memories of the fishermen, memories that are preserved in photographs of themselves and the fish that they have caught, in their fishing logs and diaries and also in photographs of the lake itself taken at different times and in different seasons: in mist, with ice, in a dappled dawn sunrise. Regular fishermen establish close personal relationships with others and a shared understanding of and relationship to the fish that they consider as being theirs in exactly the same way as a dog and its owner. Taking care of the fish and the place is a way of taking care of themselves and showing respect for non-human beings. Their embodied experience of landscape is largely static. The rod, as is the case for cyclists’ bikes, becomes a sensuous extension of their embodied experience, connecting them with the fish in the water below them. The fishermen sit in their chosen swim and observe the water and its ever-changing myriad forms.

Looking out across the lake theirs is always a limited horizon seen from a low place. That which is mainly out of sight, the fish, is as important as what they can see on the surface and they must imagine the depths below them. Their contact with this watery realm is mediated by the technologies of rod and line and hook and bait that become extensions of their own bodies. Above all the Squabmoor fishermen have
made this place their home. Their attachment to it differs significantly from their relationship to the rest of the heathlands and from other user groups, whose relationship with the Pebblebed landscape is both more transitory and more mobile, apart from the model aircraft flyers and their relationship with their dedicated flying field, discussed in the following chapter.

Figure 10.4  Carp fisherman at Squabmoor