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River Dee fishing, conservation efforts]



Netting stops, fishing improves. Sound familiar?

On a great Scotland river, conservation replaces apathy.

Text and photos by Sam Caldwell

Fishermen are much the same all over the world, and we face many of the same challenges when it comes to the resources we cherish. Scotland, with its grand sporting heritage, provides us with a unique opportunity to explore how conservation challenges are met in other parts of the world. On a great Scotland river, conservation has replaced apathy and the success story will be familiar to coastal Americans. Mark Bilsby is River Director of the Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and River Dee Trust. On a recent trip back to his ancestral homeland, CCA staffer Sam Caldwell sat down for an interview with Bilsby and received a tour of the River Dee region. — Editor

A YANK visiting his motherland for a few days in early April can fish the River Dee in Scotland in sunshine and snow. I know because I got to enjoy both at once as snow from the previous night drifted down from the Scottish highlands. Quite an experience for an

angler used to triple-digit heat and humidity on the Texas coast.

On that glorious trip, I was watching lanky Irishman Gavin MacLean wield a Spey fly rod, doing well enough with his roll casts to keep a fly bouncing along the submerged rocks, in the business zone for big spring salmon. Me, the Yank and a novice to boot with a long-handled, heavy-reeled 15-foot rod, drew grimaces from Archie Hay, our ghillie. It was his rod. He shouted instructions and encouragement.

The Yank improves his casting, but loses his footing. At noon-thirty, he faces a choice: stumble about in rushing, icy water on submerged bowling balls, or collect photographs and sketches of magnificent scenery. As he climbs onto the snow-slippery bank and unlimbers his camera, a fine fish grabs MacLean's fly. The fish leaps from the river again and again, forcing the Irishman to move with it downstream,

rod high.

Finally, the ghillie nets it, shrugs, and is disappointed.

"Tis only a large brown trout, lad," he says. As it is released for further duty, the ghillie explains his disappointment. "Was hopin' it would be a wee fish."

A wee fish? On the Dee, a 'fish' is salmo salar, from the Latin words "Salmo" meaning salmon, and "salar" meaning "leaper." All others — brown trout, seatrout, rainbows and grilse, no matter how big and fine — are incidental catches to fishermen who come from around the world to fish for Dee salmon.

The decline of salmon has been a rallying cry for Scot conservation. If that sounds familiar to a coastal American, it should. After dwindling in numbers for 30 years, the mighty salmon is returning to the River Dee in a success story that rivals the victories enjoyed by CCA.



PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

I visited with Mark Bilsby, a professional conservationist for the Dee. He is the River Director of the Dee District Salmon Fishery Board and River Dee Trust. Bilsby explained that 10 years back, nets were taken out of the river and from the coastal estuaries.

"Stringent management policies were put in place in the 1990s," he said, "and a voluntary catch-and-release policy so most fish caught are returned to the river. Then, in 2004, the big Northumberland drift nets were taken off the northeast coast of England."

Bilsby said that unlike GCCA programs of the 1970s that outlawed monofilament netting, the Scot owners were paid market value for their fisheries.

"With nets out, and catch-and-release in effect the last 10 years, a lot of salmon got back out to sea, and had a good chance of spawning again," he said.

As in coastal America, funding has been critical for the conservation effort in Scotland.

International initiatives bring together Europe, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Norway. The goal is to bring all these groups into agreement to control the exploitation of salmon, whether in local estuaries, on the coastline or on international high seas.

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"International organizations raise money — private money, money from private fishery boards — to buy out the nets, take them out of use, retire them," Bilsby said. "But limiting exploitation



is just one side of the equation. For the repair quotient, we'll take a Texas Yank around to look at some work on the tributaries."

The Scots consider the river Dee a production line. A lot of money is being invested in tributary improvement, growing-on space for the fry and parr, as they become smolts. As smolts, each salmon spends three years in fresh water before going out to sea. So, the main job is to try and put as many smolts as possible to sea.

"The problem is, there's often not suitable habitat for the little fish," said Bilsby. "Intensive forestry and agriculture causes lots of siltation. But, we're

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courting an important new partner, the farmer."

Bilsby drives us around rolling farmlands to view several 'burns,' the small tributaries that feed the River Dee. At one road turn, two cock pheasants square off in front of the Land Rover. Bilsby veers around the confrontation.

"Handsome birds, but they have only two brain cells, and one is always out of order," Bilsby laughs. "Unlike pheasants, Scot farmers are keen. They help us with our most serious problems, which is siltation from fields, damage to stream banks, shadowed streams. The silt here on the Beltie Burn was filling up the spawning gravels, which smothered the eggs. Many died over the winter. The other problem with siltation is, when salmon parr are about one year old, they become very territorial fish, and have a fight. So, a really good salmon habitat has lots of cobbles and boulders. Each fish has its own habitat, its own territory."

One of the major predators in the area — and Bilsby asked me not to take

it the wrong way — is the North American mink, brought over by the fur trade and spawned in the valley. Of course, the mink behaved exactly as they would in the states; they take large numbers of juvenile fish.

Like all good conservation plans, to put all the pieces together requires money and organization.

"The River Dee Trust is a charitable organization that looks for donations from all people. We raise money from fishing proprietors, from auctions and donations," Bilsby said. "In November, Howard Butterworth opens an exhibition that will benefit Dee river programs. A highly respected artist, he is allocating a large portion of the proceeds to the River Dee Trust."

The biggest problem facing the Dee? Apathy. Just like CCA has found, if people don't care about their rivers, their coasts, and the fish stocks they contain, then the fish and the rivers and the coasts won't get looked after.

"With outreach, we start at an early age. School programs teach the youngsters about life cycles, the animals in the river. Ghillies take them fishing. They meet the little fish and other river creatures, see how they are adapted to their environment," said Bilsby. "We talk to Farmers Unions, rotary clubs, anyone who'll listen to us for 20 minutes. In Scotland, one thing travels faster than the speed of light, and that's news and gossip between farmers. They've lived here for generations, so if there's good news or bad news they share it."

GOOD NEWS

The good news being shared — where we have more fish, we have more anglers, which brings more money to the local economy, which means more investment in the river, which means more fish.

"I mentioned apathy — if no one cares, no one invests, and it just spirals down," Bilsby concluded. "But now, we're spiraling upwards. That's a good circle to be in." ➤

Early in GCCA days, Sam Caldwell worked with Ben Kocian to begin publications that evolved into Tide magazine and the Texas newsletter, Currents. Caldwell co-authored (with Fred Carr) CCA's Change of Tides history book (Best Outdoor Book of 2001), and in 2004, was named Texas State Artist, 2004. Ducks Unlimited recently named him Texas State Artist for 2006-2007.

GETTING THERE — THE RIVER DEE



Like fishermen from the U.S., Dee salmon begin their upriver journey at Aberdeen (Houston's sister city), where the river meets the North Sea.

I was agreeably surprised by the affordability of lodging, the availability of fishing, and the quality of Scottish cuisine. The English may boil a steak, but Scots treat Angus right.

While some of the famous fishing 'beats' are booked in advance, there are hundreds of excellent fishing areas, with or without 'ghillies,' the famed Scot guides.

Archie Hay, my ghillie on the Crathie Beat, provided a Spey rod and reel (a 15-foot, double-hander), flies and training for the Spey cast. It's a fairly simple roll cast, no back-cast required. Orvis Scotland has a major outlet in Banchory, replete with gear, where-tos and how-tos.

The famed Dee spring fishing (early April), may involve casting in the snow, even in the lower beats toward Aberdeen. In addition to the run of large spring salmon, the river provides excellent fishing year-round for browns, grilse and sea trout.

Fishing on the River Dee is magnificent, although catching may not be akin to that of the great Alaskan rivers. But here you don't vie for top of the food chain with bears. Patience is part of your fishing equipment on the Dee. As Denver angler Dave Shelpuk phrased it, "Manage your expectations."

For complete fishing and accommodations information, access the Fish Dee website: www.fishdee.co.uk or drop by Orvis of Scotland 2-8 Bridge Street / Banchory, Kincardineshire / AB31 5SX / Phone: 01330 824319.

— Caldwell