

SEA-TROUT ON THE EBB AND FLOW

A ban on killing finnock, and changes to farming practices, have transformed the fortunes of the Ythan estuary, says *Stan Headley*, who catches fish to the song of the roaring surf

Dratsi ponders the strange goings-on of humans as her master plies his fly in the Ythan estuary.





A good three-pounder taken on a fry pattern.

I'M SORRY TO go a bit spiritual on you, but I used always to think that brown hares and sea-trout had a lot in common – their populations rise and slump for no apparent reason, they are timid beyond description, and as unfathomable as the chatter in the WI. After a trip to the Ythan (pronounced eye-than) estuary I've had to rethink this opinion. Brown hare population fluctuations may still be

squelched and crunched our way up over the mud and shells to the confluence of the Tarty Burn and the main river. Stephen and George had supplied the flies: fry-imitating lures of blue or red and silver. George's were traditional streamer types; Stephen's more modern; long, slim and sparse. "There are sand beds here that hold lots of sandeels, and the trout know it. It's one of the best stretches in the estuary. Wade out 'til you can cast to the far

them. It was another of those places where God went to fish, and not for scruffy little urchins like me.

The Ythan estuary is a giant lagoon on the shores of the Aberdeenshire North Sea which floods with water at high tide and, at low tide, consists of an intriguing maze of streams, backwaters and pools. Unlike most estuaries, it fishes well at most states of the tide, and the number of fish it holds is

"The Ythan estuary is a giant lagoon on the shores of the North Sea"

something of a mystery, but it seems that sea-trout numbers in specific locations can be spectacularly enhanced with good management policy.

George the gillie said: "The tide is right. Let's try above the bridge." It was about 9 am and the tide had been ebbing for about two and a half hours. When we started below the bridge at 7 am we didn't have to wait long. Stephen was in first with a sparkling fish of about 2½ lb; George took a school bass; and I lost a whopping great sea-trout that swam around George's feet for a moment or two before departing. George said, "Good fish. About four and a half. Pity!"

Leaving Stephen and Colin to persevere below the bridge, we

shoreline. You can't go wrong!"

Whenever I thought of sea-trout I remembered the wild lochs of the West or the wide-open sea bays of the Northern Isles. Others may dream of dark nights and deep pools where the fish have a Welsh accent. Rarely do many of us think of the East. This is another thing that I'll have to reassess.

However, for longer than I care to think the name Ythan has intrigued me. Not just the name – which doesn't sound Gaelic, and probably means something along the lines of "place of the big silvery fish" in Pictish – but also the fishing history. In my youth it had a phenomenal reputation as a place for big sea-trout – and lots of

incredible. I was simply stunned by the head of finnock in the estuary – two at a time, and a fish a chuck, were regular features of our trip. But finnock are the seed-corn of the future and strictly preserved – and therein lies a major part of the success story that is the Ythan estuary.

It has always been an accepted part of Scottish sea-trout fishing that finnock were a legitimate target, and massive harvests of these gung-ho, suicidal little chaps were taken every year. One of my earliest memories is of a family holiday near Montrose, where my father planned a serious finnock-bash on the lower stretches of the South Esk. This was an accepted and celebrated

part of the fly-fishing year. However, we now know that finnock are basically sea-trout grilse, which, unlike *bona fide* grilse, if left alone will assuredly grow into the sea-trout of tomorrow. The decline of Scottish east coast sea-trout over the past decades has in no small part been accelerated by a cavalier attitude to finnock. Happily, the fishery management has banned the taking of any finnock from the Ythan estuary and the rapid growth in the number of mature sea-trout is the outcome. Since 2005 all finnock must be returned, dead or alive, and having dead finnock in your possession is a hanging offence – or should be.

Another aspect of improvement in the fishery has been an agreement between conservation bodies and agricultural interests to reduce nutrient (nitrate and phosphate) loading in the catchment area. This was done to protect the massive over-wintering eider duck population. The growth of blanket algae in the estuary brought on by heightened water fertility was killing the mussel beds, which are of massive importance to the eider duck.

When the algal growth was at its height the catch returns also reached their nadir. The combination of these conservation efforts has brought the Ythan estuary to a point where both bird and fish populations are growing exponentially year upon year. Happy days are here again!

Fishing returns over the past four years lay the facts out for all to see: 2006 – 481 sea-trout recorded; 2007 – 377; 2008 – 519; 2009 – 707. But the most exciting component of the figures lies in the returns from May-July of last year. The July figures alone (713 fish) show that more fish were caught in this month than in the whole of the previous year, and the three-month total was 1,288 fish for 3,147½ lb.

The whole package is beautiful. Three miles of tidal water stuffed with fish. Excellent fly and spinning water (top-of-the-tide stuff can be all about spinning, I'm told, although we still took fish on fly in such circumstances). There are first-class local gillies available who know every lie and feeding location, and excellent accommodation in the nearby town of Newburgh. We stayed at



Streamer patterns imitate the prolific sandeels of the Ythan estuary.

the Udney Arms Hotel and they bent over backwards to pander to our every whim. The food was sublime and the rooms very comfy indeed.

But now it was just us and the fish. We were above the bridge on Beat 3 – and it reeked of fish. Three casts into the stream there was a slapping sort of take, right on the surface, which threw a wave upstream. A split second later the rod heaved over and I was in. It's very difficult to assess the size of a hooked fish in the Ythan stream – you'll know if it's a finnock or a sea-trout, but no further dare you go. Let's just say a modest fish feels like a good 'un, and a good 'un feels like a monster. They use every nuance of the flow to give you trouble, and the fight isn't over until the hook's out. George netted the fish expertly, which isn't easily done when you are up to your

Below: George (left) and Stephen with a good fish from down the stream.





SEA TROUT ON THE EBB AND FLOW *continued*

Dog watch:
Dratsi the
labrador keeps
the gulls away
from the writer's
table spoils.

conjugulars in the fast-flowing water and the fish has other ideas entirely. A nice fish it was, about 3½ lb, and George asked, "D'ye want to keep 'im?"

"Dammit," I replied. "Yes, I do. I'll eat him, enjoy him, and no regrets!" I was going all hunter-gatherer again – it's funny how the real wilds and silver fish will do that to you.

While my labrador bitch, Dratsi, stood (or more accurately lay) guard over my fish to stop the gulls from pecking its eyes out, George and I returned to the fray. He went in at the top of the stream and I returned to the scene of action. Now it was finnock for me

happy to relax and suck up the ambience and feel pity for the wage-slaves thundering over the bridge on their way to Aberdeen.

It's a wonderful place, the Ythan. Towering sand dunes; flocks of Arctic, sandwich and little terns, eider duck rocketing up- and downstream like building blocks with wings; fish-fry exploding from the backwaters; the odd other angler way off in the distance; the roar of the sea breaking over the sandbar, which, like a bass guitar on full volume, you feel as well as hear. And all this a 20-minute drive from Aberdeen city centre.

I know that this game is all

"George's fish led him a merry dance"

and another nice fish for George. George's led him a merry dance but eventually he brought another similar fish to the net.

I got the impression that the fish were still there but that they also knew we were there. We all had a trip or two down the stream after that hectic start but it was over, and Colin and Stephen returned below the bridge while George and I had a smoke and a chat under the bridge as the drizzle crept up from the sea. We watched as Stephen landed another fine fish that had run him down to his backing, but George and I were

about hyperbole and, sometimes, over-exaggeration – it can be like flogging washing powder – but let me just say it won't be about if I'm going back, but when I'm going back. The Ythan is definitely going to be an integral part of my fishing year.

I've been playing about at the vice and I reckon I've got some sure-fire killers tucked up my sleeve. Here's my thinking: a tough trip in June for a couple of big 'uns, plus a July trip for hectic sport, if I'm spared. I was born for this. Weren't you?

FACTFILE

The season runs from February 11–October 31, but day tickets are available only from May to October. The fishery is divided into five beats, with day tickets (£25–£30) available on four of them, and a daily bag limit of two sea-trout over 13 in. Boat-fishing is also available, but only when accompanied by a gillie, who must be hired by separate negotiation.

Further details from Mrs Forbes-Clarke, 3 Lea Cottages, Newburgh, Aberdeenshire AB41 6BN. Tel: 01366 769 237.

