



The River Deveron

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The River Deveron

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The Deveron, Scotland's hidden gem, travels a 60 mile course, rising from open heather moor land in the Cabrach, on the edge of the picturesque Grampian Mountains, meandering through the rolling farmland of Banffshire, and finally discharging into the North Sea at Banff.

Much of its middle reaches are contained within a picturesque landscape which Walter Scott pronounced to be the very best of our Scottish scenery, "at the junction, namely, of the rougher uplands with the softer plains, where the mountains guarding the infant stream have sunk down to hills less stern and commanding, allowing a fringe of birches and hazels to soften their shaggy sides, while every now and then numerous affluents called "burns" come gurgling in through the hollows that stretch away in the recesses of the diverging glens."

The Deveron, including its principal tributaries the Bogie and the Isla, produces some of the highest rod catches of salmon and sea trout in Scotland outside the top four rivers of the Tweed, Spey, Tay and Dee. It holds the record for the largest salmon ever caught on a fly in a Scottish river – Miss "Tiny" Morison's 61.5lb monster taken on the Mountblairy beat just above Banff.

The river is noted for its large sea trout – fish of 5lbs or even 6lbs are not uncommon, and the quality of its wild brown trout fishing is unsurpassed – a brown trout of 11lbs having been taken recently on the Isla.

Importantly, the river is one of the most open in the country with in excess of 50% of the total angling resource managed by the public angling associations of Huntly, Turriff and Banff. In addition, most of the privately owned beats on the river offer

fishing permits by the day or week at very reasonable prices. These can be obtained either directly via the www.deveron.org website or from Frank Henderson's tackle shop in Turriff or via his own website www.fishingthedeveron.co.uk.

The parlous state of wild Atlantic salmon and sea trout stocks will be well known to readers. In common with many other rivers in Scotland, the Deveron Board formed, in 2001, its own Trust, whose mission is to improve the riparian habitat for the benefit of all wildlife in the catchment, not least its stocks of juvenile salmonids.

The Trust also fulfils a vital educational role in teaching Primary school children from within the catchment the life cycle of the migratory fish which run up our rivers.

The Deveron, Bogie & Isla Rivers Charitable Trust is regulated by the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) and was a founding member of the recently constituted Rivers & Fisheries Trusts of Scotland (RAFTS), an umbrella body set up to disseminate training, advice and best practice guidelines across fisheries management throughout Scotland.

The Trust has set about its task with gusto. A Fisheries' status report was commissioned from Colin Carnie, building on earlier survey work completed by Karen Hall and culminating in a plan of action – the Fishery Management Plan. High on the list of priorities was the opening up of many miles of sterile areas, cut off from the main river by a variety of distillery weirs, redundant hydro dams, Irish fords, and hung culverts.

An annual programme of electro-fishing was started to provide detailed information on juvenile populations and



Figure 1



Figure 2

particularly those above obstructions which were causing access problems for spawning migratory fish.

The Trust modified three "Irish Fords" with some spectacular results (Figure 1). It removed two redundant dams (Figures 2 and 3). It installed fish ladders on three sites where the design of road-bridge aprons had affected the ability of fish to migrate upstream (Figure 4). These modifications have made accessible an extra 21 miles of spawning habitat and subsequent surveys in these areas have demonstrated high and increasing numbers of juveniles of both salmon and trout.

The Isla is an important resource representing some 30% of the spawning areas of the Upper Deveron. Electro-fishing in the Upper Isla over the past five years has shown low juvenile salmon populations where the in-stream habitat suggests the river could sustain much higher figures. A series of partial obstructions at Keith was pinpointed as the probable cause of poor juvenile recruitment, as migratory fish struggled to get up stream during periods of low to medium water flows. With financial help from distillers Chivas Brothers, owned by Pernod Ricard, one of these obstructions was modified by the installation of a fish ladder with an integral counter. Within a week of its installation we recorded salmon using the ladder (Figure 5).



Figure 3

Modifications to a man-made waterfall downstream will probably still be required, particularly for spawning sea trout and brown trout. However, the Trust is optimistic that anglers will have good reason to be thankful for the generosity of Chivas Brothers in the future as more and more migratory fish are able to make the journey up stream to their spawning grounds.

The River Bogie system contains over forty spawning burns, representing another third of the Upper Deveron catchment. This area remains heavily forested following the planting of the Clashindarroch Forest in the 1950s. Silt loading following planting, road building, and now heavy shading from conifers have significantly degraded the habitat in these burns over time. However, new and more enlightened forestry practices have led to some small improvements and our electro-fishing results have shown some promising increases in juvenile numbers in recent years (although much of this is possibly due to our removal of several Irish Fords).

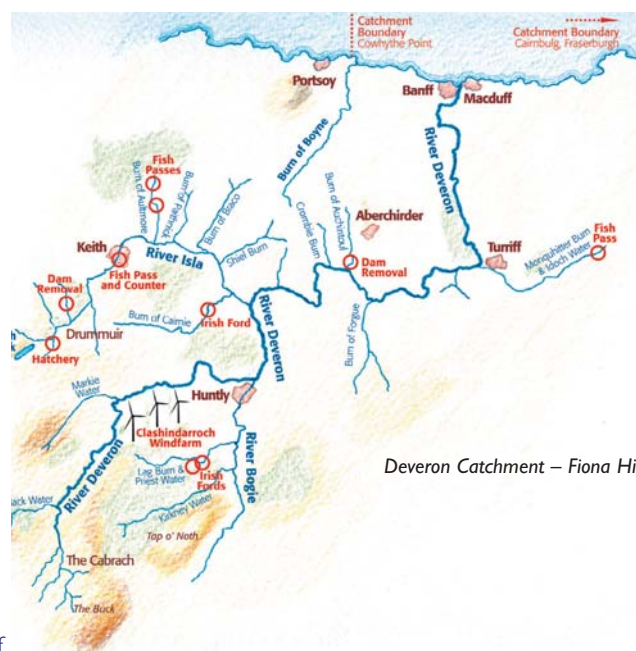
However, we are now facing the possibility of a massive 47-turbine wind farm being erected on the ridge between the Bogie and the main Deveron catchments. The clear felling of 1500 acres of mature woodland to accommodate this development, and the construction of 38 km of access roads (criss-crossing a myriad of fragile spawning streams) raises the spectre of a sudden reversal in the recent resurgence of juvenile salmonid populations. As if this were not bad enough, many of the proposed turbine sites and their access roads are to be dug into the blanket mire system that forms the headwaters of the Bogie. The illogical and misguided destruction of this deep peat layer, capable of absorbing carbon dioxide for many more thousands of years,

has been forcibly put at a recent Public Enquiry. A long-term programme of electro-fishing, water quality monitoring and invertebrate surveys is now in place to monitor any changes in habitat and water quality. The Trust nervously awaits the Reporter's recommendation.

Our electro-fishing and invertebrate surveys have also enabled the Trust to enter into a constructive dialogue with managers of forests to both restructure riparian zones and ensure that important spawning tributaries are kept free of fallen trees and brash which can very quickly build up to form total barriers to the migration of spawning fish to their redds.

The Trust has built, principally through the generosity of two riparian owners, its own hatchery, the target being to produce enough fed fry to restock those sterile areas previously beyond the reach of spawning salmonids and which have recently been opened up. Examples of the Trust's success are the Towie and Auchintoul burns which now support salmon parr as a direct result of the release of fed fry from the hatchery. Neither of these burns had seen salmon for over a hundred years until the Trust removed the dams that had been blocking the passage of migratory fish.

The Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) was commissioned by the Trust in 2004 to promote agri-environmental schemes. Farmers and land owners were incentivised to enter these schemes by the Trust's contribution of £200 per application (to cover the cost of habitat surveys). As a result, over £500,000 of environmental improvements have been completed, much of which consists of stock fencing alongside water courses and the installation



Deveron Catchment – Fiona Hill

of water troughs or fenced watering points. The provision of buffer strips to reduce the effects of diffuse pollution from agricultural and forestry activities are also an important element of these schemes.

Co-operation with Scottish Native Woods has resulted in the planting of native trees alongside water courses, providing a food source for invertebrates and cover for fish and the many other species which utilise these areas as wildlife corridors. Areas of native trees such as willow and alder also act as filters for acidic run off from conifer plantations and diffuse pollution from agriculture and construction activities.

The Trust and Board participate in the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan which was set up in 2005 by the Scottish Executive and SNH to manage salmon and seals in the Moray Firth. Under this plan, rivers within the Moray Firth are allocated an annual quota to remove rogue seals that are a threat to stocks of fish in rivers and in some cases estuaries. The Board also applies for an annual licence to cull sawbill ducks following a survey each winter to determine the numbers of cormorants and gosanders.

The Trust has started to tackle the increasing problem of non-native and invasive giant hogweed which used to be the responsibility of and be controlled by local authorities. However, eradication was never completed and serious infestations have re-emerged on the Bogie and Isla. Funding for eradication programmes is being sought for this very labour intensive exercise. The work will need to continue for many years as the seeds can lie dormant for up to 15 years. Apart from the danger to humans – physical contact



Figure 4



Figure 5

can leave painful blisters on the skin – hogweed shades out native vegetation on river banks which results in bank erosion and silt loading, causing smothering of redds and loss of in-stream juvenile fish habitat.

As indicators of the wide bio-diversity a healthy river system can support, the Upper Deveron contains the most significant breeding population of water voles in the UK and possibly in Western Europe. Many of the burns sustain brook lampreys (*Lampetra planeri*) and river lamprey (*Lampetra fluviatilis*). Juvenile sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) have also been discovered in the main stem during a survey in 2003. Eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) are present in many areas, although probably

not in the same numbers as in recent times. Fresh water mussels (*Margaritifera margaritifera*) and *Brachyptera putata*, a nationally scarce stonefly that requires good water quality, are also known to be present in the middle reaches of the Deveron.

Our current electro-fishing results are extremely encouraging and have shown many of our tributaries as having significantly improving densities of both fry and parr comparable with some of the best rivers in Scotland. However, many challenges remain, for example, the significant threat from wind farm construction activities high up the catchment, diffuse pollution and continuing afforestation.

Undoubtedly the major threat for both migratory salmonids is out at sea, and a clear indication of this has been the return of emaciated grilse and sea trout to our rivers in recent years. The Trust is focused on trying to ensure that the in-river environment is everything that it should be to ensure that juvenile fish can thrive and, at the same time, enhancing the riparian habitat for the wide range of wildlife that relies on a healthy river system. Thus, with an active and representative Board and a well funded and efficiently run Trust, anglers on the Deveron have every reason to be optimistic for the future.

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