

BALLYNAHINCH CASTLE HOTEL FISHING NEWSLETTER

February 2011



A RECORD RUN OF FISH IN 2010

A huge return of salmon to Ballynahinch in 2010 made for a magical (and at times, frustrating) year of fishing at the hotel. In a year when the main lake at Ballynahinch froze over in January, forest fires raged through Connemara during one of the driest springs on record followed by an unseasonably wet July, the salmon flourished and returned in unexpectedly high numbers to Ballynahinch and most Irish rivers. The number of salmon landed at Ballynahinch was a respectable 82; however, over 3,200 salmon spawned successfully over the past few months. Survival of salmon at sea (or lack of!) is the greatest concern for salmon conservationists in these times and it was a welcome surprise in 2010 to see so many fish returning.

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2011?

Since the removal of mixed stock drift netting in 2007, the impending salmon run of 2011 has been eagerly awaited.

Back in 2007, the huge increase in salmon returning to Ballynahinch following the drift net ban confirmed our assertions that 50% of Ballynahinch salmon were being caught along the Irish coast during June and July. Given that the majority of our grilse arrive to the coast during July (the peak of the netting season) we were far more heavily impacted than rivers with an August or September run.

The life cycle of a Ballynahinch salmon means that salmon which returned in 2007, would have spawned that winter. The eggs would have hatched in late spring 2008 where the offspring would have spent 2 years living in the freshwater. In April/May 2010 a hormonal trigger would have changed the then, parr into a slender silvery smolt about 4-6 inches in length. In late spring 2010, about 100,000 smolts would have swam past downstream heading for the sea. They would have travelled north to the Faeroe Islands arriving during the summer of 2010. In spring 2011, the now fattened grilse are heading back towards Ballynahinch in great shoals.

A doubling of the salmon run following the drift net ban does not by any accounts mean that the 2011 return will be double our 2010 run of over 3,000 fish. We will get to a point where the catchment can only produce a finite number of smolts, no matter how many spawners there are. At this stage, nobody knows, how many spawners this is (and we might not ever know). The multitude of density dependant factors affecting survival is too wide a scope for this newsletter and I would not like to say with any certainty what numbers we will achieve this coming year. I am, however, quietly confident!

In 2005 (pre counter) I estimate that 1,200 salmon ran the river and this led to a run of 2,400 in 2009. The run in 2006 was 1,650, which led to a run of 3,200 last year. The run in 2007 was 3,100.....!.

THE 2010 SEASON

The dry spring at Ballynahinch meant that spring salmon fishing pressure at the hotel was lower than normal. Long-time regular to Ballynahinch, Ulrich Treusch, caught the sole spring salmon for 2010. On one of the only "fishy" days that spring afforded us, Ulrich took a fabulous 11.5lb fresh salmon from the stream on Beat 4. Given that Ballynahinch never had large stocks of spring salmon, even 50 years ago, there has always been a large element of luck in coming across one of the few multi-sea winter salmon.

Nearly all of the salmon that enter the catchment before June spawn below Lough Inagh. They have no wish to hang around in the Ballynahinch River and are generally at the Derryclare Butts with 24 hours of leaving the sea! Having said this, and all of our regular spring anglers would agree, there is simply nothing better than catching a spring salmon from Ballynahinch.

Frustratingly, the dry spell continued up until the last days of June. On every tide from mid-June, Beat 8 filling up with shoals of grilse. Every day I watched, admired and even tried to catch the salmon as they energetically splashed their way around the rain starved river growing more impatient by the day. On one occasion a shoal of 40 grilse swam beneath me as I stood in front of The Anglers Return. On another occasion as I stood on the bridge on Beat 7 I could not believe my eyes as 6 salmon splashed over the gravel with their backs out of the water heading for the safety of Beat 6. Little were we to know the number of fish waiting below the counter...

The rain finally arrived on 30th June. The sight of salmon and sea trout going up in twos and threes over the counter was so fantastic. Just under 600 salmon swam upstream in a 24 hour period accounting for nearly 20% of our annual migration in one day! Unfortunately for us at Ballynahinch (and fortunately for the fisheries further upstream) it rained most days in July, albeit in small amounts, keeping the river high enough not to provide an impediment to a fresh grilse straight out of the sea. The Upper Ballynahinch and Lough Inagh fisheries certainly recorded some of their best catches of salmon for the month of July in many years. Fresh grilse with long tailed sea lice were regularly being caught at the top of Lough

Inagh. These fish were out of the sea less than 24 hours!

In July, 21 salmon were landed on the Castle Stretch with Beat 1 providing most of the sport. Fishing Club Members, regulars and guides made up practically the entire July catch. The best fish was taken by Kevin Keaney who caught a beautifully fresh 8.5lb grilse from Beat 4. Miles McDowell and Jack Meredith also had some good fishing for their weeks whilst big congratulations are due to regular visitor and club member, Chris Emin for catching his first salmon. Chris took a fresh 4lb grilse from the stream of Beat 1 on 27th July.



Chris Emin's first Ballynahinch Salmon

July saw a lot of fish in the 4-5lb range. Whilst these are not small grilse by Irish standards, the downward trend is a worry. The prevalence of these smaller fish, not only in Irish rivers, but throughout the North Atlantic is a huge cause for concern.

The fishing conditions in August were a huge improvement on July with perfect water levels. A disappointing 27 salmon were landed for the month given the conditions; however, the angling pressure was far less than July, therefore giving a higher catch per rod effort. John Casey, Tom McManus and Cyril Biggins were top rods for the month accounting for 12 of the salmon landed. Julian Wright caught his first salmon from Beat 1 on a Badger leaving a very jealous Monty Halls from BBC2, who was also trying to catch his first salmon. Monty has fished the stream of Beat 1 only 30 minutes before Julian landed his 6lb beauty!



Julian with his first salmon at Ballynahinch

The average size of salmon in August was 6.5lbs, which was quite encouraging after the smaller fish that ran in July. John Casey and Des Lally both took fresh 2 sea winter fish of 9lbs during the month. Green Butts and Badgers were the flavour of the month for August to the extent that we sold out of both patterns!

September is traditionally a very productive fishing month at the Castle, particularly the last two weeks. This year certainly lived up to the claim with 31 fish taken for the month (26 of these coming in the last 2 weeks). Given the few number of anglers fishing the river the catch per rod effort was 50%.

Tom McManus, Michael the Dutchman, Ann Corcoran and Colin McDowell were the top rods for September accounting for 14 for the month. Tom and Michael were having success with the traditional Badger whilst the Green Highlander made an unlikely return to the fold accounting for 6 of the last 12 catches for the season!



Tom McManus with a fine fresh grilse

The average size for the month was smaller than August at 6lbs. Bill Turkington, a long time friend and guest at Ballynahinch took the largest salmon of the season from the Grassy Rock on Beat 2, an area rarely fished with a fly these days. It used to be a deadly spot with a prawn I am told! Bill, ably assisted by his close friend, Michael the Dutchman, landed, photographed and returned a wonderful 12lb cock salmon on a Green Highlander. Other notable catches for the month were a 10lb fish taken by Tom McManus from Beat 1 and a 9lb fish caught by Marcus McCorkell from Beat 2. All three of these large fish were sportingly released to spawn. These large 2 sea winter salmon are the most important fish to conserve at Ballynahinch as they are the most at risk group.



Bill and Michael just after releasing the largest salmon of the season

The most productive spot on the river in September was under the hotel. This is a great taking spot in high water later in the season. Michael the Dutchman landed a fish from the wooden platform on No-Mans-Land on 13th of the month, the first fish landed there since 2002. There were certainly 3 others lost there during the course of the year.

THE SEA TROUT SITUATION

Since the collapse of the sea trout population in the late 1980's, all sea trout returning to Ballynahinch in early summer have either been derived from the brown trout stock or else from State Funded sea trout stocking schemes during the 1990's. The latter is no longer in existence and the sea trout strain in the former may be close to exhaustion. This has lead to a big reduction in finnock numbers.

Anglers will have noticed in the past 2-3 years that there is a higher proportion of larger sea trout in the 1.5-3lb range. These fish, predominantly females are returning for the second or third time and are now important spawners.

It is a long road until we get back to a viable, sustainable sea trout population structure within the catchment; however, we have 6 very important years completed since the last stock obliteration in 2004 and the road ahead looks a lot more stable.

THE FINAL DAY FISH OUT

The annual Fish-Out on the final day of the season was a fantastic occasion. Not only was the company and craic second to none, the fishing was also fantastic. There were 6 salmon landed for the day, all of which were duly released. Three salmon came from the Upper Ballynahinch Fishery whilst the three came from the Castle Stretch. Greg Forde (Inland Fisheries Ireland) finally caught his first Ballynahinch salmon from Sna Beg, Frank Flaherty, whilst waiting for a bit of space on Beat 2, caught a fish from Between the Bridges and Ulrich Treusch took a grilse from the Wood on Beat 1. Nicky Struass, Ronan Creane and Colin McDowell were the other captors from the UBF. After a wonderful day it was Colin who won the Mickey Conneely Trophy for the second year in succession for the largest fish on the last day.

THE BEAT 4 CONUNDRUM

Beats 4-6 are normally very productive throughout the season, however, they failed to shine in 2010. It is certainly not from a lack of effort why Beat 4 did not produce; the fish simply were not there. After much postulation and conjecture from many fishing sages it was felt that the low water in June followed by the high water in July meant that the fish had no inclination to slowly move through the system, rather to get to their final destination as quick as possible. Any other hypotheses are welcome!

GRILSE FROM THE FALLS

Throughout the summer months more and more anglers are fishing the pools below the fish counter. These pools were traditionally sea trout pools but have since become quite productive salmon lies since the construction of the counter. In 2009 there were 3 salmon taken from the pool directly below the counter and this year there were 3 lost (2 at the net). Local guide, Jonathan Broderick, took a small 3¾lb grilse from the Middle Falls Pool whilst fishing for sea trout in early August. The pool below the counter is a perfect salmon lie in low to medium water with a great water speed and depth. In 2011, this pool will officially become part of Beat 3.

MONTY HALLS

We were fortunate to have marine biologist, Monty Halls, from the BBC living in Roundstone for 6 months during the summer of 2010. He was filming his third TV series, *Monty Halls Great Irish Escape*, based largely around marine mammals but also including a great deal about life in Connemara. Monty fell in love with the history and ecology of the estate at Ballynahinch and spent a lot of time around the hotel. His personal mission for the summer was to catch his first ever salmon at Ballynahinch. Unfortunately, and not for the lack of trying, Monty failed in his numerous attempts!



Bewildered by his lack of success on the river, Monty put his endeavours to better use and spent a day raking the spawning beds in the small tributary flowing into Beat 6.

The six one-hour episodes are due to be broadcast over a 6-week period on BBC2 starting on Sunday 27th March at 9pm. I was fortunate to see the first cut of the first episode and was absolutely blown away by how beautiful Connemara looks in it. Set your Sky Box now!

SALMON FARMING

At this stage you will all be acutely aware that the salmon farm in Bertraghboy Bay resumed operations in October 2008. We have always viewed the salmon farming industry as being the greatest single threat to the survival of our salmon and sea trout stocks at Ballynahinch. Consequently, an ongoing campaign to seek the removal of salmon farms from the estuaries of important salmon and sea trout rivers and a drive for better regulation of the industry has been ongoing.

The Bertraghboy salmon farm, to date, has not caused any appreciable damage to our salmon and sea trout stocks since its reintroduction. The lice levels on the farm have been maintained at a low level and post smolts have not been encountered in the estuary covered in sea lice. This does not mean, by any account that we do not seek to have the farms removed from the bay as soon as possible. Previous experience has shown that if the local salmon farm does not manage its sea lice for only one month during the migration period, an entire cohort of salmon and sea trout can be practically wiped out. Our 6 years of sea trout revival would end in an instant. The current situation is far too precarious.

Twenty years of campaigning by so many has given many men grey hair! Achievements have been very important but extraordinarily difficult to attain. The transparent and publicly available monthly sea lice readings from every salmon farm in the country was achieved after a massive campaign and subsequent court action taken in the late 1990s by Peter Mantle at Delphi Lodge. Anti salmon farm activists in Scotland, Canada and Norway do not have access to similar data in their respective countries.

Following on from the successes of the drift netting campaign where the use of the EU Habitats Directive was crucial, a similar campaign has been waged on salmon farms in Ireland. In February 2009, Salmon Watch Ireland (www.salmon.ie) lodged an official complaint with the EU Commission in Brussels citing Ireland's failure to comply with the Habitats Directive. The complaint is based on the premise that, under the Directive, Ireland is obliged to protect certain species, namely Atlantic Salmon, in designated Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). Sufficient peer reviewed evidence from Ireland and other salmon farming countries indicates that poorly sited and poorly regulated salmon farms negatively impact on the survival of wild migrating salmon. Salmon Watch Ireland is calling for the removal of salmon farms from the bays that contain the estuaries of important salmon rivers and for a more coherent and comprehensively regulated sector. The current state of affairs is a complete shambles.

The complaint has been received by the Commission and is making its way slowly through due processes. The Irish Authorities are currently responding to questions posed by the Commission drawn from the Salmon Watch document. Progress is typically slow, however, experience tells us that this is by far the best approach to take. No change of Government will make a damn

bit of difference to the current situation regardless what their manifestos may say.

SURVIVAL OF SALMON AT SEA

Over the past 40 years, the rate of survival of salmon from smolt to adults (the marine phase) has dropped from 20% to ca. 5%. This means that in the 1970's a smolt had a four times greater chance of survival than it does today. This means that with today's smolt output from Ballynahinch of circa. 100,000, over 20,000 adults would return to the system every year! Don't forget that in the 1970's, drift nets were taking 50% of the catch, so the run at that time was probably around 10,000 salmon.

The SALSEA-Merge programme continues apace with ship borne research completed and the continuation of the analysis of the material collected. The programme is designed to examine how Atlantic salmon interact with the ocean in terms of its journey, food source and potential predation. Hopefully some useful conclusions will emerge in relation to dwindling marine survival of salmon smolts. A full report on the project is to be given to a conference in La Rochelle in October 2011.

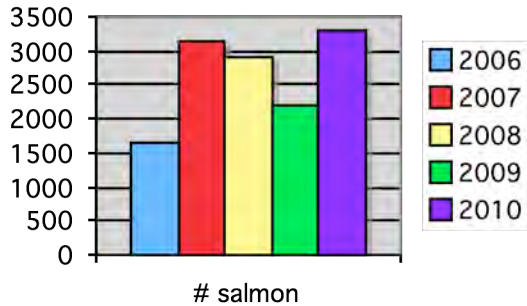
RIVER MAINTENANCE

During the low water from April to June, Cyril, Michael the Dutchman and Simon spent over a week clearing instream weeds from the usual affected areas. Iron rakes, chains with barbed wire attached, wetsuits, grappling hooks and a whole manner of tools were dragged through the river to remove offending vegetation. Unfortunately, high water for most of the season meant that work went largely unnoticed!

The spawning beds in the Castle Stretch will be raked between June and September this coming year and new gravel will be added if necessary.

The groundsmen are busily constructing a fabulous path along the railway line from the front gate to the top of Beat 2. The path will loop back up the river to the hotel joining the existing No Man's Land path. The trail, to be completed in the late spring will mean that anglers will have easy walking access to the top of Beat 2 from the hotel. A couple of new casting piers will also be constructed downstream of the existing wooden pier on No Man's Land to provide more space for casting tuition. These new piers will also provide access to another, previously inaccessible salmon lie.

FISH COUNTER FIGURES



Last year saw the highest run of salmon over the counter since its installation in 2006. The run was poor in 2009 due to a poor spawning year in 2005 resulting from a salmon farm related decimation of the smolts in 2004. We eagerly await 2011 with rods at the ready.

The conservation limit (the number of spawners required to ensure a long term sustainable stock in our catchment) has been set by the State fishery scientists at 1,100 salmon. This is quite low in my opinion given the size of our catchment. It does, however, mean that there would have to be a catastrophic decline in our salmon stock before our fishery was deemed to be catch and release fishery.

Unfortunately the counter is not accurate at recording sea trout migrations as they are too small and are simply not detected in higher water flows. Anything under 2lbs largely goes unnoticed.

FISHING BOOKINGS FOR 2011

The deadline for Club Members' preferred fishing dates is due at the end of February and fishing reservations are opened up to hotel guests after this date. Fishing is open to non-residents, however, bookings cannot be taken further out than one week during the busy season of July and August.

Bookings can be made by ringing the hotel on 095 31006 or by email to info@ballynahinch-castle.com.

SCALE READINGS

I have been taking scale readings from salmon on the slab over the past four years. Below are some interesting results:

1. On average 85% of our smolts migrate as 2 year olds at lengths ranging from 10-17cm. 15% of smolts migrate as 3 year olds ranging from 13-16cms.
2. Every fish sampled up to 8.5lbs has been a grilse (ie has only spent one winter at sea). All fish above this size are multi sea winter fish.
3. An 8lb sea trout kelt killed by accident in March 2008 was on its way to sea for the 7th time having never spent more than 4 months at sea on each of its 6 previous springtime migrations. The fish was 8 years old!

