

WRFT Arctic charr discovery week (2): 1st notice

based at the Loch Maree Lodge (Hotel), 22nd November to 29th November 2008

to be supported by FRS, the Scottish Government (via RAFTS) and Scottish Natural Heritage.



[Mostly pictures from Charr week 2006: (top left) PhD student, Jon Low ready to snorkel charr spawning sites in Loch Maree; (top right) two charr morphs taken in Loch Maree in July 2006; (middle left) Loch Kernsary charr; (middle right) Nick Thomson serves 'charr pie' [made with local smoked haddock] to charr week participants; (bottom right) Ben, Rob and Norman with a charr from Loch an Draing; (bottom left) participants who stuck it out 'til the end of the week outside the Loch Maree Hotel . . .]

Introduction

The first Arctic charr discovery week was held at the Loch Maree Hotel in November 2006 and attended by an energetic mix of charr biologists and local fish and fisheries enthusiasts. With permissions and support from local estates and the Scottish Government, expeditions were organised to set nets in nearby waters which were reputed to support charr. Charr were collected from two waters where previously only sketchy anecdotes existed. Charr were also filmed on a stream spawning sites using a Remote Operating Vehicle (supported by Wester Ross Environment Network). Awareness raising events included a practical session led by Prof Peter Maitland and Jon Low at Gairloch Secondary School; a well attended public meeting to report findings at the end of the week, and an article in the Press and Journal newspaper.

Objectives

This year we aim to build on what we achieved during the 2006 event. The Loch Maree Lodge (Hotel) has been booked for the week and can provide overnight accommodation for 20+ people – see below. It is by the lochside, there's a boatshed and freezer for sorting & storing fish, and the fireside in the ghillies' bar is a fine place to put the world of charr taxonomy to rights after a good supper. This year the week has been timed for the end of November primarily to focus on locating charr spawning areas in Loch Maree (we were too early in 2006). The end of November is also peak spawning period for salmon in local rivers and there will be a wide range of opportunities for observing and learning about the other freshwater fishes of the area, including spawning brown trout and sea trout.

Objectives are as follows:

1. Further surveys to locate spawning areas of Charr populations (2 at least?) in Loch Maree (fyke netting, snorkel surveys, use of ROV [pending funding / availability] . . .). This might also develop into a practical 'how to locate charr spawning sites session' for those interested in locating charr spawning areas in other lochs.
2. Further gill net sampling of lochs in the area (including those in the Badachro river system with permissions as required) to confirm presence of charr and to obtain samples for genetic / taxonomic / other analytical work. Plenty of jobs for helpers to do here carrying kit and sorting fish. To assist, you'll need to be equipped for working in potentially wintery weather in wild, remote terrain.
3. Workshop session to discuss RAFTS members' Fisheries Management Plan actions for charr conservation and management. Dr Eric Verspoor, possibly assisted by Ron Greer, will present sessions on inventory gill netting of lochs in Wester Ross and present results from surveys earlier in the summer and genetic studies.
4. Further awareness raising activities. A practical session at Gairloch High School was well received last time; a similar school session is scheduled this year. The Arctic charr week film produced by Wester Ross Marine Reserve Partnership in 2006 was well received. BBC 'Natural World' film crews will be working in the area and may be able to help record charr footage for a film on Loch Maree wildlife to be screened in Spring 2009.

Participation

Although the week is aimed at professional biologists, it also aims to be of interest to wildlife and fish enthusiasts who are keen to learn more about one of Scotland's most elusive fishes. Leading charr biologists who have already indicated that they plan to attend include Prof Peter Maitland of Fish Conservation Centre; Dr Colin Bean, SNH Fisheries Officer; Dr Eric Verspoor of Fisheries Research Services.

Participants will gain 'hands-on' learning experience with leading experts, sharing knowledge of sampling techniques and Arctic charr in Scottish lochs, and their conservation requirements.

Dinner, Bed and Breakfast at Loch Maree Hotel is being provided at £55 / night. There are 20+ rooms which will be allocated on first-come first-served basis. The hotel will be open to non-resident participants living locally. There will be no charge for field trips, other than for food & refreshments. Grant applications are currently being prepared so that where possible those who are best able and qualified to assist with field work and other activities are reimbursed as appropriate – please phone to discuss.

If you would like to participate, please contact Peter Cunningham at WRFT (info@wrft.org.uk) for further details, telephone 01445 712 899.

Provisional schedule

Saturday 22nd November: any early arrivals can check in at the Loch Maree Lodge (Hotel).

Sunday 23rd November: informal introductory **wildlife excursion** along sea trout, salmon and charr spawning streams within the River Ewe - Loch Maree catchment area. An introduction to the area, its fishes and wildlife for those who like to get the feel of a place. Preparation of materials / equipment and other arrangements for later in the week.

Monday 24th – Wednesday 26th November: Loch Maree charr spawning survey: including fyke netting; expeditions to other nearby lochs in search of charr, setting nets where / as appropriate. Sorting samples and documenting catch. A **practical session at Gairloch High School** has been scheduled for Wednesday 26th November, 9 – 11am. Interviews with 'Two Lochs Radio' and other media.

Thursday 27th: Net check and sample processing (am). **Workshop** 12 noon to 7 pm: ***Managing and conserving charr populations in (NW) Scotland: Priority Actions for Fisheries Management Plans***

Friday 28th Final surveys, sample processing and tidy up; preparation of presentations for public meeting in evening. Public meeting in evening (**7-9pm, Gairloch**) to present findings and conclusions of 'Charr week 2008'.

Saturday 29th: Return home

