

WESTER ROSS FISHERIES TRUST

Conserving, restoring & developing wild fisheries in Wester Ross



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NEWSLETTER

Juvenile salmon populations withstand drought

After several weeks with heavy rain and strong winds, the long, generally dry summer is almost forgotten. For most holiday makers visiting Wester Ross, summer 2008 was one of the best. However, for salmon populations and anglers it was not such a good one as fish were held up in sea lochs by low water.

The month of May was particularly dry. Many rivers fell to low levels, exposing areas of river bed not seen for many years. In some places Freshwater pearl mussels were stranded high and dry. At the Tournaig Trap salmon and sea trout smolts were unable to migrate to sea.

Smolts were also trapped in pools in streams entering Loch Maree: the lowest 200m of the Taagan burn dried up completely providing herons and other fish-eating wildlife with easy pickings. Smolts may have also been delayed in other systems.

So the WRFT electro-fishing team was a little uncertain how juvenile fish populations had fared. Remarkably, results from surveys in August and September indicated generally healthy juvenile salmon populations.

Five sites were surveyed in the River Broom (including Woodturning Centre burn and four 'Ross Gardiner' sites in the main river), salmon parr and fry were found at all sites. In the Dundonnell River, catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) of salmon fry was high at some sites, and good numbers for parr were recorded.



David Mullaney by the Badachro River. Salmon fry and parr were recorded at all sites in the main river and tributary stream at high

CPUE for salmon fry was reasonable or high by core spawning sites in the Gruinard and Little Gruinard Rivers. However salmon fry were particularly small. Juvenile salmon growth in both these rivers is dependent upon in-stream food production; the desiccation of mayfly and stonefly habitat may have adversely affected growth rates.

Further south, salmon fry and parr were widely distributed and recorded at healthy CPUE in the Tournaig, Kinlochewe River, Kerry, Badachro, Elchaig and Shiel, demonstrating the remarkable resilience of juvenile salmon populations to adverse conditions.

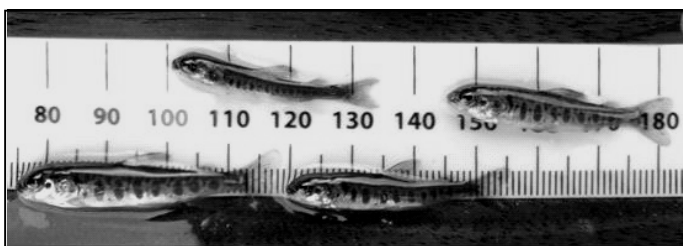
Exceptions were as follows (generally smaller waters): Slatadale Burn (by Loch Maree): healthy trout fry populations, but

no salmon fry; Talladale River: low CPUE of large salmon fry and large salmon parr indicating that densities of juvenile salmon were far below carrying capacity; a back channel site in the Little Gruinard where salmon fry were absent (recorded in most other years), suggesting desiccation earlier in the year.

CPUE for salmon fry in areas stocked with fry in June '08 above the Bruachaig falls was lower than anticipated. In contrast, in the Elchaig fry CPUE was generally good in areas stocked in the upper river above the loch.

Prior to embarking on a stocking programme, fisheries managers are encouraged to contact the WRFT biologist for advice. WRFT supports well thought-out stocking programmes aimed at restoring wild fish populations; the trust can also offer advice to fishery proprietors intent on elevating rod catches through supplementary stocking, with the aim of minimising possible competition between stocked fish and valuable progeny of wild spawned fish.

River-specific management reports will be drafted through the winter months with full results of electro-fishing surveys.



Salmon fry from a back channel in the lower River Gruinard, recorded on 20th August 2008. These were the smallest fry found during summer 2008; food producing areas may have been desiccated during the drought earlier in the year. (Picture by David Mullaney)

WRFT News

• Trustee update

It was with considerable regret that our Chairman since 2006, Johnie Parry, announced his decision to stand down at the Trustees meeting on 12th November. The remaining trustees would like to express their sadness that this has happened despite their full support for him. He has been a trustee for most of the life of the Trust and his judgement and breadth of knowledge of all matters concerned with fish and fishing have been of enormous value.

Standing down with Johnie, was Col Sandy Lindsay who was not only a founder trustee but has missed only one meeting of the Trust or its management group since the Trust came into being in March 1996. His knowledge of the workings of the Trust and his eagle eye for detail were legendary.

The Trust's current very strong financial position is in large measure due to the time and commitment of these two people who have both contributed so much and the remaining trustees wish to express their heartfelt thanks to Johnie and Sandy.

New trustees are Dr Barry Blake, Mark Williams and Graeme Wilson to whom a warm welcome is extended. Mini-biographies of the new trustees will be posted shortly on the website. John Mackenzie was elected as the new Chairman of trustees at the meeting.

• Angling catches

Rod catches of salmon for most rivers appear to have been generally down on those of 2007, especially for the smaller rivers. This may in part have been due to low water through much of the angling season.

However, a run of grilse provided late sport, particularly in the River Carron where over 100 fish, almost half of the season's total, were recorded in October.

Some larger salmon were also taken including a fish of 30lb from the River Ewe, caught and released by ghillie Ray Dingwall.

Please submit catch returns as soon as possible so that we can fully assess the season.

Sea lice epizootics affect sea trout in Lochs Broom, Little Loch Broom, Loch Carron and Loch Alsh

The parasitic sea louse *Lepeophtheirus salmonis* has caused major problems for wild fish, especially sea trout, in the Wester Ross Fisheries Trust area. Since 1996, the WRFT has monitored sea lice abundance on sea trout, particularly those which return prematurely to freshwater in the late spring and early summer.

During the spring and summer of 2008, WRFT carried out a series of sweep nettings to target sea trout and monitor sea lice in Loch Ewe (Boor Bay), Loch Gairloch (Kerry Bay), and Loch Carron. Elsewhere within the WRFT area, the Tripartite Working Group's Regional Development Officer for West Sutherland and Wester Ross, Ailsa McLellan, led sweep net sampling at the mouth of the River Kanaird (north of Ullapool), in Little Loch Broom and in Loch Long (near Dornie).

Ailsa's report which presents a summary of the results of moni-



(l-r) Bob Kindness, volunteers Dougie Foreman (holding a sea trout of 43cm) and David Foreman; and Jim Raffell and Stephen Buttle at the sea trout sweep netting site in the estuary of the River Carron in June. The fish had over 50 sea lice and rather tatty fins.

toring for sea lice infestations in West Sutherland and Wester Ross in 2008 is now on line at the TWG website www.tripartiteworkinggroup.com

A more detailed report, including data from the Dundonnell fyke net operated by Eilean

Darach estate and Dundonnell Estate, and rod catch data from the River Ewe will be prepared by the WRFT biologist shortly.

Sweep net sea lice monitoring in 2008 (-2009) was funded by the Scottish Government via the Tripartite Working Group.

WRFT assists with Highland Loch Fish Communities survey

Ron Greer and Dr Eric Verspoor from the Freshwater Fisheries Laboratory visited the area twice over the summer to carry out surveys of fish populations in some of the larger lochs.

Using the proposed European standard protocol, multi-mesh gill nets were fished overnight at depths ranging from marginal shallows to the deepest parts of respective lochs, to obtain an inventory of fish populations.

In July, nets were set in Loch na Sealga in the Gruinard system. In addition to brown trout, arctic charr were caught. Charr and trout were also caught in Loch Damh (Balgy system) including some unusually large fish.

One of the most interesting catches was taken from Loch Doughaill (River Carron system) which included two kinds of Arctic char. Ron and Eric returned in September to carry out an inventory netting survey of Loch Maree. Trout and charr were recorded at low densities in all three basins. Many thanks to Prof Peter Maguire for helping with the Loch Maree survey.



Jim Raffell, Stephen Buttle (FRS Shildaig project) and Ron Greer sorting the catch in the WRFT office as Dr Eric Verspoor (background) takes standardised photographs of each fish.

Another successful Family Day by Loch Maree

Over 60 people attended the Loch Maree family day on 11th October. The heavy showers stayed away for the guided walk to the hotel burn and through the woods to the Talladale River in search of fishes and other wildlife. Trout, minnows and an eel were caught by the electro-fishers from the Hotel burn and inspected by many enthusiastic children. Larger salmon parr were found in the Talladale River.

Thanks to Jim Raffell of FRS Shildaig sea trout project for plankton sampling demonstrations and explaining the 'science' of scale reading to budding fish biologists in the boatshed; to Lindsey Duncan, HC Countryside Ranger and Nicola Talloch of SNH who had their very own tent 'with a view...' with wildlife displays and bird cake making demonstration. And thanks, again to Mark Vincent and Nick Thompson at the Loch Maree Hotel for burgers, refreshments and a warm fire in the ghillies bar.



A toad, found by one observant youngster, was carefully inspected prior to release. . . (photo by Lindsey Duncan)

In Brief

• Tournaig trap news

The salmon smolt run petered out in early May and for over a month there were no fish. Then after the first summer rainfall, a few more smolts were recorded, the last taken in mid July, delayed by over two months by low flows. These late smolts may have been trapped in pools between the loch and the sea. The total salmon smolt run of 332 was about 200 less than anticipated from the results of electro-fishing surveys in 2007.

Low flows prevented the ascent of salmon and sea trout from the sea in July and August. Despite a record salmon smolt run of over 600 in 2007, only 11 salmon, plus an escaped farm salmon had been recorded by the end of September. Then, in early October, another 8 wild grise were taken, bringing the total number of wild salmon to 19. To date, seven finnock have also been taken in the upstream trap.

Thanks to Ben Rushbooke for operating the trap and Marine Harvest for funding.

• WRFT Biologist helps film wild salmon for BBC 'Natural World'

Throughout the year, BBC film crews have been recording the wildlife of the Loch Maree area, for 'Secrets of The Highlands' to be screened in spring 2008. The film, produced by Fergus Beeley, will follow the special wildlife of the area as the seasons change.

In August 2008, the WRFT biologist teamed up with Aaron Forsyth and John Sangster of the Wester Ross Marine Reserve Partnership and using an underwater camera recorded salmon and grise in the River Ewe for the film.

• WRFT Fisheries Management Plan consultation

With support from the Scottish Government, WRFT is producing a fisheries management plan to guide its work over the next few years. For those with broadband, sections of the draft plan can be downloaded from the WRFT website. A final draft will be prepared by the end of the year. Please phone the Trust to arrange to see a paper copy (150 pages).

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