

# Wester Ross Fisheries Trust

Newsletter, September 2024



## A dry and sunny spring, then a cool and very wet summer . . .

For wild salmon and sea trout, so far 2024 has been a year of mixed fortunes. Spring 2024 in Wester Ross was relatively dry. River flows for May for the River Ewe and River Carron were only 45% and 47% of 1991 to 2020 averages respectively (source <https://nrfa.ceh.ac.uk/>), not so good for emigrating salmon and sea trout smolts making their way downstream to the sea, especially from the smaller, shallower streams.

In contrast, Summer 2024 was cool, wet and windy; not good for many tourism businesses but almost ideal for wild salmon and trout (both adults and juveniles). River flows for June for the River Ewe and River Carron were 126% and 131% of long-term averages respectively; for July, 166% and 121% of averages; and for August, 157% and 227% of averages: exceptionally high flows. The first half of September continued with much rainfall and below average temperatures; but then, at the time of writing, the sun has come out . . .

Frequent spates have allowed adult salmon to enter from the sea and provided good conditions for angling.

## Signs of spring spawning herring seen from shore and from space. . .

In March, this story made the BBC newpage [here](#) as well as the WRFT news page [here](#). Subsequently shoals of 'whitebait' (often a mix of sprats and juvenile herring) were seen during the summer in Loch Gairloch and in Loch Ewe.

*(below) Picture taken just after herring eggs were found on the sea bed to west of Aultgrishan on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024: happy survey team and herring eggs sticking to ROV (photos by Peter Cunningham)*



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## . . . and then a summer of many large whales

In July and August, wildlife tour boats from Gairloch and Ullapool, and passengers on the Ullapool - Stornoway ferry enjoyed record numbers of encounters with Humpback whales and Fin whales in the Minch. We were very happy to support Steve Truluck of Hebridean Whale Cruises with efforts to learn more about whale diet through sampling of Humpback whale faeces.

Observations of feeding whales and from sampling (. . . it was bright red and floated) indicated that Northern krill was a major food source attracting these whales, perhaps rather more so than pelagic fin-fish including herring.



Pelagic food-webs are complex. Krill are also eaten by herring and juvenile salmon. Fish-finders indicated that there were also large shoals of fish not so far from where the large whales were feeding, sometimes in the outer parts of Wester Ross Marine Protected Area.

What determines the size of krill populations in the seas around Wester Ross?

*(above) Humpback whale feeding on krill in the outer Wester Ross Marine Protected area. Look out for more of Steve's remarkable pictures and videos at <https://www.facebook.com/SteveTruluckAtSea/> and on the BBC website.*

## Peter Jarosz retires as WRFT Administrator and WRASFB Clerk

On 11<sup>th</sup> June, several trustees and colleagues enjoyed a meal at the Myrtle Bank Hotel to mark Peter Jarosz's retirement after 18 years in support of wild fish populations and fisheries in Wester Ross. All at the Trust and the Board thank Peter for dedication far beyond official paid hours.

Much of Peter's work was behind the scenes. Following the covid pandemic, Peter was instrumental in setting up the 'new' Wester Ross Fisheries Trust, gaining support from diverse stakeholders and for coordinating fisheries management activity for both the Trust and the Board, including overseeing many projects. The defence of wild fish populations and fisheries from many pressures, including those associated with salmon farming (which can take a lot of time) can be a rather thankless grind. That Wester Ross retains some relatively healthy wild salmon populations is partly thanks to Peter's work.

We wish Peter a good recovery after a recent car accident and look forward to meeting up for a cup of tea from time to time, to find out about how the honey bees are doing . . .

*(right) Peter Jarosz, Peter Cunningham (WRFT Biologist), and some bee-friendly plants outside the Myrtle Bank Hotel on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2024 (photo by Sue Ward)*



## High numbers of sea lice on early-returned sea trout near Ullapool in May 2024

Sweep netting teams have been busier in 2024 than in previous years, with new monthly sea trout sampling at Gruinard Bay and in Loch Torridon (two sites) in addition to traditional sites the River Kanaird estuary, Loch Ewe, Flowerdale (Loch Gairloch), and Applecross. Reports can be found [here](#).

Some of the monitoring has been carried out under contract to inform Environment Management Plans [EMPs] for nearby salmon farms.

*(left) Sweep netting team, Ardmair shore (photo by Chloe Hall), (right) Sweep netting team at Kanaird estuary on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2024 (photo WRFT)*



Netting catches have been mixed with good numbers of fish caught at some but not all sites. Sea lice levels were low on sea trout sampled at Gairloch in April 2024, and at Applecross in May and June 2024 in contrast to results at the same locations in spring 2023. However, small sea trout taken at the Kanaird in May 2024 were heavily lice-infested; concurring with reports from local anglers.

*(below) Sea trout with sea lice sampled in River Kanaird estuary on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2024 (photos WRFT)*



Lice levels recorded on wild fish tend to correlate with reported lice abundance on nearby salmon farms, as discussed in 'Reviews' which can be found on the WRFT website [here](#) and [here](#).

In 2024, the Ardmair salmon farm, closest to the River Kanaird monitoring site, reported weekly average adult female sea lice counts in excess of 1.4 per farmed fish (far above Code of Good Practice levels) from week 15 (week of 8<sup>th</sup> April) to week 22 (week of 27<sup>th</sup> May). The Kanaird sea trout monitoring site is less than 3km away from the Ardmair salmon farm.

In contrast, salmon farms in Loch Torridon (closest to Gairloch) and in the east coast of Skye (closest to Applecross) were fallow or just recently stocked in spring of 2024 with reported adult female lice counts of less than 0.05 lice per fish throughout this period.

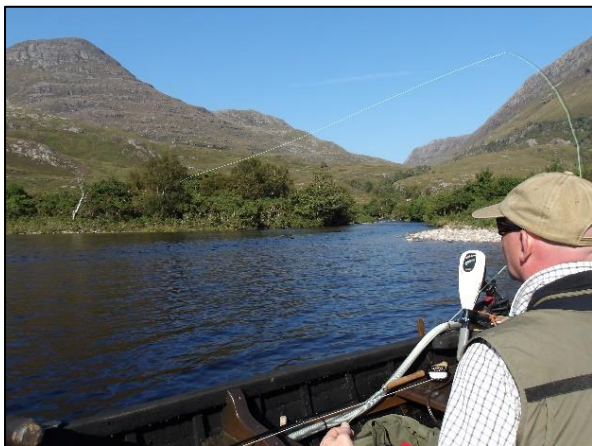
For all salmon farms, the challenge for 2025 is to ensure that lice levels on farmed fish remain very low especially during the crucial spring months when salmon smolts are migrating through coastal waters.

Sea lice monitoring in 2024 has been supported by MOWI, Wester Ross Fisheries, Bakkafrost and the Scottish Government, plus many people from local areas. Thank you to everyone for much help.

## Loch Maree wild trout diversity . . . how many kinds of trout?

Wester Ross is a stronghold for [wild trout biodiversity](#). Loch Maree was formerly a prolific sea trout fishery. However, in recent years there have been fewer sea trout and more 'resident' brown trout recorded in catches.

*Stuart Pickering and Keith Dunbar fishing Loch Maree on 31<sup>st</sup> August (pics by Peter Cunningham)*



*(below)* Here are two 2lb+ trout (both just over 43cm) caught at the south end of Loch Maree on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2024. Both were assumed to be male trout, but look how different they are! Check out the head shape, fin shapes, spot patterns, and colouration. Both were recorded as 'brown trout'. Scale samples have been taken to learn more about their age and life-history from [scale reading](#).



We are always keen to assist research scientists to learn more about wild trout population structuring in Loch Maree and in other lochs around Wester Ross using the latest genetic methods, in support of wild trout conservation.

Thank you to Keith Dunbar for organising the fishing day, to Neil Macdonald for boat and seeing us off, and to Stuart Pickering for demonstrating how to catch big trout on a bright calm sunny day!

## 2023 rod catches of salmon were the lowest in recent years for some rivers in Wester Ross

Catch figures for the 2023 season highlight a continued decline of wild salmon in many rivers and the need to do all that can be done to support struggling populations. Figures and commentary can be found via links and [here](#) and [here](#) . Provisional reports for 2024 season so far suggest some recovery in rod catches of salmon.

We have been working on several project proposals to support production of juvenile salmon from rivers in Wester Ross. In November 2024, we plan to pilot new methods for providing supplementary nutrition to streams where a lack of food due to declining numbers of adult salmon returning from the sea may be one of the factors limiting smolt survival, through a project part-funded by Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation [HIEF].

*(left) Too thin? Anaesthetised salmon smolts sampled on their way to sea in April (photo by Mark Williams); (right) Salmon stream nutrition was discussed at the [Torridon salmon and sea trout workshop in April 2024](#).*



## Is the water mould Saprolegnia killing too many wild salmon?

There is increasing concern about the possibility of new strains of the water mould Saprolegnia affecting wild salmon and trout populations following death of many salmon in some of the river in the east of Scotland in 2023 and 2024. Please report any diseased fish that you find via links [here](#) <https://fms.scot/fish-health-and-disease/> .

Thank you to Alasdair Macdonald (Dundonnell estate), Ray Dingwall (Inveran Estate) and staff at Hendrix Genetics Inverkerry smolt farm for supporting a study to learn more about the occurrence of different strains of Saprolegnia in rivers in Scotland. More information can be found at <https://ifm.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Saprolegnia-in-salmonids.pdf> .

## On-line course about wild salmon biology, ecology and conservation in Wester Ross

We are currently putting together a new online learning course, scheduled to start in November. This course will focus on the biology, ecology and conservation needs of wild Atlantic salmon, and is aimed at anglers, ghillies and wildlife enthusiasts who might like to know more about salmon and what they can do to help to support wild populations. It will consist of a series of learning materials for you to work through online at your own pace over a 4-week period, plus the opportunity to join online discussions each week with us and fellow participants. The course will be delivered by Peter Cunningham and Dr Sue Ward. We anticipate a charge of around £40 for the course.

If interested in participating, please email us at: [education@wrft.org.uk](mailto:education@wrft.org.uk)

## Bruachaig wild salmon revival?

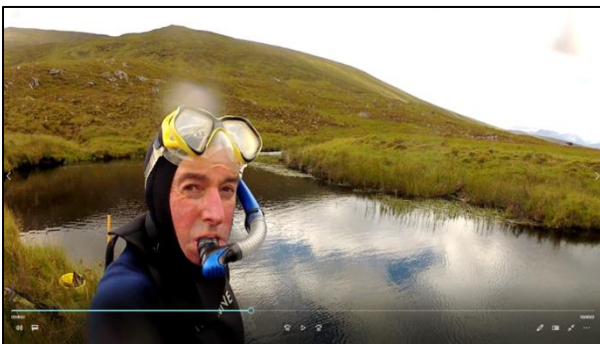
The Bruachaig River is one of two main tributaries of the Kinlochewe River, the main wild salmon and sea trout spawning stream within the River Ewe - Loch Maree system. In the 1950s, a large pipeline was built to divert water from the Bruachaig headwaters into Loch Fannich as part of the Conon hydroelectric power scheme. Between 2014 to 2017, several smaller hydro power projects were developed in the Bruachaig catchment area.

Following an earlier juvenile salmon stocking programme to revive a wild salmon population above the Bruachaig falls led by WRFT (2007 to 2014), there is renewed interest to progress the revival of wild salmon. Previous efforts may not have been in vain; both salmon fry and salmon parr of wild spawned origin were found above the Bruachaig falls in August 2024 for the first time since 2018.

*(below) 12<sup>th</sup> August 2024: a horrendously midgy day by the Heights of Kinlochewe (Franki Kalinowski and Nic Butler)! But we found two year-classes of juvenile salmon; they grow well (photos WRFT).*



A report has been drafted to describe stream habitat in Srath Chrombuill above a series of difficult, but not impassable waterfalls, following a survey in August 2024. This area has all the features required for salmon: some very large holding pools for adult fish, good spawning habitat, and several km of good mixed juvenile habitat.



The upper Bruachaig (above the falls) may be able to contribute an additional 3000 and 6000 salmon smolts per year; an additional 10% – 20% of smolt production for the River Ewe system as a whole. Discussions are ongoing about how best to support the revival of a wild salmon population in this area.

*(left and below) Srath Chrombuill has several km of good habitat for a wild salmon population (photos WRFT)*



## Thank you!

Most of the work that the Trust is able to do is dependent upon many supporters and helpers. If you would like to find out more about helping with our work, membership or anything else, please contact Sue Ward at [admin@wrft.org.uk](mailto:admin@wrft.org.uk) or Peter Cunningham at [info@wrft.org.uk](mailto:info@wrft.org.uk).