

A photograph of a person standing in a river, surrounded by dense green trees. The person is wearing a blue jacket and dark pants. The river is flowing, and the trees are lush and green. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking across the river towards the person.

Finavon Castle Water River South Esk

New Year 2016 Newsletter

Some Thoughts on Floods

Unprecedented river levels of many Scottish and English rivers brought the old year to a tumultuous end. The Aberdeenshire rivers, Dee and Don, were among the worst affected. There are months ahead of clean up, insurance claims and expenditure on trying to re-establish some sort of normality for river proprietors and long-term tenants.

For SEPA, the Scottish Government agency responsible for flood management, these floods should be a reminder that in many Scottish rivers catchments flood management regimes simply cannot cope with these extraordinarily high river levels. The same issue is of course relevant to English rivers such as the Cumbria Eden and Lancashire Ribble.

Wisdom From The 1970s

In 1970 Jeremy Purseglove wrote 'The Taming of the Flood' (ISBN 9780008129354. William Collins) which to many people, including myself, is a Classic which says all that needs to be said about the morphology, history and natural history of rivers and wetlands. The book is well worth reading because it defines the necessity of a catchment approach to managing river flows. Each catchment requires a different approach, depending on its topography.

Are Flood Defences The Right Concept?

'Flood Defences' is the battle cry of the media and beleaguered flooded communities. But the word 'defences' describes exactly what is wrong with current flood management practice because the issue should be about prevention, answering this question, "How can peak flood events in this catchment be absorbed by its natural resilience (flood plains) to spread the flow physically over a long period?" 'Defence' suggests there is an attack: if there is no attack because the flood water is dispersed, there will be less need for 'defences'.

A Change In Philosophy Is Coming

To implement an effective flood prevention regime we need to allow the natural 'sponge' characteristics of a river catchment to work. For example, that will require forestry practice to move towards contour planting and farmers with land in the flood plain to allow flooding. If that means giving grants to farmers to allow planned inundation at times of flooding that is a cost worth bearing, as anyone living in York, Inverurie or Perth will tell you.

Exciting New Perspectives for Salmon Fishing on The South Esk

Doubtless you have heard by now that from 2016 there will be no coastal netting for wild Atlantic salmon anywhere in Scotland. The effects of this radical change will offer the South Esk, probably more than any other river, the prospect of improved runs of both salmon and sea trout. To claim that 2016 is an exciting prospect is an understatement.

A Long History of Coastal Netting

I have been trying to find out when the South Esk was last free of nets. The Finavon Castle Water catch records go back to the 1880s, but netting salmon was widespread along the Scottish East coast centuries before that. It might be reasonable to claim that salmon netting of the South Esk goes back to pre-Roman times!

Thousands of Salmon and Sea Trout

Those records frequently refer to the huge catches of both salmon and sea trout by coastal, estuary and in-river nets. In some years between 1960 and the late 1990s there were more than 20,000 sea trout caught during one season in the South Esk District. In 1967 for example, a staggering 34,354 sea trout were killed in the District, while twenty years later in 1987 the declared net kill was 10,750 salmon & grilse and 9,336 sea trout. More recently, in 2007 nets declared 3,144 salmon and 1,464 sea trout killed in a year when rods caught and returned over 70% of a total catch of 1,003 salmon and 747 sea trout. The point I want to make by listing these declared catches is that they show the potential of the South Esk. That potential has never been fully appreciated, until now.

Mixed stocks coastal netting. Confined to history!



Spring Runs Heavily Exploited by Nets

The fragile stocks of multi-sea-winter spring salmon, returning to the South Esk between January and June, have been decimated by coastal nets. A recent example is May 2011, when the Usan nets said they killed 2,307 multi-sea-winter salmon in that month, about 35% of which are likely to have been South Esk fish. That same month saw reasonable catches of fine spring salmon on the South Esk, nearly all of which were returned alive to the river. It is evident that the South Esk District has been the 'milch cow' for the netting industry -- until now. We should remember that declared catches by Usan Fisheries Ltd may not tell the whole story. The track record of that company suggests that the declared catch numbers are likely to be less than actual catches, perhaps considerably so.

A New Dawn At Last

For the first time in hundreds of years salmon and sea trout will have unobstructed access to the river throughout the season. Salmon have been netted for so long that it may take a few years before the full potential of the river is realised. Until last year we know that as many as 3,500 salmon and grilse belonging to the South Esk were killed by coastal nets each year. Logically therefore, in 2016 we should see an immediate increase of salmon and grilse in South Esk pools.

Our Responsibility Is To Conserve Wild Salmon And Sea Trout

With this new regime comes increased responsibility for anglers to demonstrate their support for conservation. Put simply, that means we must kill less fish. Ideally I believe we should return over 90% of the salmon we catch alive to the river. Iain MacMaster will advise visitors on all aspects of fish handling and C&R. Iain's guidance will be based on current regulations and fishery board guidelines plus our own conservation policy. While FCW is not a 100% Catch & Release fishery, we do not kill many fish, and those that are selected for the angler to take home will be clearly defined in terms of sex, length and condition.

A beautifully composed photo of salmon netsmen on the beach at Lunan Bay, probably in the 1930s



The Finavon Castle Water Experience

We have worked hard over the years to develop the 2.8 miles of runs, riffles and pools at FCW into a fly fisher's delight. The prospect of arriving on the shingle bank of the Red Brae to fish down the length of The Wall to that magical taking spot, where the current is deflected to the middle of the river, is a delight in itself. Anticipation and the experience merge as you fish that perfect water. There are many other pools that offer that level of excitement: pools such as House, Tollmuir, Indies, Melgund, Beeches, Nine Maidens, Pheantry, Kirkinn, Volcano, Willows and Tyndals. The pool names read evocatively - like a poem!

I have included below another dimension to the 'FCW Experience' by describing my response to the winter river environment:

A Midwinter Gloaming Visit to Red Brae at the Solstice

I walk the mile to Red Brae every day to give my two ageing Labradors their constitutional, not to mention the same for their master. At this time of year the river is deceptively quiet. At the winter solstice one could be forgiven for thinking that the river sleeps....

The confluence of the Lemno Burn with the South Esk provides a perfect vantage point for looking down the Red Brae. The ambience is much enhanced by the original FCW hut, which, like a Grimms Fairy Tale woodcutter's dwelling, serves to keep our visitors warm and dry, or a place to sleep through the quiet hours of the night, depending on the time of year.

My favourite place is the stone circle, which we call 'The Broch', like a winkle shell, where there is a stone seat. From there is an unrivalled view of the RB Wall right down into the tail of the pool, Kirkinn and the head of Pheantry. That view enables the observer to see fish entering the pool, after which they often show briefly at the end of the Wall as they either settle into a lie, or prepare to move upstream through the neck of the pool into Craigo Stream and on upriver.

An aspect of sitting on the stone bench at the ' Broch' is that the viewer is concealed and in a perfect position to witness wildlife movement. The Broch is slightly raised above the level of the banks and woodland, which gives it the characteristics of a high seat. After a few minutes the surroundings return to their natural rhythms following the brief rupture caused by a human arrival at the Broch. From there you have an uninterrupted vista of about three hundred yards of river and riparian woods. On your right is the high bank of red soil and stone which is the 'Red Brae' itself. That Brae gives the place a sense of enclosure, like being inside the nave of a great natural cathedral.

On many occasions over the last thirty years I have seen roe deer and red squirrels coming to the pool to drink. Sometimes they swim the river to the south bank, scarcely pausing before plunging into the river. Generations of otters and their families use the Lemno and Red Brae sanctuaries as home, raising their families and using the place as their play and hunting grounds.

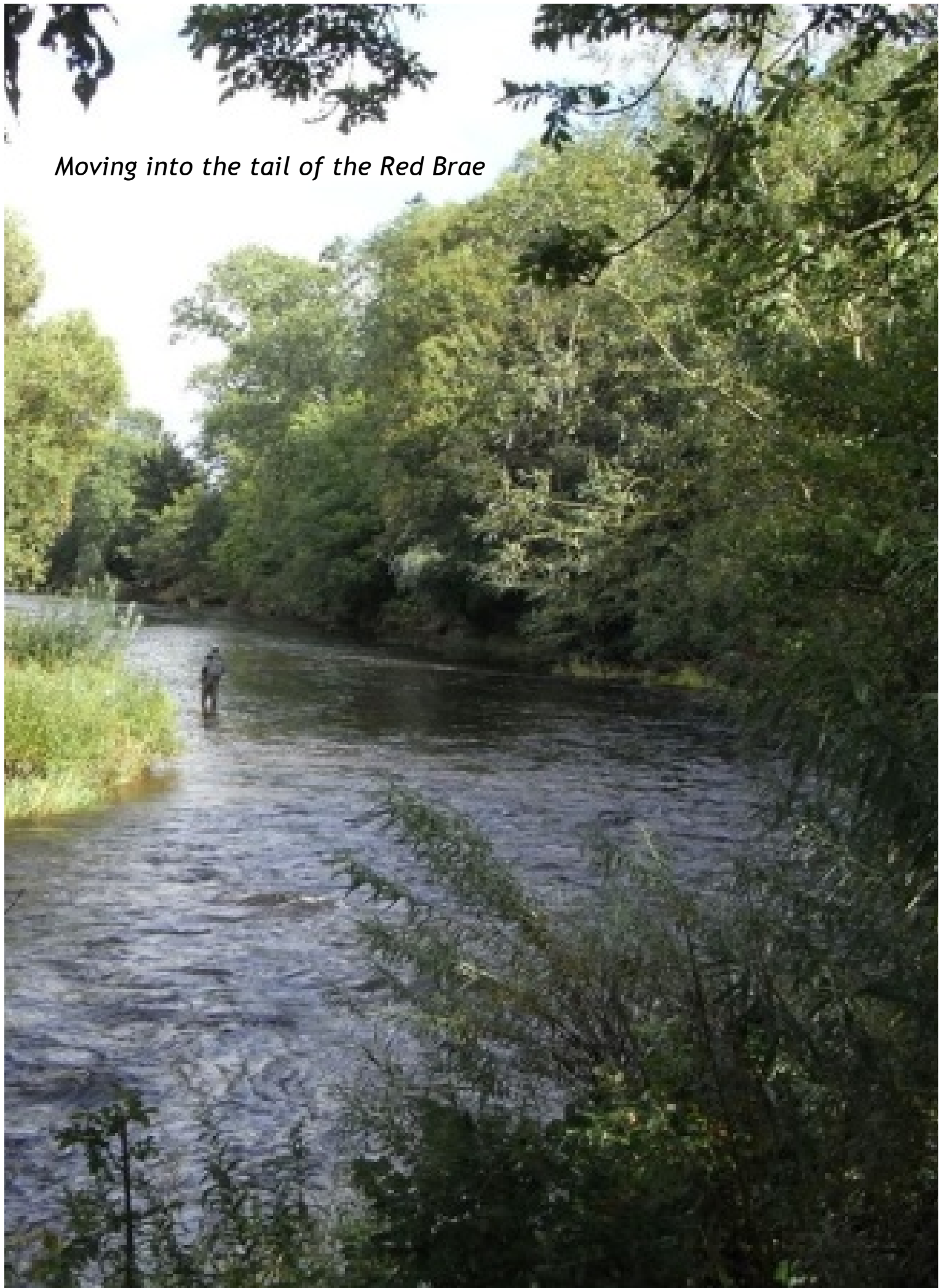
Sometimes, while fishing for sea trout at night, otters have surfaced within a rod's length of where I was standing. Occasional Ospreys, blizzards of buzzards and wood pigeons, electric blue flashes of passing kingfishers and obsequious dippers bowing and scraping to the visitor as they feed among the stones, dainty watery wagtails scooping ephemerids from the water surface, are all part of the daily rosta of our own local wildlife through the seasons.

Sitting on on that stone bench in the Broch can be a chilling experience, so a waterproof cushion is a useful comfort for the wildlife watcher. In these mid winter days the River is unrelenting in the force and flow of its clean mountain water. The tangential low light of a Scottish winter solstice gives the water an impenetratable reflection like the blade of a mediaeval broadsword, so different from the translucence of summer. There is very little surface movement, save the occasional bobbing dipper or diving goosander. No sign of parr taking flies from the surface, very few salmon or kelts showing.

To those who live beside the river through the months of the year, the lack of activity is felt to be deceptive. We know that within the river there is abundant life. Kelts struggling against the winter current as they slowly move down river, tail first. Ephemerids at the chrysalis stage of their metamorphosis, freshwater mussels filtering organic matter from the flow, and above them the honking skeins of pinkfoot and grey lag geese on their daily feeding and roosting rhythms.

That is winter at Finavon for the interested visitor. I feel the power of the coming year in subtle changes in colour and texture to the end-of-branch foliage of alder, birch and willow. On the shortest day I feel rather than see the darkening light and the promise of the surge of growth and renewal that post-solstice light and Spring warmth will bring. In the darkest day lies the prospect of the luxuriant abundance of May and June, which is the outcome of the unseen activity of today, the shortest of the year.

Moving into the tail of the Red Brae



Finavon Castle Water Communications

We try to keep prospective and existing fishing visitors up to date with what is going on at FCW and the wider context. Our website is much enjoyed by many people, especially the webcam and blogs/bulletin sections. The Fishpal website provides useful information on the South Esk, as well as recent catches, rod availability, prices, places to stay and reports. Iain's weekly Fishpal report on both Esks is also informative and much appreciated by anglers far and wide.

www.fishpal.com/scotland/esks/finavoncastlewater

Contacts

If you want 'up-to-the-minute' news you can e-mail me on colonsay@hotmail.com (mobile 07748 634 658)

or

Iain on salmosalar88@hotmail.co.uk (mobile 07824 428 825)



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