

EXTRACT FROM AUGUSTUS GRIMBLE'S BOOK. THE SALMON RIVERS OF SCOTLAND. THIRD EDITION. 1913.

CHAPTER XLI

THE YTHAN

Rises from the Wells of Ythan, some eight hundred feet above the sea, in the Aberdeenshire hills, lying to the east of Huntly, and pursuing a winding, smooth-flowing course of about forty miles, falls into the North Sea at Newburgh, some fifteen miles to the north of the Dee.

The Earl of Errol, Mr. Udny of Udny, and Lady Gordon Cathcart are the chief owners of the nettings, which are sublet to tacksmen ; the other river proprietors are Miss Buchan of Auchmacoy, Mr. A. J. L. Gordon of Ellon, Mr. H. W. Gordon of Esslemont. Colonel Rae of Auchterellon, Colonel John Turner of Turner Hall, Mr. A. J. Forbes Leith of Fyvie, and the Earl of Aberdeen, who owns the best and largest share of the river, as it flows through his estate for some fourteen miles on both banks, from the borders of the Fyvie estate on the north to the boundary of the Esslemont estate.

Over nearly the whole of this lengthy stretch of water his lordship most generously and freely gives permission by tickets, reserving only a small portion for himself and his guests at Haddo House.

On the upper part of this water there is a very pretty glen called the Braes of Gight, with which some interesting reminiscences are connected, the place having originally belonged to Lord Byron's mother.

The average take of fish to the rods on the whole length of the river belonging to the Earl of Aberdeen is about a hundred fish each season. From Ellon Bridge to Fyvie, pike are rather numerous, though kept down as much as possible.

The Ythan is a famous netting river, and from 3000 to 5000 sea trout, besides salmon and grilse, are usually captured, the chief run of fish being in August and September, though the sea nets begin to get fish from the 1st of March. In the tidal water at Newburgh there are about four miles attached to the Udny Arms Hotel, where at times good sport from a boat may be had with sea trout and whitling, upwards of a hundred having once been got in a day by two rods.

Each season the Ythan nets, and sometimes the rods, get some very heavy fish. In 1892, Dr. Fowler, of Ellon, on Lord Aberdeen's water, had one to the fly of 44 lb. (Jock Scot, Silver Doctor, and Butcher are the three favourites) ; and Mr. C. G. Smith, the factor, had another of 36 lb. ; while the small museum at Haddo House contains a stuffed fish of 51½ lb., which was found dead in a little backwater, where it had been left by a flood in January 1895. It was a cock fish, and, had it been fresh from the sea, would have weighed but little short of 60 lb.

The October fish are the heaviest, and, strange to relate, during the month of November there is always a large run of heavy fish, a fact which, in 1891, induced the District Board to petition the Secretary for Scotland to extend the rod season for a further fortnight, or at least ten days ; under the circumstances this seemed a reasonable request, which, had it been granted, could have done the river no harm, for, in the opinion of many of those who live on its banks, there are each season more spawners in the water than suffice to fill the spawning beds, as is evidenced by the great numbers of cock fish found each season which are either wounded or dead from fighting.

Perhaps had this extra ten days been granted to the rods, it might have been followed by a petition for a further ten days of netting, which it would have been difficult to refuse.

In 1889 the Fishery Board Report states that the sea nets took 5620 salmon and grilse against thirty-seven got by the whole of the river rods ; this, however, was a season of great drought, which accounts for the enormous disproportion. In 1890 there were 5227 salmon and grilse netted as against seventy taken by the rods ; and in 1891, 6528 were captured, and 300 fell to the rods, and this latter year may be taken as a fair average for both nets and rods. In

1892 and ever since, the lessees of the nets have refused to give any information to the Fishery Board of the numbers of fish caught by the coast nets of the Ythan district.

The take of the years already given amount to a total of 17375 salmon and grilse as against 407 to the rods, or forty-two fish to the netters for one to the anglers ; it may, however, be taken for granted that the net fishings have not fallen off, or the lessees would have been complaining, and therefore the chances are that the sea catches have even exceeded the figures given, in which case the lessees may well feel somewhat bashful about making such returns of their gains as would perhaps lead to a rise in their rentals.

In face of the opinion held by many of the dwellers on Ythan side — i.e. that there are already too many fish on the spawning grounds — the District Fishery Board have just put up a hatchery by the river side on the estate of Auchterellon, which will take 200,000 ova, though the benefits will probably be wholly absorbed by the sea nets. Here, then, is yet another of the many instances of coast nets unduly depriving a river of a fair and proportionate stock of spring fish ; and here, as in other places, the bag- and stake- nets should be set wider apart from either side of Ythan mouth, or the weekly close time should be lengthened ; and if that were done, then the spring angling belonging to the upper proprietors of the river would speedily become a valuable and realisable asset, as indeed it should be.

At present, rumours are prevalent that a fresh Royal Commission is about to be appointed to revise the existing Salmon Fishery Laws ; therefore at last the upper proprietors of salmon rivers may hope for some betterment of their present anomalous and hard position, and the public may likewise expect that salmon as a " food supply " will eventually become a reality, and not a mere empty form of parliamentary eloquence.

In 1904 the rods caught about 100 salmon. In 1905 the rods caught about 150 salmon, the heaviest 27 lb., from Haddo House water. In 1906 the rods caught about 120 salmon. In 1907 the rods caught about 120 salmon. In 1908, no records. In 1909, about 130 salmon.

This is also a very good sea trout river. Here are the takes of the Ellon Castle water : —

In 1902, 260 sea trout. In 1903, 200 sea trout, 7 salmon. In 1904, fishing a failure. In 1905, 300 sea trout, 10 salmon. In 1906, no record, 6 salmon. In 1909, no record, 9 salmon. In 1910, 150 sea trout, 15 salmon. In 1911, 302 sea trout, 15 salmon. This take is made on about three miles of the river, chiefly on both banks.