

A NINETEENTH CENTURY DISEASE OUTBREAK

Older anglers will remember when the still rather mysterious ulcerative dermal necrosis – UDN – began to afflict salmon in the late 1960s. What is thought to have been an earlier outbreak of UDN arrived in Scotland in 1877 and similarly to the 1960s outbreak decayed away over the following decade. During this nineteenth century visitation a Mr George Minty of St Mary's, Fyvie wrote as reproduced below to the Ythan District Salmon Fishery Board on 6th April 1882.

Dear Sir,

I wish to bring under your notice what I believe to be the prevalence of salmon disease in the Ythan. I have never seen the disease before but the state of the fish I have examined appear to correspond exactly with the symptoms of disease given exactly by Prof Huxley. Yesterday and today when out on the river for a little I picked out two salmon in a dying state covered with the fungus. There are several dead fish lying in the bed of the river; the only one I could reach I found to be covered with the fungus also. In the clear water I saw several fish which had the white spots on the head and back while the frantic leaping and rushing along the surface of the water of the salmon in general in the pools indicate the beginning of the disease in others. I wish a diseased salmon could be submitted to the examination of an expert. I would be willing to give any assistance I can.

The consequences to our fishing I fear will be very serious. There has scarcely been a spring flood to take down the kelts this season and there is an unusual number of them still here.

The river is now very small and the salmon are all crowded into the deep pools. When one thinks of the amount of water which according to Huxley even one fish can pollute and also of the great numbers in our small stream the prospect is dark enough. Could not something be done by the water bailiff to remove these dead and dying fish from the river? and so in part stop the spread of the disease.

I am

Your obedient servant

George Minty

The UDN outbreak of the late 1960s took place when salmon/grilse numbers were high and this was also the case at the time of the 1877 outbreak. Never the less it is revealing to read Mr Minty's description of the numbers of salmon he was seeing in the Ythan at Fyvie in April. The writer recalls first seeing its impact at Fyvie in October 1968. That so many dead or dying salmon and grilse were to be seen made him wonder if such numbers of fish were previously present in October but remained unseen and uncaught. During UDN outbreaks many of the infected fish develop patches of fungus as a secondary infection and the combination of the two often kills. However he was struck on that 1968 late October day by how a few dead fish were pretty well unblemished. Scenes similar to those described by Mr Minty were evident for a few years from 1968 into the early 1970s during December if water levels allowed sight of fish during the spawning period, typically in December although there seemed to be few casualties before spawning.

Apart from the many adverse environmental factors that can affect salmon a disease outbreak is something that salmon could well do without at the present time. Rather worryingly, a

virulent form of fungus – saprolegnia – has appeared in a few rivers this past year or two and is being investigated at the University of Aberdeen.