

Fisheries of the Ythan

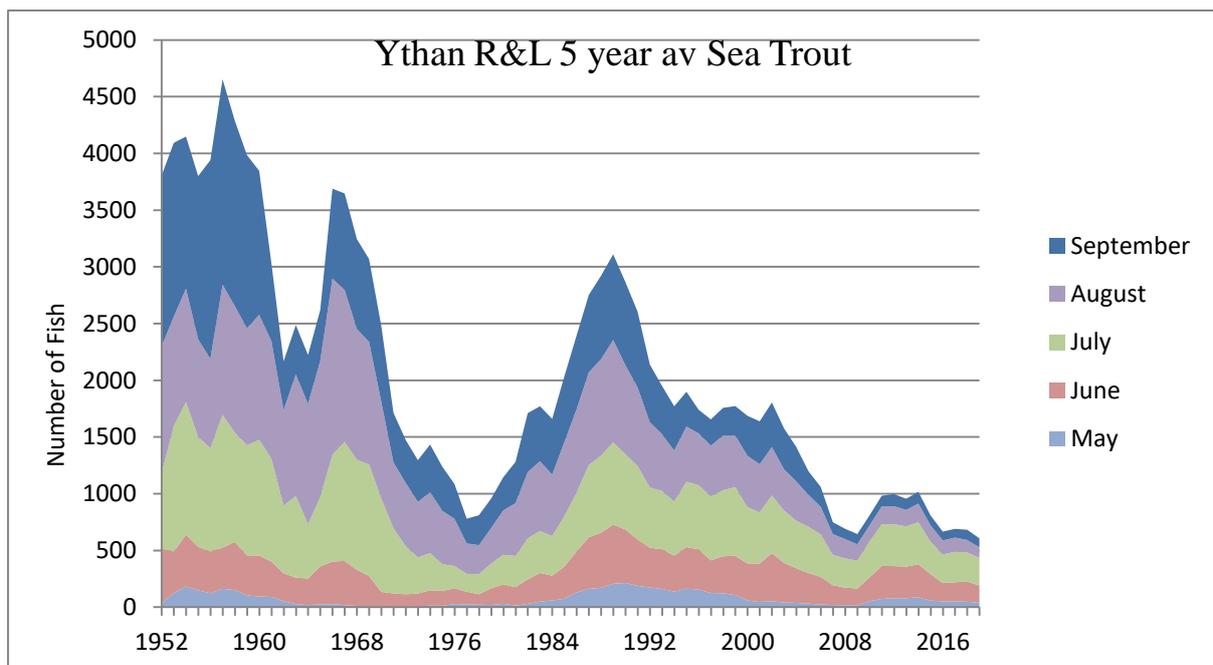
Since 1952 all salmon, grilse, and sea trout landed in Scotland should have been recorded and annually reported to the government fisheries office. Since 2004 this has also applied to finnock.

The Sea Trout Fishery

Since the late nineteenth century the tidal waters of the Ythan have been held in high repute as a sea trout fishery for anglers. Indeed in its high periods it was the equal of, if not surpassing, any other in the country.

Catches of sea trout by anglers in the tidal waters combined with those from upriver are available for 1952 onwards. Inspection of these reveals two unfortunate features. Firstly, many fish did not reach the reported catches since on occasions major fisheries must have failed to make annual returns, witness annual catches of 7,500 and under 600 during the 'good times' of the 1950s and 1960s. Secondly, prior to 2004 finnock were erratically both recorded and included in returns of sea trout. Additionally individual anglers whether on tidal waters or upriver had to be trusted to report their catches as would have been requested on their permits.

The figure below shows the reported sea trout catches as a running five year average which to an extent smoothes out the misleading annual variations mentioned above.



The two dips in catches in the 1960s and in the late 1970s are due to missing returns from major fisheries. The figure shows that sea trout catches today are well below those of earlier years. Upriver anglers have also landed upwards of 1,000 finnock some years in the February to April period adding more in September and October. Nowadays angler effort on the estuary is below that of earlier years before the decline in numbers of fish present and the competing attraction of rainbow trout fisheries.

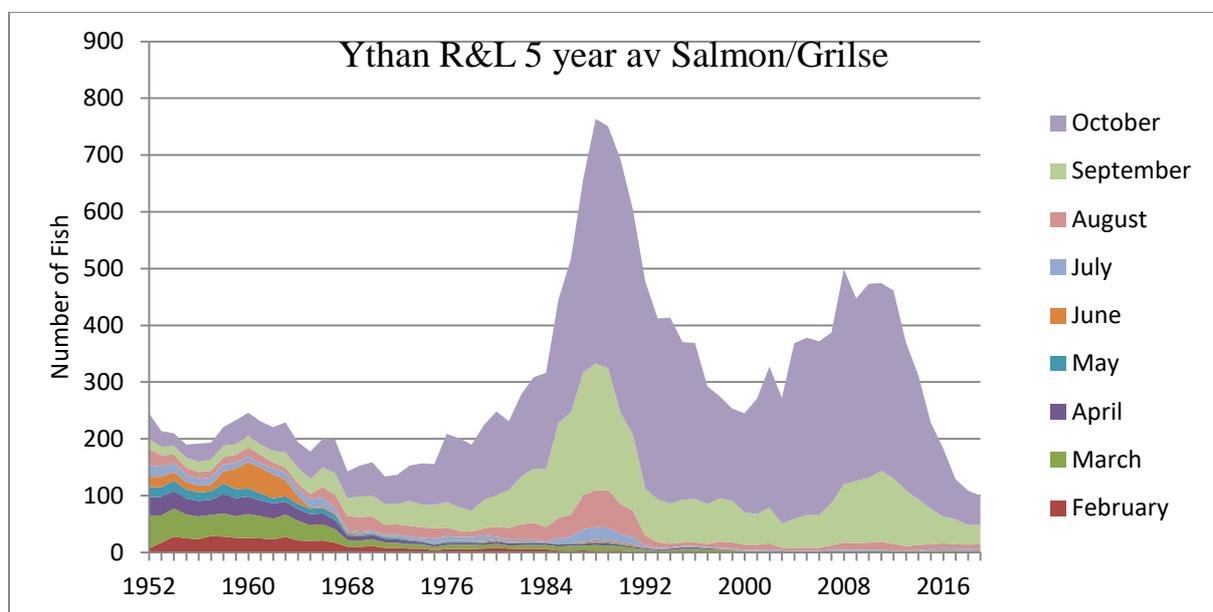
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The final years of fishing before a lack of fish and the economic consequences brought about the closure of the main Ythan coastal fisheries were the mid 1990s. Since 2016 coastal salmon fisheries in Scotland by law can no longer operate.

The decline in numbers of early running salmon over the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as springers, is clearly seen with their replacement by later running salmon although these later fish will have included large later season grilse which appeared at this time and above around 8 pounds were marketed as salmon. The two peaks relate to two years of uniquely high salmon catches.

The great increase in grilse numbers starting in the late 1960s is clearly illustrated together with their decline in numbers prompting the closure of the major fishing stations in the 1990s.

The modest salmon angling fishery in the upriver Ythan went essentially unrecorded before 1952. Since then it might be diplomatic to simply say that the extent to which salmon or grilse have been recorded has been improving up to the present day. A high percentage of fish landed now reach the official catch statistics while the figures in the 1950s hint at the local reporting channels getting into gear. The figure below shows the reported annual catches as five year rolling averages.



In the above figure salmon and grilse are combined since many of the late season fish landed since the late 1970s have been larger grilse reported as salmon.

That the rod fishery in the 1950s and 1960s also depended on early running salmon is clearly seen. A near complete swing to what is largely a grilse fishery in the final two months of the season is also apparent. The dip in catches in the late 1960s and early 1970s was due to the UDN outbreak not to a lack of fish since this period yielded the highest net catches in the 1952 to 2015 period. The bulge for August in the 1980s is due to an exceptional August catch in the very wet summer of 1987. The peak in annual average catch in 1988 and 1989 follows on from a number of wet autumns and also possibly the closure by this time of many coastal netting stations in the North East and the Moray Firth. The salmon fishery in the river is very dependent on flow in the river, nowadays particularly in the final months of the season. In fact the annual catch in recent years can vary by a factor of up to seven between dry and wet autumns.

Well known to salmon anglers in Scotland are the low annual catches since 2012. The sea trout angling catch shows a similar trend. The reasons for this are much debated. With the Scottish

commercial net fishery, which in the 1960s and 1970s landed upwards of five times as many fish as anglers, now gone one would have expected angling catches to be as high as ever they were. This decline in salmon numbers led the government to introduce conservation measures in 2016 which, for the Ythan, presently require anglers to return unharmed to the river all salmon or grilse which they land.

The main reason or reasons for the present day low numbers of salmon returning to our rivers are thought to lie out at sea, whether in near or distant waters or both is unknown. Some hold the view that certain creatures which fly or swim and eat fish are having a significant impact and should be reduced in number. While the monitoring of post smolts in the ocean is challenging and expensive, modern miniaturisation of tracking devices is allowing the passage of smolts down river and out to sea to be monitored. This work should in time establish whether the attrition of pre adult fish is very largely well out at sea where on their migration to feeding grounds and back they encounter ever changing currents, temperatures, prey availability and predators.

The present diminished numbers of fish returning to home waters has not impacted equally on all sea ages groups running at different times. Early running salmon numbers seem to be low but fairly stable, late spring and summer numbers of salmon may be modest but increasing while late running salmon are now very few. Grilse numbers have markedly declined over the past eight years with the late season grilse now much reduced in number. This seeming pattern of developing runs is not ideal for the Ythan when the late spring and summer is when sustained favourable flow in the river for angling is not common.

As an optimist one might expect that the metaphorical tide will turn and increasing numbers of salmon and sea trout are only a few years away. The decline in numbers a few years ago was quite abrupt, just after the best angling year recorded in 2010, so why not an equally rapid change for the better?