

Published in 1937 in a book promoting rivers reached by the LNER.

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## THE YTHAN

This river lies some twelve miles North of Aberdeen and offers some of the best sea trout and finnock fishing to be had on the whole East Coast. It can be reached by motor bus direct from Aberdeen or from Ellon station, LNER. While fishing is obtainable further upstream, the best ground for sea trout and finnock is undoubtedly the estuary. The Ythan flows down through a big estuary, roughly about three miles in length, and with great sand dunes on either side. From the scenic point of view the place is perhaps a little bleak, but of the quality of the sport – after all, the chief consideration – there can be no doubt whatsoever.

A daily charge is made for the fishing, and a very reasonable one. To my mind, the great advantage of the Ythan estuary fishing lies in the fact that, even in the worst of droughts, sport is always possible, even probable. Therein lies the advantage of tidal water. Twice a day the tide obligingly runs up the estuary, bringing the sea trout with it, so that all the visiting angler needs is a copy of the tide tables, and he can arrange his programme in accordance.

There are two methods of approach – by wading or by boat fishing. Each has its place in the scheme of things, and should be regarded as complementary to each other. Personally I prefer to wade, because then one is entirely master of one’s own fate and captain of one’s own ship, so to speak; while when boating the ghillie is, usually, very much in charge of the proceedings. Again, there is a huge stretch of wading ground, and you can go where you will, there is any amount of elbow room, and, most important of all, there is no need to book a boat in advance, or, failing in so doing, finding that they are all engaged. But on the other hand, if you wish to take your full advantage out of the Ythan, you should both wade and boat. The reason I will give later in this section.

*Four paragraphs on the gear required are not reproduced here.*

And now to procedure. At low tide the river is about twenty five yards wide, and at hightide a good half a mile. The time to begin wading is three hours before low water. As the tide recedes, you can wade down, gradually getting out to the true river bed. It is a grand place for wading, just a sloping beach with a very good footing right down to the river channel. Now many an angler has been tempted by the wide expanse of water to fish as far out as he possibly can; but this, I think, is often a mistake. The sea trout have a habit of nosing alongshore through all the tiny channels in the beach and also for the beds of sea weed. All these places hold trout food in abundance, and therefore it is wise to fish the inshore water very thoroughly indeed.

*Three paragraphs on how to fish a natural sand eel are not reproduced here.*

Right on the time of low water, fly fishing with a one inch hackle terror, or the ordinary sea trout flies, is the best method, I think, as the current is then easy and small lures are more appropriate to the conditions. The whole channel is then easily covered with a ten foot fly rod.

As the tide comes swirling in across the sand, the angler will gradually be driven farther inshore, and the pace of the current will increase. It is then policy to increase the size of the lure.

At about three hours after low water it is advisable to take to the boats. This phrase, I admit, sounds rather like a newspaper description of a maritime catastrophe; but if you wish to catch sea trout a boat is very essential for the best results at this time.

The Ythan boats are both light and narrow and draw very little water. The idea is to ease the work of the oarsman, who is obliged to stem an exceedingly strong tide, and therefore a design which offers little resistance to the water, either vertically or laterally, is chosen.

The procedure, when the tide is running full bore, is to zig-zag from side to side exactly like a Tay or Namsen boat, and harl a big three inch terror, natural sand eel or devon minnow. The chief drawback to this proceeding is the floating weed, which possesses an affection for the trailing lure only exceeded by that of a small boy for chocolate! Every now and then one has to haul in, remove a long piece of weed, and pay out line again. But how the big sea trout do fight in the fast water! They have a nasty knack of spinning round and round and, in so doing, sometimes twist the hook out. I have seen the gut joining the hooks of a three hook terror twisted up in the most extraordinary fashion, with four complete round turns in it! The smaller fish of a pond to a pound and a half are as active as one could wish, and, with the weight of the stream behind them, take a bit of stopping.

The estuary is frequently a wonderful sight. Sea trout can be seen rising everywhere, and they seem to keep very near to the surface as rule.

Perhaps the reader would be interested in some recent bags made on the Ythan estuary, so I append a few taken from the Udney Arms Hotel Fishing Book.

The record sea trout weighed 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb, measured thirty two inches long and nineteen inches in girth, and was caught on 11th July 1929. The second largest pulled the scales down to 10  $\frac{1}{4}$  lb, and was killed in the same year, on 25th May. Other fine sea trout of 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ lb, 8lb 13 oz, 8lb 2oz, 5  $\frac{1}{4}$ lb, 6lb, 4lb 6oz and plenty of 3 pounders are recorded in the hotel book. The angler in search of big sea trout might, therefore, do worse than try his luck at Newburgh.

If, however, he likes numbers rather than great size, well, the Ythan is a very accommodating river, and can supply his requirements. For example---

Two rods, 102 trout in ten days fishing

One rod, 8 sea trout and 7 finnock in one day

One rod, 16 trout and finnock in two days

One rod, 14 sea trout in one day

One rod, 19 sea trout weighing 14  $\frac{1}{2}$ lb in one day

Two rods, 25 sea trout in one day

One rod, 24 sea trout in one day

Three rods, 120 sea trout and finnock in three days

Fishing is also to be had further upstream at Ellon, and here some excellent bags of sea trout and finnock have been made. I know of one local angler who has taken fifty finnock on fly in

a day at Ellon. This, however, was some years ago, and nowadays the finnock do not run far upstream or so frequently as they did.

It should also be noted that the Ythan is a good salmon river. Some four hundred fish are grassed each year. It is essentially a spring river, for the salmon fishing tapers off very much after the end of May. In 1935, one angler landed over twenty five salmon to his own rod. Of course, salmon fishing is more or less hopeless in the estuary; in recent years I have only heard of one salmon being caught there, a 17lb fish killed by an Aberdeen angler and measuring thirty six inches in length by nineteen inches in girth. On account of the rarity of such a feat, quite a sensation was caused among local anglers. For some reason salmon never do take well in salt water. Upstream however, above the influence of the tides, the Ythan as I have said, is a good spring salmon stream.

Altogether I should describe the Ythan as a capital river for the sea trout angler, and one in which - given ordinary luck - some really good sport may be enjoyed.

*The same author, 'Jock Scott' in 1936 published a book titled 'Game Fish Records'. Below are extracts from the section on the Ythan.*

The Ythan is some forty miles in length and falls into the sea at Newburgh, North of Aberdeen. It is a first rate sea trout river and also holds salmon and brown trout. My best thanks are due to Mr A W Campbell and to the Proprietress of the Udney Arms Hotel for the records of Ythan fishing.

First, as to salmon. The Ythan, in a good season, yields some four hundred salmon to the rod the spring fish averaging 8 ½ lb (9 ½ lb in 1935) while autumn fish run 18lb to 20lb. In October 1932 over a hundred salmon were caught averaging 20lb. *(The statements here about autumn fish are more than a little surprising – has the author got some of his information mixed up? Compare them with the above 'essentially a spring river' which is correct for the date.)*

The largest rod caught salmon of which authentic details are on record is one of 44lb taken by the late Dr Fowler of Ellon 35 years ago. There are several legendary 50lb fish; but in every case they appear to be very old records and lacking in confirmation.

The 1935 spring season was uncommonly good; to May 2<sup>nd</sup> 256 salmon were caught up to 17lb in weight; the three most successful rods taking 20, 18 and 16 fish respectively. *(It is intriguing that such a specific figure for the whole? river was obtained.)*

During the opening months – February and March – it is usual to hook three kelts to one clean fish, but in April the kelts return to the sea and in May the spring salmon fishing tapers off. As regards method – in 1935 about one half of the total spring salmon were taken on eel tail or minnow, one quarter on worm and one quarter on fly. Mr Campbell gives it as his opinion – based on forty years' experience – that the spring fishing is today similar to that of thirty years ago but that there are more fishers and also more experts.

Owing to its large estuary the Ythan has always been famous for its sea trout fishing. The tide runs up four miles; the fish run up the river in July, August and onwards spawning in October and November. Baskets of ten and fifteen fish are quite common on the estuary and, during a spate, on the river inland. The fish average 1 ½ lb with occasional large fish.

On May 25<sup>th</sup> 1929 Mr T Walker caught a sea trout of 10 ¼ lb. At that date it was the record fish. This record however was soon destined to fall for on July 11<sup>th</sup> of the same year Mr Alex Cruickshank took a very fine fish of 11 ¾ lb measuring 32 inches long by 18 inches girth. This fish was set up. (*Note that this fish is 14 ¾ lb above.*)

Baskets of 36 fish in a day (in August 1934) 25, 24, 20, 18 and 15 are recorded from the estuary. The fishing here is from boats or from the shore (wading) and hackle 'terrors' are largely employed.

An unusual incident occurred on October 20<sup>th</sup> 1934. Mr A Wilson caught a 17lb salmon close to the mouth of the river. The fish measured 32 inches long by 19 inches and is remarkable on account of its capture so near the sea.

Up to some fifteen years ago the Ythan was an excellent finnock river in spring and autumn. The fish averaged about ¾ lb with a few pounders and provided the finest of fly fishing. For some reason unknown to the local anglers finnock do not now run the Ythan beyond a few miles from the estuary except for a few 'strays'. Fifteen or twenty years ago they came up in shoals to a distance of fifteen miles and good baskets were made on fly and minnow.

The record bag was made twenty years ago by Mr William Grant of Methlick. It was made on 25<sup>th</sup> February ten miles from the tideway - 85 finnock all taken by worm on Stewart tackle. These fish came from one pool, the Minister's Pot, some three hundred yards in length. The most recent big run of finnock occurred in October 1923. Nowadays the finnock fishing is confined to the tideway and the lowest reaches.

As a brown trout stream the Ythan is only a ghost of its former self. Mr Campbell blames the large increase in the number of anglers, sheep dip, tar from roads, and drainage. In bygone days black fishing with gaff and torch was prevalent and hundreds of gravid fish were taken. The champion blackfisher boasted that he took fifty salmon per annum for twenty years or one thousand fish in all but eventually retribution, in the shape of the water bailiffs, cut short his career. At the present time the river is well watched.