

**THE CANDACRAIG FISHINGS - RIVER DON, STRATHDON,
ABERDEENSHIRE.**

**Advisory Visit Report Undertaken on behalf of
The Wild Trout Trust**

By Ron Holloway MIFM

On 4th October 2002



River Don, Candacraig Fishings, Strathdon, Aberdeenshire.

**RH Associates
Magdalenehall Farm
St Boswells
Melrose
Scottish Borders TD6 OEB, Tel. 01835 824387**

E-mail :- ron@ronholloway.freeserve.co.uk

Candacraig Fishings – River Don - Aberdeenshire
Advisory Visit Report 4th October 2001

This Advisory visit was undertaken by Ron Holloway (R H Associates) on behalf of the Wild Trout Trust (WTT) in the company of Bill Watson, Lessee of the Candacraig and Edinglassie Fishings on the River Don.

Objective of Visit:

To look at the River Don within the boundaries of the fishings and to pinpoint and identify any limiting factors that may be controlling the survival of the native/wild brown trout and to suggest any actions which could be undertaken to address any identified problems and to recommend any other work that could be done to enhance the wild brown trout population and its habitat.

Background

Bill Watson has leased the fishings from the Candacraig and Edinglassie Estates for the past five years and intends to retain the lease for the foreseeable future. The fishery has been lightly fished over recent years, mainly due to the fact that the day and weekly tickets that were available only from the Colquhonnies Hotel became almost unobtainable for a period when the hotel was closed for eighteen months prior to the new landlord taking over. The old landlord was not interested in the fishing or its potential for attracting fishermen to stay, so many of the fishing lets were lost. The new landlord is very keen to promote the fishing and together with Bill Watson are once more promoting the fishing and the hotel as an attractive destination to stay and fish for wild brown trout.

The fishery is a totally wild, self sustaining brown trout fishery with the occasional salmon and sea trout being caught. There are six miles of river with good access to both banks. 99% of the river bank is fenced off from grazing stock and bank vegetation is excellent with bank erosion being minimal. The substrate within the river consists of rock and cobble with substantial well sorted gravels that provide excellent spawning areas for all salmonids. Water quality appears to be good as instream observation showed that there is a healthy and diverse range of insects present – e.g. Caddis, Baetis and ephemeroptera with fresh water shrimp in

profusion. Due to the well vegetated banks recent large spates have done little or no permanent damage. Annual re-sorting and movement of gravels is to be expected but is not a major problem.

The River, when seen, was at low summer level and even so there were several areas of good trout habitat available, particularly for young of the year and one plus trout. However, with the low summer flows, good deep holding areas for adult trout tend to be few and far between.

Anecdotal information regarding historic catches appear to be rather vague, though the expert visitors and local fishermen do appear to manage to have good, but difficult, sport. There were several references made to the presence of big brown trout into the 5 to 7lb range but general opinion also suggests that there are few 10oz to 1lb plus brown trout.

The Don Salmon Fisheries Board have periodically stocked the tributaries with month fed fry that originated from wild brown trout brood stock taken from the salmon netting station at Newe Mill where netting and trapping for wild salmon brood stocks is undertaken. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that seatrout are now becoming more evident with fish of 4 to 5lbs taken recently. Comments were also made which indicate that, at times, although there has been an abundance of insect surface activity, trout do not appear to rise.

Conclusions:

Observations indicated that the general quality of the native trout habitat is good throughout, though due to the nature of the river banks, at low water particularly, fly fishing is very difficult and it is only with good field craft and delicate presentation that results will be forthcoming – i.e. the more experienced the angler at fly fishing, the better catches appear to be.

The overall impression from this visit indicates that there is very little wrong with this fishery and there are no major controlling factors which might influence the holding capacity for trout. However, some work could be considered which should improve

and increase the present holding capacity of the river, particularly in some of the flat, featureless stretches of the stream.



Picture One: Featureless stretch of stream.

Should the stocking of month fed fry into the tributaries be ongoing then it is suggested that these fish are stocked at swim up fry stage, prior to being introduced to artificial food, furthermore, the time when the non fed fry are seeded out is critical and should coincide with the natural appearance of wild fry at the margins of the stream. Stocking at the month fed stage of the life cycle, mortalities will be great, but the survivors of swim up fry (non fed) to parr stage will be much greater. Cover and food availability at the stocking time is all important and the actual stocking times and the site selected to stock are of highest importance.

Any wild resident brown trout of a large size should be harvested and as such is the nature of this river, these large fish could predate heavily on young of the year and parr. It is suggested that the natural insect life is insufficient to sustain many large insect eating resident trout, the 8oz to 1lb wild trout feed mainly on the natural insect

life to maintain growth but any larger trout if allowed to grow on may well have a significant impact on the survival rate of young of the year and parr by predation.

Recommendations:

Of the many areas visited throughout the fishery there are areas that would benefit from the creation of deeper holding pools. An illustration of what can be done by moving some rocks to create a low flow constrictor that will concentrate the flow at all levels to scour a deeper holding pool is illustrated below.



Picture 2. Before Rock Placement.



Picture Three: Suggested Rock Constrictor.

These constructions as illustrated should be built from substantial rocks that will remain stable during any flood event. The siting and placement is extremely important and a 45degree triangle format is required with the river bank making one side of this equilateral triangle. The best time to build these constructions is at mean base flow (low summer flow) and when being placed, the rock should be no more than approximately six to twelve inches out of water at summer flow levels. At low flow, the construction will concentrate the flow into the middle and create a scour pool. At higher, and flood, level when the construction is submerged, the shape and stability of the construction will continue to direct the flow to the centre of the river and so continue to scour the pool and not the river banks. Furthermore, these constructions, if built as recommended will have little, or no, impact on increasing the possibility of flooding. To further illustrate how these rock constrictors work, more examples will be included in the Appendix to this report.

To create even more holding habitat and feeding lies for trout, in the more featureless stretches, the placement of single large rocks and/or clusters of large rocks will also,

in time, create scoured holding areas around these rocks which will attract trout (see illustration in Appendix)

To enable the fishery to attract disabled fly fishermen, the construction of several of these holding pools could be considered, particularly at the convenient and accessible area beside the lane which would make easy access for wheelchairs and where a series of pools could be created for ease of fishing.



Picture Four – Potential Wheelchair Access Area.

Comments:

The construction suggestions made are suitable for use throughout the whole fishery and plans could be made to enhance other featureless stretches with one or both techniques to improve holding areas.

It should be remembered that in spate rivers any construction has to be built to withstand the highest flood and storm events, so any constructions should be over engineered rather than under engineered. Having said this, some damage and

movement of materials must be expected at times but to help reduce such instances, large rocks should be used that will be able to withstand storm events, but ongoing repair work should be allowed for each year.

An experienced Hi-Mac driver, once the objectives have been explained, could build a double constrictor in a couple of hours. It is recommended that whatever work is planned that prior consultation with the Estate Factor and the Don Salmon Fisheries Board is essential to obtain consent. It is equally as expensive to remove a construction as it is to instal! As already mentioned, it is recommended that large trout be removed, irrespective of condition in order to reduce predation. Catch and release to be encouraged on all 8oz to 11lb trout until stocks have improved and then allow for a few fish to be taken home. It is essential for the guidance of future management strategies for the river that accurate catch records are kept and maintained with all nil returns to be recorded. These catch records will be very useful for future management decisions and should also be readily available to all anglers at the bar of the Colquhonnies Hotel. Potential fishermen do like to see past catch records. These catch records are also a measure of any enhancement work undertaken. It would also be useful if a map could be made of the fishery, showing boundaries, access points and names of the pools.

Once the enhancement work has been carried out, it is suggested that an angling writer (Jon Beer, for example) be contacted and invited to spend a day fishing the river and to stay in the hotel, in return for an article to be published in an "up market" fishing publication. Jon Beer does similar articles regularly in the Trout & Salmon Magazine and this would, in my opinion, be a good way to promote the fishing and the hotel. A further requirement would be a single page leaflet, briefly describing the fishery and the hotel and clearly indicates the fishing day/week ticket costs and includes contact numbers and tariffs for the hotel. Such a leaflet would also be useful to promote the fishing and the hotel.

The ongoing clearance of conifers from the river margins and replanting with deciduous trees should be encouraged. Deciduous trees encourage terrestrial insects which trout feed on and the leaf litter entering the river in autumn, provides an excellent food source for aquatic insects. Conifers provide little insect life and no

vauable leaf litter. The ongoing policy should be to protect the river from any catchment pressures and to enhance habitat where necessary.

Finally, with regard to acquiring funding assistance for any habitat work, it is suggested that a well planned and costed project be presented to the Wild Trout Trust for match funding consideration. Furthermore, the plan should also be presented to the Estate Factor, the Don Salmon Fisheries Board, Scottish National Heritage and SEPA – also for match funding consideration.

The River Don at Strathdon (Candacraig) is in excellent condition and needs little major habitat restoration, working on the principle of “If it’s not bust, why fix it?” The work suggested is enhancement of the habitat and, when completed, will benefit not only resident brown trout but also salmon and seatrout. This is a wonderful fishery and will continue to improve by being protected as it is and when the enhancement work has been implemented this should strengthen the resident trout population.