



Honeybridge Stream



An advisory visit carried out by the Wild Trout Trust – June 2008

1. Introduction

This report is the output of a Wild Trout Trust advisory visit undertaken on the Honeybridge Stream on 22nd June 2008.

The Wild Trout Trust was initially approached by Mr Bob Burbridge to carry out an evaluation of the fishery potential of this small stream with a view to providing advice and guidance on future management. The stream flows through part of the Broadbridge Farm near Ashington which is owned by Mr Stuart Harris.

The comments and recommendations made in this report are based on the observations of the Trust's Conservation Officer, Andy Thomas and discussions with Mr Burbridge and Mr Harris during the site visit.

Throughout the report, normal convention is followed with respect to bank identification i.e. banks are designated Left Bank (LB) or Right Bank (RB) whilst looking downstream.

2. Description of the Fishery

The Honeybridge stream is a small but extremely important tributary of the River Adur in West Sussex. Rising from springs to the West of Ashington, the stream emerges from a culvert just to the east of the A24 at NGR TQ 133 155. This marks the top boundary of the fishery which is soon augmented by treated waste water from the Ashington Waste Water Treatment Works.



Culvert under the A24 marking the top boundary

From this point the stream flows a further 6km in a north easterly direction before joining the tidal River Adur near Partridge Green at NGR TQ180 178. The total length of the stream running through the farm and under the control of Mr Harris amounts to approximately 1km.

The majority of the Adur catchment is made up of relatively impermeable Gault and Weald clay. The water feeding the Honeybridge stream is derived from the chalk aquifer on the northern slopes of the South Downs. At the time of the visit the stream was flowing well and was very clear, being quite different in character to many West Sussex streams which tend to be turbid in nature. Even downstream of the WWT works the stream remained very clear and small trout were spotted in various locations.

Throughout its length the river was extremely overgrown with thick stands of hazel, hawthorn and ash. The stream was only readily accessible in a few areas and generally the channel was in heavy shade. Even in the areas where the tree canopy was thin there was little light reaching the channel due to its incised nature and thick marginal growth of nettle and bracken. Most Sussex rivers were subject to heavy and unsympathetic land drainage schemes during the 1950s and 60s and it is highly likely that much of the Honeybridge stream was dredged to improve agricultural drainage of adjacent meadows.



Stands of nettle and bracken dominate the deep, incised channel

Throughout most of the reach observed, the in-channel habitats for trout were very good with numerous examples of pool, riffle and shallow glide habitats. Many of these were actively being created by lots of fallen trees and small timber debris dams. The comparatively derelict nature of the stream probably enhances its value as a high quality spawning and nursery stream for both brown and sea trout *Salmo trutta* but would render it as an extremely marginal recreational fishery.



Debris dam on the Honeybridge stream

Discarded rubbish and cut timber is not desirable in any debris dam and occasionally when clogged with fine material they can create some difficulty for migratory salmonids. This is rare however, as most debris dams have undercuts that usually make them easily passable for fish, especially after any significant rainfall event. Removing the rubbish but retaining the large woody debris usually allows for access for migratory fish whilst still allowing the dam to actively promote channel scour, promoting pool habitat and freeing up fresh gravels for spawning.

Understanding the role of fallen timber in these streams is crucial. If management is contemplated then you should adopt a policy of retaining LWD in the river channel wherever possible. The West Country Rivers Trust provides a useful guide to the management of natural LWD:

1. Is the debris fixed, if yes then continue to 2, if not continue to 5.

2. Is the debris causing excess erosion by redirecting the current into a vulnerable bank? If yes then go to 5 if not then go to 3.
3. Would fish be able to migrate past it (take into account high river flows). If yes got to 4, if no go to 5.
4. **Retain the woody debris in the river.**
5. **Extract the debris.**

Note: If the debris dam needs to be removed but there is still a significant amount of the root system attached to the bank then it is recommended that the stump be retained for its wildlife habitat value and its stabilising effect on the bank.

LWD not only protects and improves spawning gravels but also provides a high quality habitat for invertebrates, some of which will have a requirement for rotting woody material. Provision of habitats for invertebrates is essential in maximising production for juvenile trout, sea trout and salmon.

Trout and sea trout spawning and nursery habitat was relatively abundant with plenty of gravel riffles. The gravel did not appear to be too compacted and there was lots of shallow marginal cover for juveniles in most locations.



A typical example of a Honeybridge Stream riffle. An excellent spawning habitat with some dappled light reaching the bed.



Evidence of previous coppicing. Some rotational coppicing will help to promote marginal herb growth which in turn will stabilise the banks and help prevent bank erosion and potential silt deposition.

No detailed information about fish stocks on this particular reach is available. Mr Burbridge had observed sizeable trout on previous visits and several small trout were seen during the inspection. The Environment Agency has a monitoring site only 1km downstream and it is understood that they regularly sample trout at this site but have never captured sea trout during their August monitoring programme. The downstream owner has reported seeing sea trout spawn in the stream in the Winter and it is highly likely that many of the small trout observed are destined for downstream migration.

Adjacent land use was mainly laid to pasture with low density cattle grazing interspersed with small hardwood cover strips and woodlands. Potential threats to water quality are more likely to be derived from the nearby sewage works or from pollutants entering the surface water system from the A24 and the village of Ashington just the other side of the dual carriageway.

3. Conclusion

The Honeybridge stream is obviously a superb little spawning and nursery stream for both small brown and migratory sea trout. Entering the Adur right at the top of the tidal reach probably makes this stream even more valuable as a sea trout habitat.

Currently the channel is totally unmanaged and overgrown. This may have some advantages in deterring avian predators as well as unwanted visits from poachers.

Any potential for developing a recreational fishery on this site has to be measured against protecting its wider value as a spawning and nursery stream. Unfortunately the streams value in terms of trout production is unlikely to directly benefit the owner. It is possible that some very limited sport could be had in late September/October (brown and sea trout fishing season extends to the end of October in Southern Region) but this activity would have to be at extremely low levels to be sustainable. Opening up significant sections for angling access could adversely affect its value as a spawning and nursery stream. Some careful trimming to increase the amount of dappled light penetrating the channel may well improve productivity and provide just enough space for a very occasional back-end outing with a small fishing rod.

Maintaining and protecting a small spawning stream is often a thankless task when there is no direct angling benefit. Actively monitoring and conserving a stream of this nature can, however be an extremely rewarding and worthwhile activity in its own right.

4. Recommendations

- This site is vulnerable to pollution incidents and any fish mortality may well go undetected. It is recommended that some regular but simple monitoring of aquatic invertebrates is carried out similar to that undertaken by the Riverfly Partnership. For details of the Riverfly Partnership go to: www.riverflies.org
- Do not be tempted to remove woody debris from the channel unless it is causing an unacceptable erosion risk
- In the densely shaded tunnels allow some sunlight to penetrate the channel by carefully taking out selected high level branches. Low scrubby cover at water level is extremely valuable and should be retained whenever possible. Tree works should only be tackled outside the bird nesting season.

It is a legal requirement that some works to the river may require written Environment Agency consent prior to undertaking any works, either in-channel or within 8 metres of the bank. Any modifications to hard defences will require a land drainage consent on any river designated as "main river". Advice can be obtained from the Development Control Officer.

5. Making it happen

There is the possibility that the WTT could help to start an enhancement programme. Physical enhancement works could be kick-started with the assistance of a WTT 'Practical Visit' (PV). PV's typically comprise a 1-3 day visit where an approved WTT 'Wet-Work' experts will complete a demonstration plot on the site to be restored. This will enable project leaders and teams to obtain on the ground training regarding the appropriate use of conservation techniques and materials, including Health & Safety equipment and requirements. This will then give projects the strongest possible start leading to successful completion of aims and objectives.

The WTT can fund the cost of labour (two/ three man team) and materials (max £1800). Recipients will be expected to cover travel and accommodation expenses of the contractor.

There is currently a big demand for practical assistance and the WTT has to prioritise exactly where it can deploy its limited resources. The Trust is always available to provide free advice and help to clubs, syndicates and landowners through guidance and linking them up with others that have had experience in improving trout fisheries.

Disclaimer

This report is produced for guidance only and should not be used as a substitute for full professional advice. Accordingly, no liability or responsibility for any loss or damage can be accepted by the Wild Trout Trust as a result of any other person, company or organisation acting, or refraining from acting, upon comments made in this report.