



River Meon – Boscage



An advisory visit carried out by the Wild Trout Trust – March 2012

1. Introduction

This report is the output of a Wild Trout Trust advisory visit undertaken on a stretch of the River Meon upstream of Meonstoke. The reach is approximately 100m in length running from NGR SU 612191 downstream to SU 612190.

The request for the visit was made by Mr. Andy Dredge who owns the river and adjacent meadow. Comments in this report are based on observations on the day of the site visit and discussions with Mr. Dredge.

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. Catchment overview

The River Meon rises from the Hampshire chalk aquifer near the village of East Meon and flows south for approximately 37km before entering the sea at Hill Head. The river enjoys a steep gradient for a chalk river, falling approximately 120m from source to sea. The middle and upper reaches of the river flow over deposits of Lower Chalk, which is less permeable than the Upper Chalk geology predominantly found in the rest of East Hampshire. As a result, the Meon tends to have a greater flow range compared to other southern chalk streams. The river at Soberton lies very close to a significant change in geology in the Meon Valley. Above Soberton Mill, the Meon runs over chalk; below the Mill, there is a rapid change to deposited material, principally London Clay and Reading Sand. These deposits dominate the Meon catchment south of Soberton Heath until the river enters the sea at Titchfield Haven.

For much of its length, the river displays the classic chalk stream characteristics of clear water, low soft margins and an abundance of in-channel macrophytes dominated by water crowfoot (*Ranunculus* spp.), starwort (*Callitriche* spp.) and water moss (*Fontinalis antipyretica*). As with most chalk rivers, the channel is heavily modified and in-channel habitats are heavily influenced by the numerous structures and milling impoundments found throughout its length.

Fishery surveys of the Meon conducted by the Environment Agency (EA) have concluded that the river is "a productive brown trout river". The Meon is also noted for a strong run of sea trout although they are rarely targeted by anglers on this system. Sea trout are known to run upstream of Droxford during wet years and the EA have plans to improve access for migratory fish by improving existing fish passes on the lower river. The river also supports a range of coarse fish, eel and strong populations of brook lamprey and bullhead, both of which are designated as species of conservational importance under the EU Habitats Directive.

The Meon (Waterbody ID 107042016640) has been assessed as being in 'Good Ecological Condition' under the Water Framework Directive although the river is

known to be both over abstracted and over licensed for abstraction under the EA's own Catchment Abstraction Management Plan.

3. Fishery overview

The Meon at Boscage has no recent history of being used as a fishery, although the river is actively managed as a trout fishery on reaches both above and below the section inspected. A key driver for the visit was to explore if this short section of the Meon has any potential as wild brown trout fishery and to explore ideas and options for future management and maintenance.

The Meon as a whole enjoys a good reputation as a high quality wild brown trout fly fishery and sections of the river are let to clubs and syndicates on a seasonal basis, as well as some limited opportunities for paying day rods. The beat Boscage is too short to let as a commercial beat but it does offer the opportunity for some occasional low key trout fishing for one rod, which might complement a potential holiday let to provide a fly fishing opportunity for somebody wishing to experience chalk stream fly fishing for wild brown trout.

4. Habitat assessment

The 100m section of the Meon at Boscage is comprised of a long sweeping bend and consists mainly of glide habitat suitable for holding adult brown trout. One or two slightly deeper pools are present which will undoubtedly be attractive holding areas for larger fish. There are pool tails suitable for spawning or shallow riffles, usually associated with trout nursery areas.

Water crowfoot (*ranunculus spp*) was noted and this plant is synonymous with high quality chalk stream habitat. The marginal fringe of native herbs and aquatic emergent plants was relatively luxurious on the LB (Boscage bank) but unfortunately some rather enthusiastic and inappropriate clearance has taken place from the RB by the opposite riparian owners. Removing the natural fringe will leave the RB bank vulnerable to high flow bank erosion and also lead to a loss of in-channel cover for trout. A thick fringe of plants is also essential for providing habitat for the adult life stage of many chalks stream river flies.

Trout thrive in environments where there is a dappled light and shade regime. The section of channel at Boscage is generally favourable, however, one or two willows would benefit from pollarding to protect the trees and enable a little more light to the river. Some direct light is important for establishing strong weed growth and in promoting phytoplankton and invertebrate communities, essential in providing a sustainable food source for local fish communities. In one location a branch has cracked and is nearly blocking the channel. Woody debris is considered to be a valuable habitat in any trout stream and it is recommended that the branch should be winched round parallel to the near (LB) margin and secured with a driven stake or two. This action will avoid a debris dam building up but will help to retain some valuable cover in the river margins.



The small platform near the bottom boundary provides a safe entry point for anglers who would fish the beat by wading slowly upstream.



Woody debris provides valuable cover and habitat. This branch could be pulled around and secured parallel with the near bank.



The marginal plants on the opposite bank have either been recently strimmed or treated with a herbicide. Such treatment is considered to be poor practice and leaves the banks vulnerable to erosion. This section would also benefit from the overhanging willow receiving a pollard to allow in additional light.

5. Conclusions

The Meon at Boscage will undoubtedly support adult wild trout. Only a very light touch is required to open up the tree cover sufficiently to provide some extra light and facilitate some low key access for fly fishing. The treatment of the opposite margin is a concern and if possible some encouragement to allow a sustainable fringe of chalk stream herbs and plants to develop will help to retain trout stocks within the beat.

Fishing activity should be restricted to upstream fly fishing via wading to avoid the requirement for any damaging bank clearance. Fishing activity should be low key and relatively infrequent and carried out on a "catch and release" basis. The section of river will provide a quality experience for a few hours fishing for a single angler fishing perhaps one or two short sessions a week. The reach is too short to sustain any intensive fishing pressure and if fish are caught and taken for the pot then subsequent opportunities will be very scarce until such time that stocks re-populate the beat from above. Fishing will be at its best during May and June, with September also providing some decent opportunities when fish might migrate up from downstream during their early autumn spawning migration.

6. Recommendations

- Try to open up a dialogue with your neighbour over best practice for chalkstream habitat management.
- Do not plant any ornamental or non native trees and plants in the meadow adjacent to the river
- Maintain a luxuriant fringe of plants and herbs. A light trim to facilitate a cast is acceptable but retain as much low overhanging cover as possible.
- Pollard the leggy willows to protect the tree and allow more light penetration. Where possible retain fallen woody debris by securing it to a driven stake parallel to the flow.
- In a high flow year it might be necessary to cut some of the water crowfoot by hand scythe to create lies for trout.

It is a legal requirement that some works to the river may require written Environment Agency consent prior to undertaking those 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 EA's Development Control Officer.

7. Making it happen

There is the possibility that the WTT could help to start an enhancement project. We could potentially help to draw up a project proposal (PP) which could be used to support any application for Land Drainage Consent. The PP might also be used as a document to be shared with potential partners as a vehicle for raising project funding.

Acknowledgement

The WTT would like to thank the Environment Agency for supporting the advisory and practical visit programmes.

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