

## THE CHANGING YEAR

## A Stoat's Tail in the Scottish night

Thrilling sport comes to those who wait for the darkest hour by the famous pools of the middle Dee, in the company of bats

BY COLIN BRADSHAW

FOR salmon fishers, the Aberdeenshire Dee this July was a sorry sight—a river below summer level, with no hint of the grilse run, green algae smothering the bottom, a record heatwave, and tourists swimming in all the best pools. Disappointed flyfishers were packing their bags and leaving for home, their sport abandoned. But this gloomy sight did not deter my companions and I. For us, the conditions were good. Our quarry was sea trout.

Since the Dee is one of the finest salmon rivers in the world, few fishers give its sea trout a second thought. Yet these fish can give exceptional sport. In June, great shoals of 2lb and 3lb sea trout move quickly upriver, many taking up residence in the fat middle beats for the summer. The waters around Aboyne seem to hold particularly good stocks, and, in this June alone, 186 sea trout were caught in the lovely beats of Aboyne Water and Birse, which face each other for three miles downstream of Aboyne Bridge.

Arriving on Aboyne Water, with the heatwave at its height, we made no attempt to fish by day but waited for nightfall and the darkest minutes of the Scottish night. After the previous night's reconnaissance, it seemed that the window of opportunity was from 11.50pm, when at last it was dark, to 12.35am, when the moon rose in the east. That gave us 45 precious minutes, and no time to waste. Pre-planning was vital, so that we would be on the best pools, ready and waiting for the darkest hour to arrive.

Typically, on the first night I was on the river too early. To

quell my impatience, I decided to fish the fast water of the Stones pool, where I could do no harm. It was lovely to be on the river as summer's near-darkness closed in. I took out my thermometer; the river was running at 18°C and, after a baking hot day, the air was warm and comfortable. The oystercatchers were piping down for the night and bats were hard at

stream, jumping as they go, but this one did not; instead, it got off. In the near-darkness, the encounter was thrilling.

The middle Dee, even at summer level, is a joy to fish. The river is still a good size, it runs as clear as crystal and its riffles and glides flow quickly, even in low water. Casting is easy as wide areas of shingle are exposed, giving welcome space for

deeper, hidden holes, before tumbling down a long drop to the pool below. This is a pool of dreams, and clearly on this night it was also full of sea trout.

I began at 11.15pm—too soon, yet again, so I fished the fast water of the neck. Almost at once a bright silver sea trout took the Muddler and ran hard. This early start took fish and fisher by surprise but, even so, I did not venture into the glide of the main pool until it was darker. On my approach, the deep splashes of heavy sea trout shattered the stillness—the most exciting sound that a night-time fisher could ever hear.

With only half an hour of true darkness left I could cover only a small part of the pool, so I concentrated on a hotspot. As the pool fans out, the main current hugs the far bank until a small point marks the start of a wide bay. Here the current continues past the point, slows a little, and turns slightly towards our side, leaving an area of slacker water beyond. Sea trout were showing all around here, but it needed careful wading and a long cast to reach them.

The action was immediate. This time the Stoat's Tail was their choice. On almost every cast the fly was yanked, pulled, and on three occasions brutally savaged. What sport! These sea trout were remarkably strong, beautifully marked, big finned, sleek and in superb condition.

Using the simplest of methods, in the few dark hours we fished at Aboyne that week, we landed 12 sea trout and hooked a dozen more. Who knows how many the dedicated and skilled sea trout experts from the Welsh rivers would have caught? □

‘Deep splashes of heavy sea trout shattered the stillness: the moment had come’

work when, suddenly, the heavy splashes of sea trout began.

Now was the time to move downstream to the Red Rock pool to watch and wait. I checked my watch and my simple set-up: 10ft 6in rod with AFTM #7 floating line sporting a 9ft, 10lb fluorocarbon leader with a size 8 Muddler Minnow on the dropper and a lightly dressed but long-winged (1¼in) Silver Stoat's Tail on the point.

At 11.50pm, I began to fish. In a lovely, steady stream I cast almost square to the current and waited while a nice gentle downstream curve formed in the line and the point fly sank. Then I started to work the fly. I took in line with the left hand in smooth draws of about seven inches at a time. And—bang!

Dee sea trout are savage. They hammer the fly. The top-of-the-water thrashing began and a good fish leapt clear. Big fish generally tear off down-

the night-time fisher and nesting areas for the oystercatchers.

For the next 30 minutes the Red Rock pool was generous. Two lovely sea trout were landed on the Muddler and another lost. On my second night I could somehow sense that the conditions were perfect. The night was warm but still fresh, with perhaps a little high, wispy cloud. As the light faded I started, too early again, unable to help myself.

I had been allocated the best pool on the beat—the Lumels. If a flyfisher was asked to describe a perfect salmon and sea trout pool it would look like this. A fast, narrow neck that seems to go on forever curves gently as it fans open into a beautiful, sweeping pool and long glide. This great pool steadies itself and flows with perfect majesty, 3ft to 5ft in depth, for at least another 200 metres, past intriguing points and bays in the steep bank opposite, and over