

Extract from "The Life of the Sea Trout" by G H Nall, M.A., F.R.M.S.

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Chapter X. II. - The River Ythan

I take the Ythan as a representative of the rivers on the flat Aberdeenshire coast, the general characteristics of which I have described elsewhere.

The Ythan, like the Ugie at Peterhead, from source to mouth, is a river of the lowlands. Its total length is about thirty-six miles. Rising 800 feet above sea level at the Wells of Ythan, six miles east of Huntly (on the Deveron), it flows east, then north-east to Auchterless station, where it bends sharply to the south. From Fyvie, four miles below Auchterless, to Methlick, with many meanderings it pursues a slow easterly course, then, turning more to the south, it reaches Ellon, six and a half miles from the mouth. The tide runs up to the Mains, about a mile below Ellon. The banks gradually open out and the river between sandy links slides into the estuary, which is four miles in length and at high water nearly half a mile in width. This estuary is a remarkable sheet of water, with a southerly trend, parallel to the coast, till at the mouth it closes in and makes an abrupt turn to the east to break through the dunes over a sandbar into the sea, ten miles north of the Don. On the right bank, a mile from the mouth lies Newburgh, a small village crowded in summer with anglers and other visitors.

The tidal waters are more familiar to me as an angler than the upper part above Ellon. From my own observations and from the notes and netting operations of Mr Menzies, I give the following description of the conditions in the lower waters in 1926.

Throughout the year Trout of all ages, from 1-year parr to adult fish may be found in the estuary and tidal reaches, fresh water trout as well as migratory Trout, sea fish too; Mullet and Bass (Sea-perch they call them) may be taken when harling with a Sand-eel for Trout, and a Herring was netted during marking work. In January, February and March, the estuary is full of kelts dropping down slowly to salt water; most of the older immature fish are at distant feeding grounds in the sea. The whitling (*finnock*) stock varies from week to week. Some of the native whitling cling to the estuary; some are dropping back from the upper river; some are moving about the coast or resting in other tidal waters; and travelling shoals of young fish from time to time run in for a longer or shorter rest. Food is scarce, and, even in the salt water, little growth is made. The clean fish reach their lowest condition in February. In April they begin to improve but are still thin. In April they begin to improve but are still thin. By this month kelts are decreasing in number, and whitling (last year's whitling) more numerous. Little new growth appears on the scales before May. In May and in June, first the Salmon smolts, then the Sea-trout smolts, are descending from the upper waters, and the estuary is full of them. In June there are plenty of whitling (this year's whitling) and fish in the intermediate stage between smolt and whitling; numbers of these young fish may be seen running in and out with the tides. At intervals shoals of older fish pay short visits to the estuary. Towards the end of the month the 1-winter adult Trout (which had been smolts and whitling last year), are returning, but at first they follow the tides. In this and the next month, July, condition reaches the highest figure, except in some of the oldest Trout which return later in the season, probably travelling from more remote haunts, where they have spent the summer in rich feeding. In July both whitling and adult Sea-trout are more numerous and larger; at the end of the month the 2-winter adult fish (those which are now in their third post-migration summer) have appeared, following in August by 3-winter and yet older fish. At first the large Trout run in and out as the tide flows and ebbs and show chiefly in the lower reaches near the mouth. As the weeks pass, they settle down higher and higher up the estuary and tidal waters. Whitling are still abundant, but seem to be a travelling contingent; the average size may be large one

week, small the next. Condition is declining among the younger fish. With September the ripening Trout are pushing, or have already pushed, on to the upper river; they are abundant in the topmost tidal reaches. Many of the non-spawners, whitling, and adult Trout, have returned to the sea. In October spawning has begun in the higher tributaries. In November we find the bulk of such older fish, as have lingered in the tidal waters, gathered in the topmost part below Ellon. Most are of these are ripening to spawn. Among them are a few descending fish which have already spawned. The lower estuary holds some of the non-ripening Ythan whitling, reinforced from time to time by mixed shoals from the coast, whilst many of the Ythan whitling are in the tidal waters of other rivers. In December there is little change, save that kelts are becoming more numerous in the estuary and clean fish which have overwintered in the upper river, chiefly whitling, are beginning to drop back to it.

For the size of the river there is a fair stock of Salmon and grilse. But, since the river gradients are slight and there are no obstacles to check their progress, they rarely pause in the tidal waters. The spring Salmon, of which there is a good run, push upwards without a rest; in late summer and autumn an occasional grilse or Salmon is taken by Newburgh anglers, and a considerable number were found below Ellon during marking operations.

The stock of Sea-trout is good, but fish over four pounds are scarce. In our sample (1266 fish) the heaviest weighed 6.75 lbs., and there are three others between 4 lbs. and 5 lbs. Sea-trout of 7lbs. and 8 lbs. are said to be caught occasionally in the Ythan, but some of these have been grilse. One such supposed Sea-trout, 7.5 lbs. in weight, the scales of which passed through my hands, was undoubtedly a grilse. In May 1929, a Sea-trout of 10.5 lbs. was caught in the tidal waters, and its scales were sent to me. It was fourteen years of age, and it had spawned seven times. Though it was said to be fresh run and in splendid condition, yet on the measurements given the figure for K was slightly below .80. The scale growth was not of the Ythan type, and I am more than a little inclined to believe that it was a visitor possibly from one of the Kyle of Sutherland rivers, which had run into the estuary for a rest in its progress along the coast. ON 8TH July 1930, an undoubted Sea-trout was caught by an angler in the estuary, 8.75 lbs. in weight, 10.5 years of age, with five spawning marks. The scale growth was of the Ythan type, and, on the measurements given, the figure for condition was K.84.

In our sample nearly 25 per cent of the smolts migrated after two years' river life, 66 per cent after three years. The average length of the 2-year smolts at migration is 6.7 ins., of the three year smolts, 8.4 ins.

The average length and weight of the whitling is 10.7 ins., 8 ozs.; of the maiden adult Sea-trout in their second post-migration summer (the .1 + age group), 14.6 ins., 1 lb 5.25 ozs.; of the maiden Sea-trout in their third post-migration summer (the .2 + age group), 16.4 ins., 1 lb. 14 ozs.

Excluding the 10.5 lb. And 8.75 lb. fish described above, the oldest was a 3.5 lb. kelt taken in March, which had just completed its ninth year since hatching. The two next oldest had reached the age of 8.5 years. The largest number of spawning marks is five. One fish had this number, a kelt; therefore it had spawned six times.

On pages 165-6 I have commented at some length on the poor condition of the smaller east coast fish in the spring, when such numbers of them fall victim to local anglers.