

YTHAN DSFB HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2026

Draft for Approval



Ebrie Willow Bank Repair April 2022.

Introduction

This report outlines opportunities for habitat restoration within the Ythan catchment, to be delivered through the Ythan and Don Service Level Agreement (SLA) in 2026. Based on previous restoration work carried out by the Don DSFB staff, several key techniques and locations have been identified for improvement. These include, but are not limited to:

- Assessing Potential Debris Obstructions for Fish Passage.
- Ranunculus Weed Cutting.
- Gravel Washing.
- Habitat Surveys
- Green Bank Engineering, Willow Bank Repair.

These activities aim to enhance habitat quality and build upon past restoration efforts. We acknowledge that additional priorities may emerge, as happened with the Saprolegnia infection outbreak last Autumn.

The plan is based on an allocation of 26 days for habitat restoration under the SLA.

1. Assessing Potential Debris Obstructions for Fish Passage

In 2025 there were several obstructions assessed, removed or eased over the Ythan catchment area.

- **Little Water:** Where commercial felling had taken place, accumulation of tree debris had built up, which would have caused concern to smolt passage.
- **Seggat:** 2 wind blown trees were removed along with debris that had collected behind the fallen trees.
- **Fourdon Burn:** On 2 two separate locations obstruction and debris were removed. A Tree stump along with concrete blocks were removed from the Fish pass at Fyvie. Further upstream on the Fourdon burn, a manmade Bridge crossing was having a damming effect, this obstruction was removed.
- **Methlick:** A large windblown Willow tree had fallen over the river just upstream from Lovies Bridge, the Tree almost spanned the width of the river. It fell on a shallow part of the river and was removed to prevent hindrance to fish migration.
- **Fyvie Estate (Mainstem)** An accumulation of dead elm was assessed in 2025 for mitigation in the spring and again in the Autumn period, no action was necessary at this time.

Proposed 2026 Actions

We propose to continue assessments of obstructions to fish mitigation as they arise throughout 2026. All sites that arise will be assessed to determine whether they pose risks to fish passage. If necessary, partial easing will be conducted, while naturally occurring large woody structures (LWS) will be left intact unless they obstruct migration. Additionally, manmade debris (e.g. fencing materials, plastics) will be removed to prevent blockages forming.

In 2025, 5 days were allocated and used to assess and remove or ease obstructions. I have allocated the same number of days for 2026.

Table 1. Activity Details.

River/Tributary	Grid Reference	Activity	Time Scale	Job Description
River Ythan and various tributaries	NA	Assessing potential debris obstacles for fish passage	5 days	Monitor debris obstacles at key periods of fish migration to ensure passage. Intervene where required.

2. Ranunculus Cutting

Targeted removal of the aquatic weed Ranunculus can enhance spawning habitats by preventing fine sediment accumulation. In 2025, 3 Tributaries were targeted for Ranunculus weed cutting. The Ebrie burn, Burn of Fortree which is a tributary of the Ebrie burn and 1 section in the middle reaches of the Fourdon burn. 10 sites were chosen over a 10km stretch of the Ebrie, from Glenebrie bridge downstream to Drumwhindle bridge. On the Burn of Fortree, a 473-meter section was sympathetically cut, still leaving fish cover for protection and good feeding from aquatic invertebrates. On the Fourdon burn, 1 section in the middle catchment was cleared, which will allow salmon and trout to access weed free spawning substrate.

Figure 1 and 2 below illustrating before cutting and after the weed was cleared from the section.

Fig, 1 before weed cutting.



Fig, 2 After weed cutting.



In 2025 I had allocated 7 days for this task, when in fact it took 8 days. The extra 2 days was due to discovering how badly affected the Burn of Fortree was. I have allocated the same number of days for 2026. See table below.

Table2. Activity Details

River/Tributary	Grid Reference	Activity	Time scale	Job Description
Ebrie Burn	Between NJ 93590 40270 Glenebrie bridge to NJ 93300 35820 Drumwhindle Bridge.	Weed cutting	5 days	Cut Ranunculus at key spawning sites to prevent sediment buildup.
Burn of Fortree	NJ 393377 839751	Weed cutting	2 days	
Fourdon Burn	NJ 73185 35990	Weed cutting	1 day	

Gravel Washing

As previously mentioned in past reports, the Ythan catchment has a high sediment load which when coupled with existing land use and historical canalisation, results in a very uniform channel with limited habitat diversity. In locations with low gradient and wide channels, glides and riffles form typically presenting ideal conditions and substrates for spawning by salmon and trout. However, these areas also suffer from the accumulation of fine sediments which can result in compaction of the gravels leading to poorer quality spawning substrate. The Wild Trout Trust have developed a technique to improve the quality of these spawning gravels in catchments like the Ythan by using leaf blowers and pressure washers to mobilise trapped sediments in the gravel. Over the past few seasons, we have adopted this approach at selected sites to improve areas currently monitored in our weekly redd counting programme to great effect.

In 2025 we had chosen a site on the mainstem of the river at Seggat, we were hoping for the same results as the site chosen in 2024 at Fyvie, which had shown great results. Unfortunately, the Seggat site was not as successful as the Fyvie site, with only minimal disturbance of the spawning gravel by salmonids. There could be many reasons why the gravel was not utilised.

Ebrie Burn Gravel Washing Sites,

For the 2026 habitat improvement plan, I have chosen 2 sites for Gravel washing, both of these are on the Ebrie burn and are around 20 meters apart. Gravel washing has not been carried out on the Ebrie since 2021. During Redd counting surveys, it was very evident how compact the spawning substrate had become. This is simply due to the amount of fine sediment that moves through the Ebrie system at certain times, especially after long periods of dry weather, then as sediment accumulates it is then flushed into the streams during very wet spells, colouring the water very quickly. I have spoken to the owners who own that section of the Ebrie gravel washing site, and they have given permission, if it's approved by the Ythan DSFB to carry out this task.

Table 3. Activity Details.

River/Tributary	Grid Reference	Activity	Time Scale	Description of Activity
Ebrie burn Site length 12 meters	Site 1, NJ 93608/40119	Gravel Washing	4 Days	Apply for SEPA engineering simple licence. Set sediment net below site, loosen gravel with hand tools to free sediment. Use leaf blower to further free sediment, rake gravel level over site.
Ebrie burn Site length 8 Meters	Site 2, NJ 93561/40039	Gravel washing	2 Days	Apply for SEPA engineering simple licence. Set sediment net below site, loosen gravel with hand tools to free sediment. Use leaf blower to further free sediment, rake gravel level over site.

Fig 3, Below site 1 Ebrie burn, 12 meters in length.



Green Engineering-Willow Bank Repair

Fourdon Burn is an excellent spawning tributary of the river Ythan and when appropriate water levels are available in the river, the salmon frequently migrate up this stream to spawn. Over recent years there has been some very large floods that have caused bank erosion at one key spawning area on the Fourdon burn. The burn on this section is over widening, so when normal to low flows return, the water in the section becomes shallow as the water spreads itself across the now widened area. Of course, now with global warming and extended periods of dry and hot weather, the water temperature can increase in shallow sections of the stream. The picture below shows the widened area of bank erosion, at the time of the picture taken in January this year, there was a snow melt on and the Fourdon burn was carrying a lot of water. This section has already lost at least 4ft of embankment, and the fence line you can see in the picture, will collapse into the stream in the very near future.

I would like to propose carrying out a Willow bank repair at this site, before the erosion gets any worse and to prevent further widening at this spawning area. There are many benefits from undertaking this restoration technique which include, improving water quality by reducing further erosion, reducing impacts on spawning gravel and invertebrates downstream and create habitat refuges for juvenile and adult fish. It also creates shade once the live willow grows in height to help reduce water temperature.

Fig 4, Below Fourdon burn bank erosion site, between the yellow lines.



Activity details below.

Table 4, Activity details.

River Tributary	Grid Reference	Activity	Time scale	Description of activity
Fourdon burn length 19 Meters	NJ 73460/36753	Willow bank repair	7 days	Harvest materials 2 days. drive in 57 live Willow posts. Using willow canes weave around posts creating a fence, bank fill with woody brash material from site if possible.

Summary

This plan builds on previous habitat improvement works and ongoing annual tasks throughout the River Ythan Catchment. The plan is based on an allocated 26 days and will be distributed as follows:

Activity	Time Frame	Allocated Days
Fourdon Bank Repair, Green engineering Willow weaving.	Jan-April	7
Assessing Debris Obstruction for fish Passage	April-May	5
Ranunculus Weed Cutting	July-August	8
Ebrie, 2 sites Gravel Washing	September	6

Any unused days will be reallocated to other priority tasks identified during the season.

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Acting on behalf of the Ythan DSFB