Fisheries of the Ythan

Since 1952 all salmon, grilse, and sea trout landed in Scotland should have been recorded and reported annually to the government fisheries office. Since 2004 this has also separately included finnock.

The data (1952 to 2025) used in the figures below is Crown Copyright and the source is the Marine Directorate.

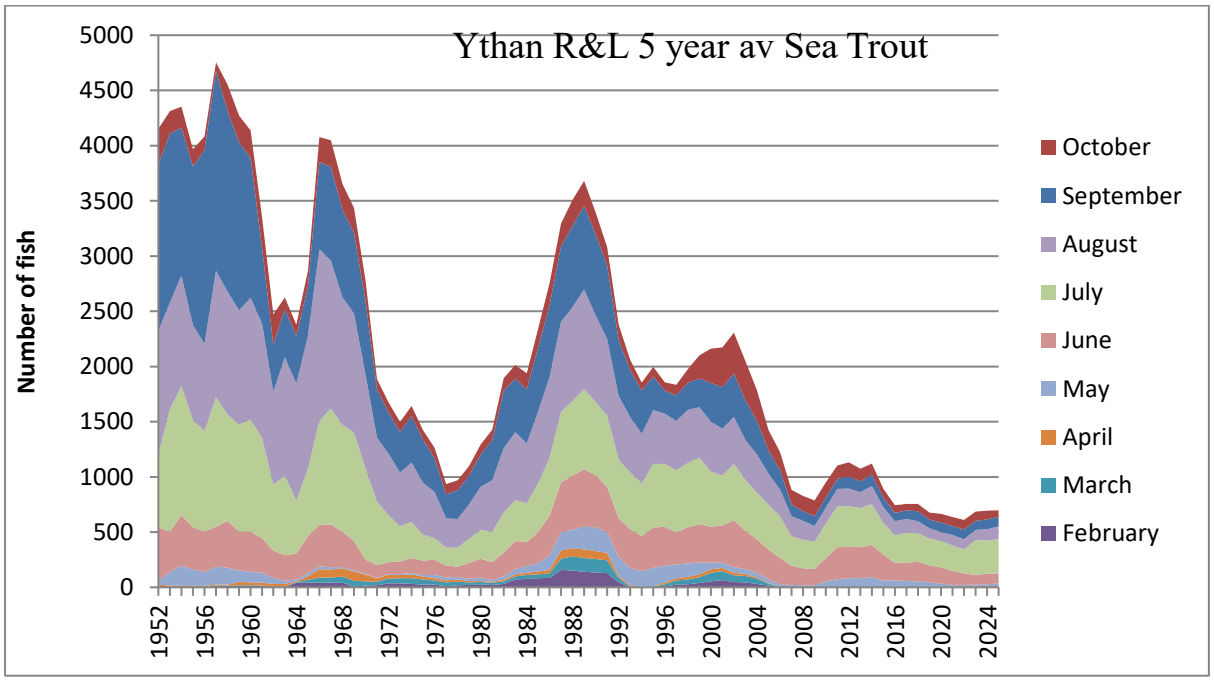
Prior to 1952 a few figures for catches on the Ythan can be gleaned from the writings of Grimble, Calderwood and Rudd (Jock Scott) in the first third of the twentieth century. Extracts from the writings of these authors on the Ythan, and by Nall on Ythan sea trout, are reproduced in this website.

The Sea Trout Fishery

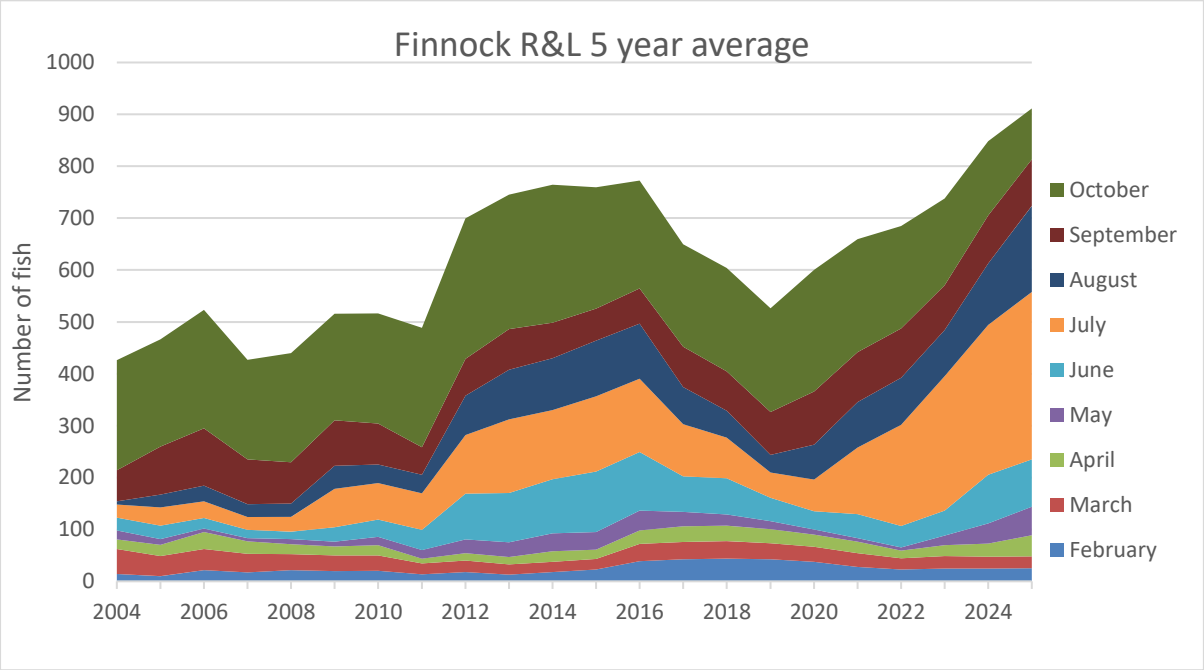
Since the late nineteenth century the tidal waters of the Ythan have been held in high repute as a sea trout fishery for anglers. Indeed in its high periods it was the equal of, if not surpassing, any other in the country in terms of numbers of fish caught.

Reported catches of sea trout by anglers in these tidal waters combined with those from upriver are available for 1952 onwards. Inspection of these reveals an unfortunate feature. Many fish did not feature in the reported catches since on occasions major fisheries must have failed to make annual returns or else did not collect catch information, witness total annual reported catches of up to 7,500 and down to under 600 during the 'good times' of the 1950s and early 1960s and even a year of under 200 in the mid 1970s. In 'Highs & Lows24' on this website these annual figures are given. Also, prior to 2004, finnock are believed to have been both erratically recorded and included in returns of sea trout. Additionally individual anglers whether on tidal waters or upriver had to be trusted to report their catches as would have been requested on their permits. The author has both seen evidence and heard accounts from anglers of many decades ago indicating that the actual magnitude of the sea trout catches by rod and line in the peak years of the 1950s and 1960s will sadly never be known.

The figure below shows the reported sea trout catches as a running five year average which to an extent smooths out the misleading annual variations mentioned above.



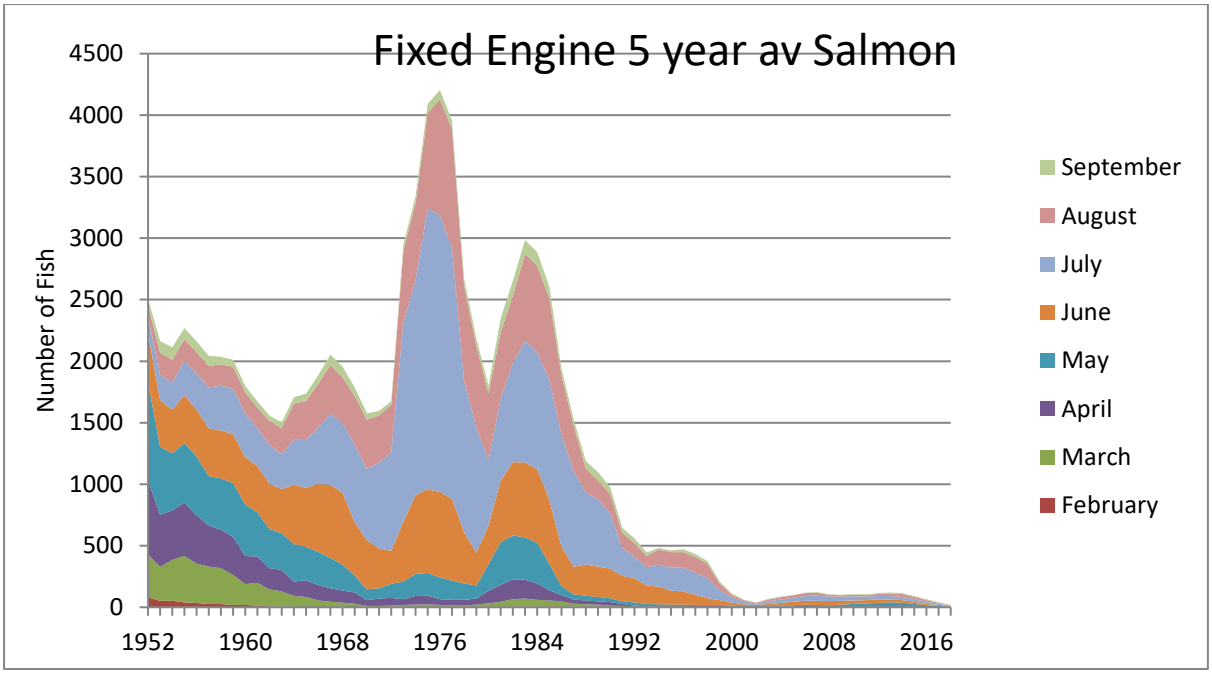
The two dips in catches in the 1960s and in the late 1970s are thought to be due to the factors suggested above for major fisheries. The figure shows that sea trout catches today are well below those of earlier years.
Nowadays angler effort on the estuary is below that of earlier years driven by the decline in numbers of fish present and the competing attraction of rainbow trout fisheries. Previously in dry summers the Ythan estuary attracted many local anglers and for a few years an annual inter club competition took place.
The diagram below shows the reported finnock catches since they have been separately sought.

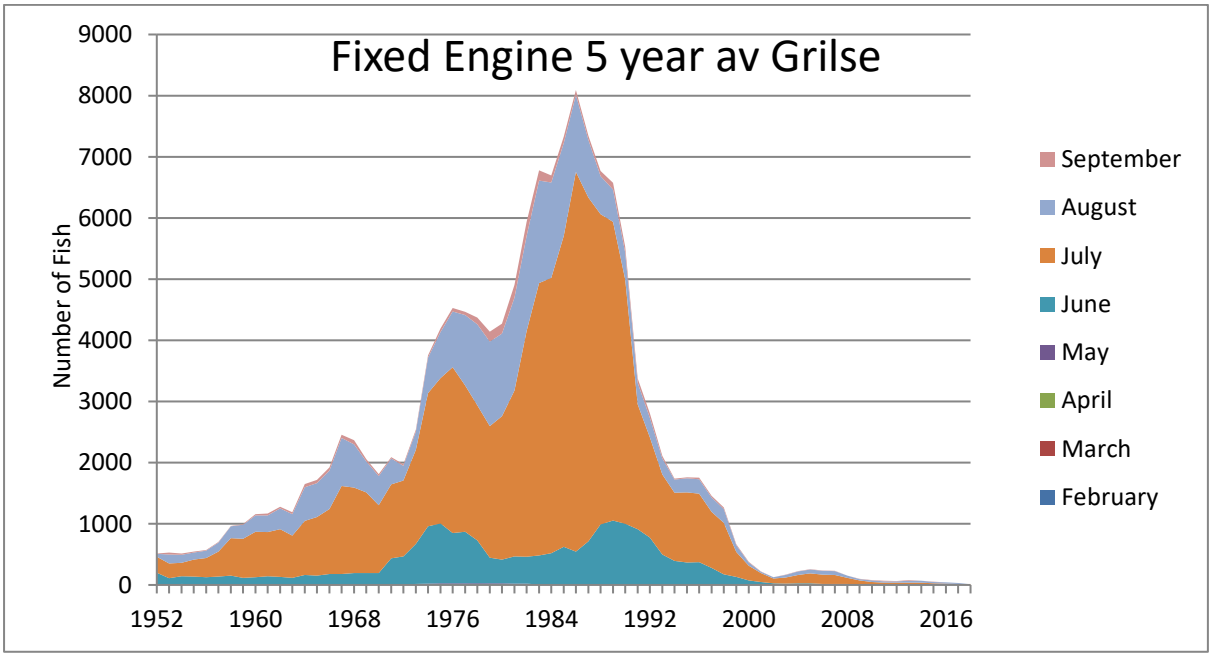


In recent years reported finnock are largely caught in the second half of the fishing season and from the tidal and lower half of the river but in total not in the numbers of yesteryear. From above the tidal reaches in the post WWII years for a couple of decades over 1,000 finnock would have been landed yearly over February to April adding more in September and October. Around 1920 one angler landed 85 finnock on a February day at Methlick.

The Salmon Fishery

The Ythan has a modest upriver 'salmon' fishery and formerly a significant coastal one. The annual pattern of numbers of 'salmon' arriving in Scottish waters has varied over the centuries both in total annual numbers and in the numbers of multi sea winter fish – salmon - and in the numbers of one sea winter fish – grilse. In conjunction with these changing numbers are also the times of year when most of a particular sea age group arrives on the coast and moves upriver.
In the period since 1952 these changes are well illustrated by the coastal or fixed engine fishery in the Ythan salmon fishery district. The figures below show separately, with five year rolling averaging, the coastal catches of salmon and of grilse.



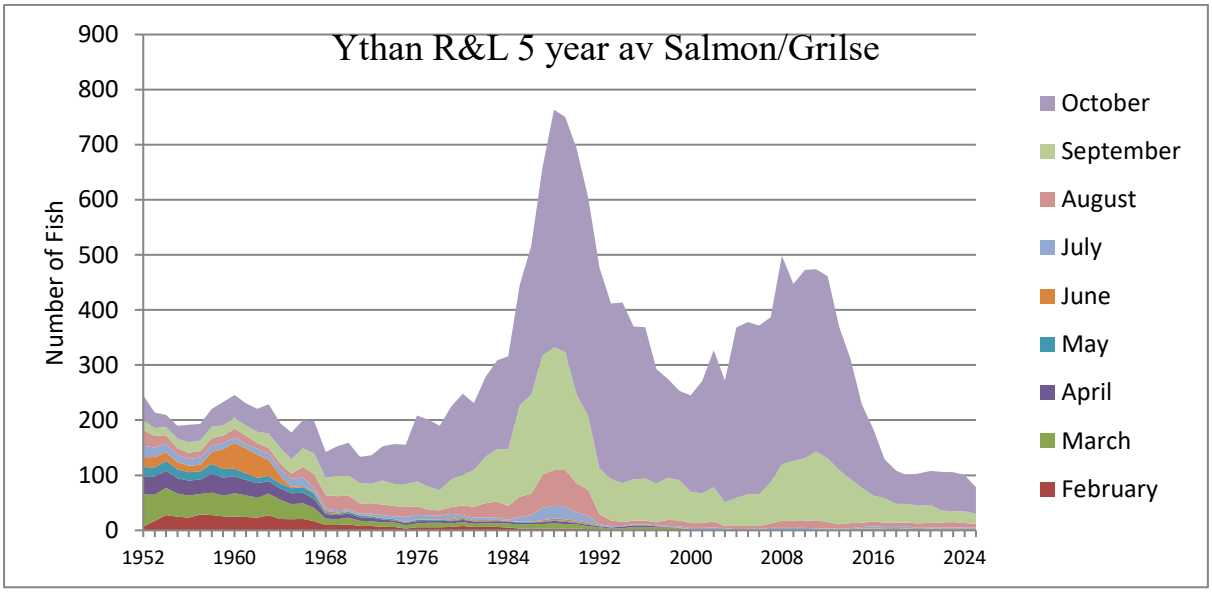


The final years of fishing before a lack of fish and their declining value in real terms brought about the closure of the main Ythan coastal fisheries were the mid 1990s. Since 2016 coastal salmon fisheries in Scotland by law can no longer operate.

The decline in numbers of early running salmon over the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as springers, is clearly seen with their replacement by later running salmon although these later fish will have included large later season grilse which appeared at this time and above around 8 pounds were marketed as salmon. The two peaks relate to two years of uniquely high salmon catches.

The great increase in summer time grilse numbers starting in the late 1960s is clearly illustrated together with their decline in numbers which prompted the closure of the major fishing stations in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

The modest salmon angling fishery in the upriver Ythan went essentially unrecorded before 1952. Since then it might be diplomatic to simply say that the extent to which salmon and grilse have been recorded has been improving up to the present day. A very high percentage of fish landed now reach the official catch statistics. The figure below shows the reported annual catches as five year rolling averages.



In the above figure salmon and grilse are combined since many of the late season fish landed since the late 1970s have been larger grilse reported as salmon.
That the rod fishery in the 1950s and 1960s also depended on early running salmon is clearly seen. A swing in recent years to a fishery in the final two months of the season is also apparent. The dip in catches in the late 1960s and early 1970s was due to the UDN outbreak not to a lack of fish since this period yielded the highest net catches in Scotland in the 1952 to 2025 period. The bulge for August in the 1980s is due to an exceptional August catch in the very wet summer of 1987. The peak in annual average catch in 1988 and 1989 follows on from a number of wet autumns, with a rod catch of over 1,000 reported one year, and also possibly the closure by this time of many coastal netting stations in the North East and the Moray Firth. The salmon fishery in the river is very dependent on flow in the river, nowadays particularly in the final months of the season. In fact the annual catch in recent years has varied by a factor of up to seven between dry and wet autumns. As noted above see 'Highs & Lows25'.

Well known to salmon anglers in Scotland are the low annual catches since 2012. The sea trout angling catch shows a similar trend. The reasons for this are much debated. With the Scottish commercial net fishery, which in the 1960s and 1970s landed upwards of five times as many fish as anglers, now gone one would have expected angling catches to be as high as ever they were, and indeed they peaked in 2010. This decline in salmon numbers led the government to introduce conservation measures in 2016 which, for the Ythan, presently require anglers to return unharmed to the river all salmon or grilse which they land.

The main reason or reasons for the present day low numbers of salmon returning to our rivers are thought to lie out at sea, whether in near or distant waters or both is unknown. Some hold the view that certain creatures which fly or swim and eat fish are having a significant impact and should be

reduced in number. While the monitoring of post smolts in the ocean is challenging and expensive, modern miniaturisation of tracking devices is allowing the passage of smolts down river and out to sea to be monitored. This work should in time establish whether the attrition of pre adult fish is very largely well out at sea where on their migration to feeding grounds and back they encounter ever changing currents, temperatures, prey availability and predators or is nearer to home. Recent tracking work has revealed that there can be non trivial losses of smolts on their down river journey.

The present diminished numbers of fish returning to home waters has not impacted equally on all sea ages groups running at different times. Early running salmon numbers seem to be low but fairly stable, late spring and summer numbers of salmon may be modest but increasing while late running salmon are now very few. Grilse numbers have markedly declined over the past ten years with the late running grilse also now much reduced in number. This current pattern of developing runs is not ideal for the Ythan for the late spring and summer is when sustained favourable flow in the river for angling is not common. This results in the fish landed now in the late season being mostly donning their breeding colours.

As an optimist one might expect that the metaphorical tide will turn and increasing numbers of salmon and sea trout are only a few years away. The decline in numbers a few years ago was quite abrupt, just after the best angling year recorded in 2010, so why not an equally rapid change for the better?