

Rare days on the Brora

Andrew Flitcroft casts a fly for spring salmon on one of the least known but most desirable rivers in the Highlands

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE



Jim Coates puts out a good line on McDonald pool on the River Brora.

USUALLY, WHEN I mention a Scottish salmon river to my fishing friends and colleagues, they will either have fished it themselves or will know someone who has. But when I was invited to fish the Brora last spring I drew a complete blank. The Brora, and especially the "Upper River", has always been a bit of an enigma. "You can't get on it," my friends would tell me. "It's all sewn up... dead men's shoes." And not so long ago they were probably right. But not any more.

I made my way to the Gordonbush estate water, the haunt of generations of the same families, rarely written about, yet one of the most prolific spring fisheries in the Highlands. It includes the Blackwater, the main spawning tributary, a river on which there

have been many epic battles with monster salmon.

It's a hell of a drive to the Brora from my Rutland home. Twelve long hours. Peter (T&S photographer) and I ticked off the rivers as we headed north, stocked up on essentials at Norris's in Penrith and had supper at the House of Bruar - not forgetting to take a peek at the Alness - one of my favourite little rivers - an hour or so before reaching the small town of Brora on Sutherland's east coast.

Our first glimpse of the river was from a small, single-track road heading due west. It tumbled and glistened below, disappearing and then flashing at us as we wound our way up the glen. After four miles of the Lower River we reached Loch Brora, the system's main loch, which at three miles in length sits smack bang between the Upper and Lower fishery. The loch is made up of three distinct sections joined by two narrow necks. Struan Lodge - our base - sits on the



ABOVE
Good water on
Jessie's Run.

bank of the uppermost section. This new (2009), environmentally friendly building boasts its own electricity supply, is spring fed and solar heated. It is made from the estate's timber and fits into the landscape. The view of the loch from its glazed frontage is arresting. There is no need for television here.

We were greeted by our host James, from Roxtons Sporting, together with their fishing consultant Bill Drury. *T&S* contributor Jim Coates was brought in as back-up. James brought us up-to date on the state of the river. He'd been praying for 2 ft on the gauge, but the water was low. The promise of rain on our middle day, if it came, would be our saviour. We sat in sumptuous sofas, toasting our arrival while Amanda Hoare, our wonderfully exuberant cook, prepared supper.

The first morning of any trip is exciting, but the thought of a Highland springer makes those butterflies beat their wings a touch faster. Retired gillie Donald Cameron and his replacement, Douglas Sutherland, advised us on methods. "Floating or intermediate lines with tips would be the order of the day, along with whatever fly you fancy."

The Gordonbush fishing starts immediately above the loch, but here the river is slow and canal-like, the sort of water you need to work, either by "backing-up" or retrieving your fly constantly. You need a bit of wind on the surface for it to fish its best. Things get more interesting a mile upriver at the roadside. The Round, McDonald, Doctor and Chemist are lovely pools with runs, tails and a good pace where every cast promises a response. I've not fished the Helmsdale or other rivers in Flow Country, but I imagine the fishing and surroundings to be similar. There are no trees here,

the river meanders in wide, flat and open bends. You can overhead cast on every pool if you wish and spot fellow rods fishing half a dozen pools up or downstream. You'll have to walk a little way to reach some pools, but the going is easy and many pools are fishable from the bank in wellingtons. If you want to wade, you'll have comfortable gravel underfoot. This open moorland has a simple beauty, the browns and ambers glow in the sunlight and clouds chase across the hills, but the weather can change quickly and moments later you can be searching helplessly for respite from driving wind and rain. There is a hut for such eventualities, with armchairs.

The river is not too wide and the average caster can easily cover the fish-holding bits. Even in the low conditions there was a good pull of water. My flies fished on a tight line and whipped round on to the dangle. I waited, retrieved a little and enjoyed more of the same. Every now and again, I had a pull, not a fish, but the bottom. One of the pulls did result in a sea-trout: I lifted in anticipation, but a springer it was not. Lunch in the hut revealed a similar fate for the other rods, except James who'd started proceedings with a beauty of around 7 lb-8 lb from Jessie pool on a floating line with a 5 ft slow-sinking tip and a half-inch Cascade bottle tube. Thanks to our host we were off the mark and able to compare notes on likely pools. The outside bend and tail of Stochan, as it filters into Bush Run, left its mark on us all - deep and steady under the far pilings, interspersed with a little scrub for shade and a glassy V-shaped glide into the pool below. It fished like a dream and screamed springers. If I were to blank I would choose there for it to happen. So enjoyable - memorable - but it didn't give up a fish.



Day two started with a hot breakfast buffet, then I put up the floater and tip and returned to my favourite Stochan pool and the as yet un-fished Pheadair. The latter - on the Blackwater - is the most prolific on the whole catchment. You only have to look at the catch records to see its dominance on nearly every page. Since the 1950s the Brora above the junction with the Blackwater has been a shadow of its former self with a hydro scheme diverting much of its water from the headwaters across to the Shin system. The Blackwater tributary is therefore the main water source for the fishery. It begins at the road bridge with Pheadair, a 200-yard holding pool below a neck of boulder-strewn pots and the impressive Balnacoil Falls, a significant temperature barrier in the spring (fish usually stack up here when the water is below 48 degree F). Above the falls the terrain is rugged and the river is rocky and remote. Adventurous tenants can fish above the falls from around the start of June, but you'll have to hike and travel light to fish this vast yet intriguing wilderness. I think a short rod and a hitch tube would be fun in the summer months.

I followed Jim down McDonald and he was soon into a fish, which I netted for him. Despite its fight and its



chrome flanks glinting in the peaty stream it turned out to be a well-mended kelt - the only one of the trip. Jim also had a pull in the tail of Stochan, just where you'd expect it, but that was it for the morning. Even the banker, Pheadair, remained quiet.

We retired for hot soup and sandwiches as the heavens opened and a hut-rocking gale blew down the glen. It would be a long lunch during which I was invited to Balnacoil lodge the home of estate owner Angela Tyser, whose late husband Richard was a fine and fanatical fisher. There on the dining-room table lay the vast illustrated records of the estate's fishing, dating back to the 1800s - endless pages of the family and guests fishing and shooting, along with stories of momentous catches and fish of epic proportions. I may never see the likes of such an archive again, but there was more. Mrs Tyser happened to mention her husband's box of Megan Boyd flies (Megan rented her cottage from the estate), which she eventually found

ABOVE LEFT
The view from
inside Struan
Lodge over
Loch Brora.

ABOVE
James Dent
with a 7 lb
springer from
Jessie's Run.

"We retired for hot soup as a hut-rocking gale blew down the glen"



Looking downstream from the top of Balnacoil Falls on the Blackwater, with the rocky Struan pools below and Pheadair in the distance.



ABOVE
Is it a springer?
Jim plays a
bright fish on
McDonald,
which turns out
to be a well-
mended kelt.

and shared with us. I will never forget all these treasures, especially the pictures of the enormous fish. The Brora has had its fair share of monsters, but sadly I don't have the space to do them justice here. I promise to publish their stories another time and will tease you with the tale of a giant encountered on the Lower River in 2001, when a fish was hooked, seen and lost after a battle that lasted for more than an hour. It was estimated to weigh over 50 lb. The following spring, gillie Donald Cameron found a huge, decomposing kelt on the Lower River - it was the same length as Miss Ballantyne's record fish.

On our last day we concentrated on Pheadair, the latter half of which is fishable at most heights. The overnight rain had turned this huge pool into a motorway of water with ribbons of white froth. The pool, evenly paced from one bank to the other was fishable from both sides. We fished hard, two rods on one bank and me on the other while Peter waited with the camera. We changed lines, retrieves, flies and angles, covering every part of the pool to its limit at the road bridge. Pheadair is a great pool and an obvious stopping point for a springer yet with



**ABOVE
RIGHT**
Balnacoil Falls, a temperature barrier in the spring and the gateway to the upper Blackwater's remote wilderness.

nothing to show by the afternoon we had one more card to play. I set up another rod, thrust it at Peter and within half-an-hour's fishing he had saved the day with a small, but perfectly-formed Brora springer taken on a 1 in gold-bodied Willie Gunn. It's not the first time I've had to play his fish for the camera!

We ended up with just two fish, but it is not uncommon to catch 5-10 salmon in our spring week, occasionally more and occasionally less with poor conditions. In favourable conditions a good spring week will see 15-30 fish to the four rods, while in the summer of 2012 one week produced more than 80 fish to six rods. The Brora has the potential for something special, whether it be numbers or size, but it is the variety of the loch, the main river and the intriguing Blackwater - below and above the falls - that leave you wanting more. The atmosphere is so relaxed, the accommodation and welcome are first-rate. There is no wonder that this fishery has been coveted. I feel privileged to have cast a line there. And now you, too, have the opportunity to fish it, if you have reasonably deep pockets - but I suspect you'll have to be quick off the mark. **TG**



**The Blackwater's
prolific Pheadair
pool in spate -
often the best
chance of a springer
on the whole river.**



Andrew with
Peter Gathercole's
perfect springer
caught at the
bottom of Pheadair
on a Willie Gunn.

〔 Eat, sleep and fish 〕

SEASON: Feb 28-Sep 30.

COST: Prices range from £4,034-£7,700. This includes exclusive use of the lodge (sleeps 16), the services of a housekeeper and four or six rods depending on the week. Extra costs include tips,

a cook and food/drink. Gillies are freelance. September can be let with stalking as well as fishing.
CONTACT: For availability contact Roxtons on 01488 689 788; www.roxtsons.com



BELOW
A typical page from the catch record book, showing the dominance of the Blackwater's pools below Balnacoil Falls, especially in the spring.

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