

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A.E. KNOX

THE BRAE WATER, River Spey

by Roy Arris

FISHING THE BRAE Water on the lower Spey is quite an experience and I have to say that it is probably the best beats I have ever fished, anywhere. The whole set up from the snug cottage accommodation in the grounds of Gordon Castle, to the team of ghillies who share over 100 years experience on the water, the variety of pools, and being visited most lunchtimes by the factor bearing malt whisky all makes for a very memorable week's fishing. Most of my visits have been in the spring, using weeks that syndicate members do not wish to fish. It's tough fishing, especially this season when there weren't many springers around, but the previous two seasons had shown signs of promise by producing more fish than for a long time. The one thing that attracts me to fishing in March is the fact that there is always a chance of hooking a springer in the 20 lb class. The Spey has a small run of these fish during that month and each year that I've been to Brae, one of the beats has produced such a fish. I just hope and pray that it will be my turn soon!

Even though the beats are on the lower reaches of the river, the Spey is by no means massive there unlike the corresponding section of the Tay for instance. There is a lot of wading which varies from easy to "bouldery", when some care is needed. So one is rarely in the position of feeling a little lost in a great wide pool. Some of the pools here are very long, but a decent cast ensures that most of the water is being covered. The lower Spey is not deep either and even in mid-March an intermediate or sink-tip line and brass tube fly is enough to fish at the right depth.

What of the fishing? Throughout the five beats is a fantastic array of pools to suit all tastes and occasions. From The Turn and Rock Pool on Beats 1 and 2, to Green Bank Otter's Cave and Aultdearg on the impeccable Beat 3, there's Pipe, Lower Aultdearg and Cruive Dyke on Beat 4, and lastly the vast Dipple, Grilse and Intake on Beat 5. Each day offers a new adventure and some of the finest fly-water in the country or the world.

The water below the Fochabers road bridge (the Castle Water, Lower Water 1 and Lower Water 2) is just as good and exciting, but depending on the time of year Lower Water 1 and 2 are fished by the local angling club. From July Castle Water is let with accommodation at Gordon Castle (heavily subscribed). However as with the Brae Water above the bridge, there are always opportunities to fish there in the spring, which has shown a slight improvement over the past couple of seasons, and later on in the summer during the most productive time.

BEATS 1 & 2

These beats sit at the top of the Brae Water, marching with Orton, and provide the most glorious setting for salmon fishing. Much of the right bank consists of red sandstone cliff, which is viewed from the grassy gentle slopes of the opposite bank.

We begin in the Twenty Pound, which is the left-side stream created by the massive island that sits in the middle of the river. This part of the river is approximately 35 m wide here and carries the fly beautifully. The island bank holds a run that is up to 3 m deep and the shingle bed slopes gently up to the left bank from where the angler fishes. Fishing commences at the sign marking the boundary between Brae and Orton and you keep fishing down until the water shallows.

The Junction is the next pool and is formed by the meeting of the two streams at the bottom end of the island. There is a heavy rush at the neck of the stream that is about 20 m wide, and from here the current spreads out across the width of the river. The neck is good for holding fish, the middle part of the pool runs deep before shallowing up at the tail. Here you should fish the fly right into the croy because the fish creep round the point and lie just in front of it, especially in higher water.

Once past the croy you are in The Turn pool. The main current lies from mid-stream and over to the right bank, which is mostly a vertical cliff face. It's a deep wade at the top, over a bed of quite large smooth stones (the old remark about "greased cannonballs" comes to mind! The way to approach the pool, even in high water, is to make a square cast to make the fly carry. The tail of the pool becomes very interesting because of the spread of larger furniture across the bed, making for some likely looking lies.

From the tail of The Turn the water spreads out into a long steady-flowing pool called The Flats. It's a deep, straight stretch of water where fish are often found along the margins in higher water. There's a point towards the tail where some rocks protrude from the left bank. Though fishing in March when I experienced the pool, my first thought was that a hitched fly in the summer might be an interesting prospect.

A short stretch of rapid takes the water down into the Rock Pool, which is a few hundred metres of sheer perfection. In the spring the likely spot is along the lower part of the pool on the left bank where there's a lovely stretch along a little bay. Later in the season, even in lower water levels, the pool can keep three rods going for a whole session. The carry of the fly here is just perfect and this pool is a real joy to fish.

The last pool is The Ewe, another long pool that curves gently to the right as it heads for Beat 3. The character is similar to that of the Rock Pool and it contains lovely streamy water that fish find to their liking.

BRAE BEATS 3, 4 and 5

This is the start of the Brae fishing that is in a daily rotation with Beats 4 and 5, so anglers fish each of the beats twice during the week. Of the three Beat 3 is probably regarded as the most attractive of the three, but each of them have their own charms and delights. They all contain wonderful pools.

BEAT 3

This beat is looked after by new head ghillie, Ian Tenant and begins at Lower Ewe, which is divided from The Ewe by a very large croy built on the left bank. This forms a short but interesting pool where fish are drawn to in high water. In the spring especially it is a favoured place to ambush running fish. It's the sort of place that you should visit several times a day to see if anyone is at home.

From the tail of Lower Ewe the river runs swift and shallow until it gets pushed over to the right bank and under the cliffs to for the Lord March. Once one of the most productive pools on the river (it produced 565 fish in 1992) where fish could almost be guaranteed, especially during the grilse run. The average catch of this one pool was 260 to 300. However, during a big flood in the 1990s the bed was destroyed and the pool filled with gravel changing the lies beyond recognition. Although Lord March still produces a few fish (10 in 2009), it's now but a shadow of its former self.

From Lord March the river enters Green Bank, which is a carbon copy of The Flats up on Beat 2. Same physical character and flow with fish being picked up along the left margin and towards the tail. One unseen feature is Big Bertha, a large rock on the bed in mid-stream which holds fish. This is when the boat is brought into play.

The river rushes through rapids for a hundred metres or so before entering Otter's Cave. This is a long piece of heavy water that will easily accommodate two or three rods. Mostly fished from the gently sloping right bank in the head and middle, with the tail fishing from either side depending on water height.

Imperceptibly Otter's Cave decants into Aultdearg which, in my book, is a little piece of perfection. This pool is mentioned in Knox's *Autumn's On The Spey*, but he writes mostly about the geology rather than the fishing. However, one always gets a sense of history when fishing here. There's about 200 m of fishing and takes time to do. The top half is fished from about mid-stream and when you come under the cliff you start to make your way towards the left bank and from here on the fish lie more

towards your bank. Fish are present all over the pool but the neck and the tail, where the landing nets are placed!, often prove to be the most productive spots.

BEAT 4

After Aultdearg a short stretch of rapids makes a turn to the left and spills into Pipe. The wide shingle bed slopes gently into the water and goes to a depth of about 3 m before rising sharply up to the steep right bank of the river. The water at the head is strong and choppy and this spreads into good popply water for most of the pool. There are some big rocks strewn along the length, coming from croys that have been washed away in floods. The pool ends when it hits the high, fortified left bank at a right angle. This spot creates a small pool in the corner that is always searched for a springer.

Here the river veers sharply to the right and forms Lower Aultdearg, a behemoth of a pool. It stretches for about 350 m and curves slightly to the right for its entire length. Rods fish from the right bank, the wide shingle bed shelves gently into the water and the deep stream runs along the high left bank, which has been built up to form a flood defence. It's a wonderful holding pool and fish can be found anywhere; opposite the burn mouth is always worth an extra cast and don't forget to fish on past the croy and explore the creases there.

Lennox lies on the bend below, where the river takes another turn to the right. This is more of a low water cast and one fishes from the shingle bar on the left bank. Lennox runs into Cruive Dyke where the river runs between parallel banks for about 400 m. It's a wide pool, about 50 to 60 m, with a very good rocky bed holding numerous lies. From the right bank the whole pool can be fished and is a bit of a marathon, but when you approach the moored boat your heart rate will start to increase! Make sure to fish that 40 m stretch very carefully and get your fly well out to cover the lie mid-stream. Fish will be found right down to the end of the pool. The lower part of Cruive Dyke also fishes from the left bank in low water. The hot spot is from the red iron fence down to the birch tree and when the current starts to come over to the left bank the fly should be allowed to come right round into the bank.

BEAT 5

This is the longest of the three rotating beats and must be close on to 2 km in length and it holds some very long pools. It's also the domain of ghillie Blair Banks former Scottish Spey Casting Champion.

The beat begins with the Intake 1, 2 and 3. At this point the river takes a dog-leg turn to the left and runs beneath a high sandy cliff that forms the right bank. Intake 1 is the 80 m stretch going into the bend and has a steeply shelving drop from the

left bank. Intake 2 is a deep, heavy stream of similar length and fished from the bottom of the high left bank. There is a lade mouth on the right bank which gives the pool its name. From the croy to the birch that leans out over the water is Intake 3 and this pool is of most interest to the spring fisher. The fish often lie on the slope of a sand bar underneath the birch, so the pool should be approached stealthily.

From Intake 3 the river widens to around 80 m as we come to Grilse. This is a true Spey stream with lovely holding water throughout its shallow, rock strewn length. In high water the fish tend to hug the left bank but in lower water of summer anglers are often made to wade down the middle of the pool in order to cover all the lies. In higher water the neck and tail are definitely the most likely spots.

The main current now shifts across to the right bank as we enter Upper Dipple, which is reached after a short walk over the shingle bed of the river. The bank slopes away gently down to a depth of around 3 to 4 m, before rising sharply on the right side. Erosion of the right hand bank made of sand and shingle is a constant problem and the pool is littered with boulders from croys that have been washed away. It fishes all the way down from neck to tail and a very enjoyable cast.

Upper Dipple swings right-handed into the main Dipple after hitting the high left bank in front of the lunch hut. From this point to the tail out must be at least 400 m, which makes it quite a pool! The main rush of the stream at the head is under the fortified left bank and continues like that for half of the pool. Down where the boat is moored the current begins to spread out across the stream for the last 150 m or more. The pool is often fished by two rods on the right bank, with one starting at the top and the other half-way down and rotating around each other. There is more than enough room and will keep both rods busy for a morning or afternoon. It's another pool where you can meet fish anywhere along its length so keep concentrating all the way down. The neck and the last 60 m are especially interesting. In lower water the left bank is worth a cast from the boat mooring down to the tailout. Dipple was one of the best early spring holding pools in the old days and Colin's tales of how the big fish could be heard splashing about like hogs make one's mouth water. This was in the days when fishing in February and earl March was at a premium on this part of the river.

From Dipple the Spey rushes noticeably downhill through a stretch of heavy water down toward the edge of Fochabers and here the river takes a gentle swing to the left. The river narrows again to about 40 m as it flow through Upper Bulwark, where the main current is over towards the right bank, but is fished from the island on the left. The main part of Bulwark starts below the tail of the island and carries on down to the Fochabers road bridge, which marks the end of the beat. This stretch of water is about 300 m long and can be fished from either bank, but the left bank

holds the better water. It's always worth a cast in the spring but does become more productive in the summer months.

Reproduced with thanks from Roy Arris's *The Salmon Annual*.