

Running the numbers on the king of salmon rivers

As the new season gets under way on Tweed, still Britain's most prolific fishery, Colin Bradshaw looks forward and back, analysing catch returns and revealing the top-ranking beats month by month

SALMON fishing is always a gamble and the fisher should never be short of an excuse to soften the anxiety of a blank day. But where can a fisher go to increase the odds in his favour? Let us study the form books.

Catch statistics have never been more accessible because of the excellent websites produced by FishScotland. They include FishTay, FishDee, FishSpey, FishEsks, FishHebrides and FishAnnan—but as Tweed continues to be the most prolific fishery in the British Isles, it is to FishTweed that we turn.

Tweed is a wonderful river and a fine example of how a salmon fishery should be run. Great river-basin management, superb beats with every facility, knowledgeable ghillies and fishing opportunities at all income levels combine to make it the star of Britain's salmon rivers, shining as brightly as its crystal-clear waters. And by analysing Tweed catch returns data we can list the beats which, on average, offer the greatest chance of catching a salmon, month by month.

If Tweed is the king of salmon rivers, the beats in and around Kelso are the jewels in the crown. These waters consistently offer the best chance of hooking a salmon. Indeed Sprouston (right bank) and Hendersyde (left bank, opposite), which alternate with one another to provide double-bank fishing for their rods, are the top performing beats in eight of the season's 10 months.

Sprouston is generous in spring and claims top spot throughout February, March and April. Its two rods can each expect to catch eight, 19 and 18 fish respectively during these months. Hendersyde comes a close second in February and April, but is piped for second place by the famous Junction in March.

In the glorious month of May, considered by many to offer the very pinnacle of sport, Hendersyde is our choice with an average catch of 19 salmon per rod.



Into an autumn salmon at Upper Hendersyde, one of the jewels in Tweed's crown.

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Sprouston is second with 14, and the lovely fly water of Upper Floors starts to show its form with 12.

In June even Tweed takes a downturn, but Hendersyde continues to lead the way with nine. Boleside, a fine beat at the junction with the Ettrick, comes joint second with Upper Mertoun, both with six fish. In July the grilse arrive but the low river levels of summer generally keep them in the lower Tweed below Coldstream and the catch statistics reflect this.

In 100 miles of river, less than three miles take the prize for being most generous. Why?

Ladykirk, near the foot of Tweed, and Tillmouth share top spot with nine fish per rod, followed by Tweedhill with seven.

In a hot, dry July, Ladykirk can be prolific as grilse and salmon come in on the tide and gather in great numbers, waiting for higher river levels before

they move upstream. During the dry season of 2003, Ladykirk fishers more than doubled their normal tally for a season, catching over 1,000 salmon.

During August the prolific runs of autumn salmon on Tweed begin. It is time to return to Hendersyde, where you can expect 21 fish per rod. For a slightly greater challenge try Sprouston or West Learmouth, which average 16 fish, or Ladykirk, which may give 11 (but more in low water).

If you are fishing Hendersyde or Sprouston in August, then stay where you are for September. Hendersyde is top with 37 salmon, followed by Sprouston, West Learmouth, Birgham Dub and Lees, which all expect catches of a fish per rod per day during the month.

In October, Tweed hits seasonal highs and the best monthly return on the whole river is recorded. West Learmouth, near Coldstream, yields on average 44 fish per rod during this month. This short single-bank beat is prolific and is said to give off more salmon per yard of bank than any other on Tweed (and probably in Scotland). Other generous beats in October are Birgham Dub, Hendersyde, Sprouston and Lees, each producing nearly 40 fish per rod.

With few rivers open in November, Tweed continues to reign supreme. This month is of course when Upper Tweed comes into play, with the best beats of Sunderland Hall and Fairlee yielding some 10 fish per rod. But again those Tweed beats around Kelso give the greatest chance of hooking a salmon. Hendersyde is top with 40 fish per rod, followed by Upper Mertoun (39), Sprouston (38), West Learmouth (35) and South Wark (32).

When one considers the '9 till 5' and 'fly only' approach taken by most Tweed beats, these figures are excellent. Furthermore, they clearly show that in 100 miles of river, just 2½ miles including Sprouston and Hender-



The Duke of Roxburghe's lovely fly water at Upper Floors begins to show its form in May.

syde stand out as the most generous, per rod, on the river. But why?

Sprouston's owner, Michael Miller, considers that many factors are at work, each playing its part as the season progresses and conditions change. First, there must be fish to catch. This stretch of water is a natural resting place for salmon, so fish are in the beat from the first day of the season to the last. Its pools are many and varied and provide natural holding areas in all heights and temperatures of water.

Salmon pause when they reach a steep gradient, and rest after running this gauntlet. Sprouston's two best holding pools are classic examples of how this can work. The Sprouston Dub is a large expanse of water that can hold many fish after they have ascended the long series of fast-water steps below. This steep, narrow sequence of caulds, fast water and small pools makes interesting fishing—but it is where the river levels off and fans out to form the glorious and prolific fly water of the Cottage Pool that many salmon are caught.

This pool is also a natural resting place for fish that have run the fast water at Birgham Dub downstream. These running fish share the beat with 'residents'—

Lowering the odds: Tweed, month by month

Month	Top performing beat	Fish per rod, per month
Feb	Sprouston	8
Mar	Sprouston	19
Apr	Sprouston	18
May	Hendersyde	19
Jun	Hendersyde	9
Jul	Ladykirk	9
Aug	Hendersyde	21
Sep	Hendersyde	37
Oct	West Learmouth	44
Nov	Hendersyde	40

Tweed beat performance for the season as a whole

Rank	Beat	Fish per rod, per season
1	Hendersyde	203
2	Sprouston	197
3	West Learmouth	153
4	Birgham Dub	150
5	Junction	135
6	The Lees	130
7	Upper Mertoun	112
8	Upper Floors	111
9	Tillmouth	111
10	Carham	100

¶ The 'fish per rod' value is calculated from the beat's salmon catch average over the last five years, divided by the number of rods that can fish the beat at one time. It assumes maximum effort by available rods—although some beats may not have been fished to full capacity. Method of fishing and length of fishing day have not been taken into consideration within this analysis; neither have catches on Tweed beats not represented by FishTweed.

those fish that, for reasons of their own, remain in the pool for longer periods. Perhaps many of these fish are destined for the Teviot—which joins Tweed a little way upstream—and hold here while they wait for their final autumn dash. Others have reached their destination: they are here to spawn on the big reaches of gravel on the beat, a welcome annual spectacle for Sprouston's head ghillie, David Carnegie.

Of prime importance to catch statistics is of course the amount of fishing, and the water available to each rod. On Sprouston, two rods share more than a mile of double-bank water and each rod fishes from a boat handled by an experienced and knowledgeable ghillie. Thus they can cover the likely water very effectively.

Not surprisingly, there is no shortage of rods keen to fish Sprouston or Hendersyde, and as most of these fishers are regular tenants they are familiar with the water and eager to fish it. With weekly lets booked years in advance, maximum fishing activity is assured, and with all the natural advantages (and perhaps some friendly opposite-bank rivalry) the result is that these two beats form the top-ranking stretch of Britain's top-ranking salmon river. □