

Epilogue: Through the Irish sea-trout season

Part One: April and May

The First Phase: Mending and Feeding

If you'd asked me in, say, 2007 – the year in which I began the work on Irish sea-trout that would translate into *Nomads of the Tides* – ‘What is a sea-trout?’, I'd have said that the question was easily answered: ‘A sea-trout is a brown trout which runs to sea.’ Five years on, the answer would be radically different: ‘A sea-trout is essentially a marine creature which uses freshwater in which to spawn.’ Of that last postulation I'm as certain as six years' intensive angling among Irish sea-trout can make me. Nevertheless, ask ‘What *makes* a sea-trout?’ and an answer comes less readily, to the extent that if it comes at all it's embedded in further questions, some of which Ken explored in Part Four of *Nomads* but which bear restatement. Is the sea-running habit of the sea-trout something genetic, where sea-run parents spawn sea-running progeny? Or is that same habit a matter of adapting generation by generation to available feeding? In other words, are sea-trout born that way? Or are they compelled by circumstance to develop that way? Or perhaps, if the prior postulation is indeed correct – that sea-trout are in essence and through morphology marine creatures – then is it the case that *nothing* ‘makes’ a sea-trout? When they migrate to the sea as smolts, or when they return to the sea after spawning, are they merely going to what is their equivalent of home? The last is, I think now, after so many years' fishing for these wonderful creatures, more likely.

A likelihood is that other things being equal, and with a stable, accessible marine environment in which to feed, sea-trout parents will spawn sea-running progeny. This is particularly the case in freshwater systems which are nutrient-poor. On those systems, the

habits of juvenile brown trout appear to be to drop downstream in order to optimise their chances of securing the maximum amount of food – a point made many years ago by Edward Fahy. Eventually, such fish end up in the estuary, although they have to undergo complex physiological changes in order to move from freshwater into the salt – and then back again. Nevertheless, the richness of the food available in the estuary makes it worthwhile for the fish to undergo the stress of osmo-regulatory adjustment, and the fish seem to make that adjustment with relative ease. Because such adjustment is ‘*only* relative’ it doesn’t seem to me coincidental that sea-trout undergoing such osmotic adjustment may be briefly but disastrously vulnerable to critical infestation by sea-lice, particularly where salmon farms generating those lice are badly sited, i.e. at the heads of the estuaries where sea-trout will enter saltwater. (Again, this matter was explored by Ken in Part Four.)

If the previous paragraph is along the right lines, then it helps to make at least partial sense of the distribution of the sea-trout in Ireland. The fish are generally most abundant in the waters of the north and west – freshwater systems running off nutrient-poor mountains and often, over nutrient-poor bog. Brown trout resident in such environments are often very small; sea-run trout are, accordingly, often – though certainly not always – modest in size. In many waters in Donegal, Mayo and Connemara, an angler’s catch will often consist largely of immature sea-trout running from $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ lb., and a 2lb. sea-trout is a good one, while 3lb. fish are rare and a sea-trout of 4lb. or over the fish of a lifetime. Yet if these sea-trout are generally modest in size, they make up for their stature by their abundance, their strength and their sea-run loveliness. On a summer

flood, too, there will be grilse among them, so that any cast may produce the unexpected – from a ½lb. finnock to a salmon.

The foregoing sketches only a partial picture. In other parts of Ireland – Currane and its system, or the rivers large and small of the east coast – sea-trout are typically larger. That appears to be so for two main reasons and a further, supplementary reason: (i) the freshwater environments are sometimes themselves richer, so they may sustain populations of larger brown trout; (ii) when the progeny of such brown trout run to sea as (relatively large) smolts, they have access to the rich feeding grounds of the Atlantic shelf and/or the Irish Sea, and therefore may grow spectacularly quickly in saltwater before returning to their natal rivers; (iii) larger sea-trout – this is the case on Currane (Kerry) – come from long-lived stocks of fish whose longevity seems to be genetically determined. On Currane, or on the River Boyne, which runs into the Irish Sea at Drogheda, a 2lb. sea-trout would raise few eyebrows and a 4lb.-er would perhaps merit merely an admiring glance. On such waters, a small minority of sea-trout run into double figures: on Currane, on the Boyne, it would be a 10lb.-er that would be your fish of a lifetime.

The differences between the north-west and south-west of Ireland, or between the Irish Sea and the Atlantic coast, are, in terms of sea-trout fishing and biology, differences in *degree* and not of *kind*: North, South, East or West, we're still dealing with 'trout': a sea-trout, as has often been pointed out, is genetically indistinguishable from a brown trout. Nevertheless, one key to those differences of degree, just as it's the key to so much else in sea-trout fishing in Ireland, lies in the salt, the estuary, the tide and the coastal shelf. It was that great sea-trout angler Hamish Stuart who, writing in 1917, called sea-trout 'nomads of the tides' and although Stuart was thinking primarily of Hebridean sea-

trout his comment is valid across Ireland. Sea-trout can usefully be thought of as Stuart defined them: 'estuary fish...to whom all watery ways are familiar'. The same point was made by Holiday in 1960: 'Sea-trout are fish of the estuary' (p.98).

It's with estuaries, therefore, that my own thinking about sea-trout begins – and to which it continually returns. This kind of thinking is somewhat different from the kind of work on sea-trout so often expressed in the literature. There – and although there are some great exceptions including Hamish Stuart, Richard Clapham and Hugh Falkus – writers tend to emphasise the capture of sea-trout in freshwater, particularly at night. Nothing wrong with that, of course – night fishing for sea-trout in running water is one of the finest things angling has to offer – but such a vision seems to me partial. Equal or even greater challenges (and often, what amounts to vigin fishing) may be found in those inter-tidal zones where sea-trout are actively feeding.

Suppose you're standing on the southern shore of the Erne estuary near Ballyshannon (Donegal) in early April. The estuary stretches over two miles, from the town (to your left), where the waters of the Erne system course into the sea via a long, rocky channel, to the open sea (to your right). At the top of the estuary, you're fishing in what is effectively a river pool which the tide reaches twice a day. As you move seawards along the estuary, the channel widens considerably. When the tide floods over the sands, you're looking over unbroken acres of wave-glitter and saltwater light. As the tide drops, however, the estuary shrinks back into a channel carved between sandbanks. You can stand on the sandbanks and cast into what was once, at high tide, almost a lake but is now a fast-flowing brackish river.

The sea-trout know all about such places. At high water, shoals of these fish may feed almost anywhere in the estuary, though certain marks are more favoured than others. It follows that at high water, sea-trout can be difficult to locate. As the tide recedes, however, available food – sandeels, fish-fry and shrimps – is concentrated into the channel formed by the outgoing tide. The sea-trout follow such concentrations of food. As you stand on the sands and cast a sandeel representation, your chances increase as the tide ebbs. If you can find an obstruction in the outgoing tide – a wall-end, boulders, fence-posts strung with rusting barbed wire – it's almost certain that as they drop back with the tide, sea-trout will pause in the turbulence down-tide of the obstruction. They'll wait there to intercept sandeels, shrimps and fry being swept past them on the current. They won't be there at every stage of the receding tide, but for half an hour, perhaps an hour, such places can bring an offer at almost every cast.

At low water, dead tide, the fishing slows. The sea-trout shoals have retreated to the open coast. They're not far away, but they're beyond your reach. As the tide begins to flood again, however, new food is pushed into the channel....and the sea-trout will follow, questing up into the estuary on the first hour or two of the flood.



Erne estuary, the Wrack Shore

The image shows the lower part of the Erne estuary at low tide. To the right of the shot is the open sea; to the left, the upper estuary and Ballyshannon town. In the foreground is a tangle of bladderwrack lying on a slope covered by the tide at high water. Sea-trout will forage along that slope when the tide has reached it. As the tide recedes, sea-trout move out into the channel, towards the red buoy in the middle distance. As the tide recedes still further, it courses over the wall seen to the right of the red buoy...and there, for perhaps half an hour, the sea-trout will wait in the rush of current. As the tide recedes still further, the sea-trout will move further down the estuary, towards the open sea. Angling will slow – until the next tide, when the cycle begins again.

The Erne estuary is by no means atypical, but to ‘read’ it you must think ‘instinctively’, as a sea-trout thinks. Where and how will a sea-trout acquire the maximum amount of food most easily and in the shortest possible period of time?

The Erne estuary's instructive for another reason. Sea-trout rarely if ever run into the river at the head of the estuary. True, the Erne system was once one of the major salmon waters of Ireland, but a hydro-electric dam, constructed in the 1940s, put paid to a great deal of the Erne's former greatness, and sea-trout don't appear to run through the channel into Assaroe Lough. The sea-trout tenanted the Erne estuary, therefore, do not 'belong' to the Erne system itself. Where do they come from?

They must come from adjacent freshwater systems. Some trout feeding in the estuary are also 'proper' brown trout, spawned in the streams around Assaroe Abbey, which are using the estuary rather as they would use a surprisingly large pool at the lowest end of their river. Some of these brown trout take up permanent residence in the upper part of the estuary, where the angler knows them as 'slob trout'. Such fish retain their brown trout colouration and may even retain some red spots. Elsewhere on the Erne estuary in April, though, the tide is full of sea-trout which have run into the tide after spending the winter having spawned the previous autumn in a freshwater more or less distant from the Erne. Those fish – more or less well-mended kelt sea-trout – are using the availability of the food in the Erne estuary to recover condition. And alongside the mending kelts, there's also a population of small sea-trout of around 1lb. These fish, which may be three or four years old and which represent some of the the finnock of the previous summer and autumn, have very probably overwintered in the estuary. Since many of these fish haven't yet made a spawning run they're pristine: white-scaled, clean-lined and full of energy, even in the low water temperatures of April.



Pristine post-smolt, Strangford



Mending kelt, Gweebarra estuary

On an April day on the Erne estuary, therefore, you may encounter many different ‘classes’ of trout, from slob trout to post-finnock to mending kelts. Among them, too, there may occasionally be large, maiden sea-trout. These last are sea-run brown trout which have fed in and around the estuary for the past year, possibly even the past two or even three years, packing on weight as they’ve done so. Now weighing 4lb. or possibly more, they quest into the tide like their smaller relatives, feeding on the new spring shoals of sandeels, on small flatfish, even on crustaceans.

An angler wanting to catch these early-season sea-trout must be adaptable, sensitive and selective. Angling tactics include fishing the natural sandeel, retrieving long, narrow spoons of the Toby type, or fly-fishing with sinking lines and sandeel

representations or representations of small fish. Whatever tactics are employed, great care must be taken with hooked fish, particularly sea-trout kelts. Barbless single hooks are favoured over trebles, and where trebles are used, as in certain kinds of natural sandeel mount, the barbs are crushed. On the fly-rod, Sunk Lures (size 8 tandem, length around 1½ inches) are favoured, as are classic fish- and fry-representing patterns such as the Teal, Blue and Silver, the Medicine or a lurex-bodied Gadget, the last easy to sight as it comes towards you on the retrieve...where astonishingly often, it's followed by a scrap of moving shadow in the current as a sea-trout comes to inspect it.

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Part Two: June and July

The Second Phase: Running and Lying

Sea-trout will continue to haunt the estuary the whole season long. It seems to me that the larger and more brackish the estuary, the more inclined sea-trout will be inclined to feed in it. Generalising from my experiences in Denmark (where angling regulations permit year-round fishing for sea-trout), such large sheets of brackish water may even yield sea-trout during warm spells in the deepest winter, when shoals of smaller post-finnock may move for an hour or two, particularly in the late afternoon as sunlight strikes the shallows. As spring turns into early summer, such waters begin to fish in earnest: post-finnock and sea-trout kelts are alike rapidly recovering condition, and in May of a typical year, these fish are joined by the sea-trout smolts of that year's migration, so that the estuary is full of fish of different age-classes and groups. Shrimps are abundant – they can often be glimpsed in their millions at the edges of some tidal channels – and sandeels are becoming ever more present as food items. As April turns into May and June, terns

arrive from their wintering grounds on the other side of the globe and the air around you may be filled with a squall of wings and cries as the birds feed as avidly on shrimps and sandeels as sea-trout do.

Given the relative abundance of food, why do sea-trout leave the estuary and move into freshwater? Come the first real flood of summer, groups of sea-trout may leave the estuary and head into the river. These are often fairly big fish, though they run into freshwater in small numbers. Many of the post-smolts of that year's migration, however, may well remain in the estuary for another month or two, feeding hard before making their own run into freshwater later that summer.

I remember a night on the Ballynahinch many years ago....

It was 23rd June, 1985. I was fishing a beat of the Ballynahinch together with two friends. The diary tells me that a keen, cold wind blew from the north-west all day. During the afternoon I took one fish from where the river runs into the lough: 1¾lbs., Watson's Fancy, and a decent fish for the Irish west. But thereafter, nothing; then more nothing. Then a bit more of the same nothing that had been lurking about being nothing earlier. The nothings persisted into the dusk, into dark.

Those were the drinking days, and in the midst of nothings we'd have long conversations with a variety of hip-flasks. We were into our second or third, at around midnight, when I barely noticed that the night had become warmer. A bat freaked against the stars and some high cloud began to shroud the moon. I had the wit, back then, to leave the whiskey alone and pick up the rod.

I went down the butt for the umpteenth time, sensing the easing of the wind, feeling the relative warmth of the night on my face. There are times when, given the time, you just know. You know beyond the articles, the textbooks, the received wisdoms of the gallery of self-appointed experts. You just... *know* – because you're out there, fishing. You have as it were tuned in. These days I suppose we'd say that you're In The Zone, wherever that is.

The line swung round below me. To slow its travel I gave a little mend as the fly lit, then allowed the current to take the taper round in a curve to my left. On that travel there are two great taking moments – the first just after the flies begin to swing, the second as they begin to hang. You can also sometimes conjure a fish by drawing the line towards you after the hang, accelerating the progress of the fly.

I just...knew. I even knew when and where the sea-trout was likely to take: the start of the hang. As I netted the fish the moon cleared and the brisk wind picked up again.

Expertise? Far from it (I smile as I write). But neither was it entirely luck. It was simply common sense, persistence, an alert sensitivity. I had time on and in my hands when the line tightened.

I wish I could say it was a five pounder. Nevertheless, at 2¼lb. it was another grand fish for the Irish west. It was also the only one that took that night, there in that lull, as the wind eased briefly for a moment or two, as warmth gathered in the darkness and clouds covered the moon.

[Adapted from *Trout and Salmon* (2002) and reprinted with kind permission.]

A month later, and that same beat would perhaps on a good day or night have yielded a dozen sea-trout – but few if any would have been larger than 1lb. There in June 1985, however, it was only the relatively larger sea-trout that had appeared to run.

To return to the question posed above: *why* is it that it's the relatively larger sea-trout that seem so often to make their entry into freshwater earlier than finnock? The answer may well relate to the fact that as April turns into May and June these larger fish are (a) already sated with sea-feeding, i.e. they're 'full' and instinctively know that they've packed on sufficient weight (= energy) to make what may be a relatively long sojourn in freshwater before spawning in November or December that year and (b) these larger fish instinctively know that freshwater – particularly, the deepest and most slow-moving parts of the freshwater environment – offers a stable environment in which they won't have to expend too much energy and at the same time will be less exposed to the threats of predation. Come a June flood, therefore, and at least some adult sea-trout will move into freshwater, where they will seek as much cover and security as possible and to reach it, may well move under cover of darkness.

It's significant that the boxed text above invokes sea-trout fishing at night. On some waters – I think here of Currane, in particular – big fish may enter freshwater in May or even in April and they may be caught on the lough during the daytime. Elsewhere, however, night fishing with the fly may begin in June, as soon as the first pulses of extra freshwater induce these often larger sea-trout to enter the river or lough. I would add that when sea-trout enter freshwater on a flood, they will often (though not

always) run as far and as fast as possible. Some fish, indeed, may hover around the lowest reaches of the river and may even move in and out with the tides, yet many, once they have decided to run, will run if they can to the deepest and most secure parts of the freshwater environment – to the slowest, deepest river pools or as the flood drops, to the head of the lough, if a lough is available. It's a mistake to think that sea-trout creep into and then populate a lough by tenanting lies around the exiting river first and from there spreading further up the lough towards the inflowing stream. They do not: they run to the inflowing stream first, and will run that if there's sufficient water. If not, they'll rest around the inflow or may find a lie more or less close to it – the 'less close' lies being those around the shores or islands or on the shallows in in mid-lake.

It follows that the sea-trout fisher in Ireland should ideally in May or June gauge the height, nature and intensity of the flood when fishing in freshwater. A really big flood may carry sea-trout a long way from the tide; a moderate or quick-dropping flood may see them tenanting lies in the middle or lower river or in loughs nearer the sea; a cloudburst may affect just one or two tributary streams, which if lying close to the sea may offer a mere hour or two of supreme fishing (as the sea-trout explore the possibilities of freshwater or change position from very lowest to lower reaches of a river) before the flood runs off.

As July wears, smaller sea-trout – post-smolts, finnock – may begin their own run into freshwater. These fish appear to be much less determined than their larger relatives: they may come in and go out with the tide for many weeks before making any sort of decisive movement into the river. They may even come into the lower reaches of a freshwater catchment and then leave it again for the estuary. Given a July flood, however,

and finnock will begin to be present in numbers in river and lough, though (I stress) some will remain in the estuary for many weeks – and some may choose to over-winter in saltwater and may never in that year enter freshwater at all.

How instinctively clever these strategies are: it would make no ecological sense for larger sea-trout to enter freshwater in one big run, since the gene pool for that year would become critically vulnerable in the event of a large-scale catastrophe (drought, for instance). Similarly, it wouldn't make sense for all finnock to run in one massive pulse: far better, in case of potential disaster, to leave some fish over-wintering in the estuary, so that they can spawn in a following year. Clever, too, to ensure that finnock are present in numbers sufficient to guarantee at least some spawning activity among such juveniles. And clever, finally, to ensure that small brown trout are resident in the upper reaches of freshwater systems so that they may recruit into the numbers of adult and juvenile spawning sea-trout.

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Part Three: August and September

The Third Phase: Moving and Resting

By August, barring episodic or continuing catastrophe and and if there has been rain, sea-trout will be lying in the rivers and loughs of Ireland in numbers. The population in a given stream or stillwater will be mixed and may consist of big fish, multi-spawners which have run early; finnock larger and (usually) smaller; one- or two-sea-winter adult sea-trout running for whatever reason in July and August – and perhaps, the first of what is on many systems a small but definite movement of larger fish late in the season.

Mid-July through to mid-September are of course the great holiday months and it seems to me no accident that many people's first experience of fishing for white-trout comes on waters lying westerly in Ireland and comes in these summer months. If, in May or June, the angler's first resource is larger tandems and singles representing sandeels and small fish, by later July and August it's entirely possible, even desirable, to approach the sea-trout using smaller flies and, on the lough, using teams of such smaller flies fished in a traditional 'over the front' method from a drifting boat. The success of such smaller flies, particularly among sea-trout of 1lb. and less, seems to rest on several interlinked factors: (i) whereas larger, early-run sea-trout rarely if ever feed in freshwater, finnock can and do sometimes feed in freshwater and may well be prepared to accept artificial patterns representing those items they see and eat (or remember having seen and eaten) in freshwater; (ii) in high summer, sedges, Daddy-long-legs and heather flies may well be abundant on or around rivers and loughs, and flies representing these food items may secure success, particularly among smaller sea-trout; (iii) movements of smaller sea-trout to natural flies, or indeed movements of smaller sea-trout for whatever reason, may just

stimulate larger fish to move position or become less torpid, and therefore more ready to inspect an artificial fly. Further, among these summer sea-trout will often be grilse and small salmon – fish which may under certain circumstances be prepared to move to size 10-12 artificial flies. A good day's fishing on a reputable westerly-lying river or lough in August, therefore, may yield sea-trout, finnock and bonus salmon and will be a long-remembered, long-cherished experience.

That's the kind of white-trout fishing to which I was myself introduced in 1973 and it's the kind of white-trout fishing I still enjoy. Yet it's only one part – and a small part – of an Irish sea-trout angler's season. That season may well have begun months before, in the cold salt winds of an estuary in April, and may have continued through the first movement of sea-trout into freshwater, through night fishing in June and July, to the tiredness of August greenery around the waterside when the summer itself, like the sea-trout, seems listless and enervated.

Night fishing for white-trout in August and September shouldn't be neglected, and on some freshwater systems it is justifiably the first line of approach to sea-trout fishing. On many westerly fisheries, for example, and particularly those where salmon run, it's traditional to stop fishing around dinner-time and thereafter spend the evening couched over the rarefied delights of cocktails and (it may be) shrimp tempura. These delights, particularly on a stormy or cold or drought-stricken summer day, can often be tempting, but even on the most apparently unpromising days sea-trout can often be caught after dark. On cloudy nights, too, the Surface Lure may also work wonders in the full darkness, if you have the time. Energy and leisure to fish until – or better, through – the small hours and into the dawn.

By mid-September, many sea-trout are beginning to colour up in freshwater. Some fresh fish may trickle in from the tide, but even down on the estuary fish may be colouring up in the salt in readiness for their spawning run. I've also found that the grand, hours-long activity one sometimes experiences in July or August is found less often in September: in a good wave and light, sea-trout may move for part of a morning or afternoon, but there may be movements of fish lasting a mere half-hour. In that respect I remember two days on the Currane system which were particularly instructive. On the first (September 2009), Lough Derriana, the top lake of the system, lay sullen for the whole day. Fishing with Ken and James, I saw little and moved nothing except an unlucky and beautifully-coloured brown trout in mid-afternoon. Come seven o'clock that evening, however, and a small wind got up from nowhere and gusted fitfully towards the head of the lough. And there, at the head of the lough, in the most oxygenated water we could find, we moved sea-trout...but only during a half-hour spell. The best of the fish that took was a black 3lb-er, but it saved a blank.

On another occasion I was fishing Currane with James. It was again September, the lough was low and the day had been dreadful. The usual marks – Church, Bog Bay, Three Sisters, Cappal – had yielded nothing apart from a useless follow from one large, unconvinced fish somewhere surprising in the middle of the lake. It was the end of the trip and James and I looked at each other quizzically, largely because the chocolate bars had been finished and there seemed nothing left to do apart from start the outboard and dawdle home. For luck, we thought, we'd try one last drift along the southerly shore of Church Island. It was well past seven o'clock and even the dusk seemed to be falling in early. The light that remained was yellow, greasy, unpromising.

In fifty yards of slow drifting we moved half-a dozen sea-trout and got two of them. They weren't big fish by any means – they were coloured finnock that had been up in freshwater for three weeks and more – but they were active and, like that 3lb-er from Derriana, they provided a great deal of interest and saved a blank. After a mere twenty minutes, however, the movement of fish tailed off and Currane resumed its September torpor before sliding into an early dark.

I also remember a walk along the Argideen in 2011. I'd fished this lovely little stream in July and August of the same year and had encountered sea-trout running to a couple of pounds, fishing at night. Back then, the fish were lithe, sea-silvered, active. In late September, on my way back to Cork airport after the final sea-trout trip of the season, I pulled the car into a space, reached for the polarising glasses and walked back up the river, reliving as I did so the successes and failures of the previous summer. At each pool I peered into the shallows and deeps, trying to spot sea-trout. And there, sometimes, they were, lying in small shoals, in their hulls of spawning colours, intent for the time being merely on breathing, resting, conserving energy. One or two fish wore scars from Lord knew what encounters in the estuary. They were becoming patched, travelled veterans. Leaves were turning on blackberry bushes around the pools and autumn debris drifted down the currents. Nothing disturbed these shoals of sea-trout: they were patterns of focus, of patience, loyal now to nothing but the machinery of their own genetics. And during that short September walk up the Argideen, summer turned to autumn. It was the end of another angling season.