

# IN THE WILDS OF CONNEMARA

Buoyed by tales of good sea-trout catches, **Dennis Moss** goes afloat in search of sport on beautiful Lough Inagh

PHOTOGRAPHS: DENNIS MOSS

A good wave on Lough Inagh, where more than 700 sea-trout were caught last season.



**N**ATURE IS RESILIENT. Man can abuse all that is wild and beautiful and take it to the threshold of extinction. We do not have to go to exotic locations to see evidence of our misdemeanours. Sadly we have examples of this abuse here within our own shores. When it is close to our own doorstep, we brush it away. Government has ignored it, most of the country is unaware of it, and yet the plight of the sea-trout is a classic example of our abuse of a wild species. All along the west coast of Ireland and Scotland, the sea-trout, one of the most sporting fish to swim in our waters, has been taken to that threshold of extinction. It is to our shame that as guardians of our environment we anglers have failed them; we spare no expense or time pursuing these enigmatic fish, and yet when it comes to protecting our sport we have been totally ineffectual.

well over 700 sea-trout were reported from Lough Inagh – a positive sign and one which we hope will continue. We do not fully know why the runs of migratory fish have increased, but Colin Folan the fishery manager attributes the increase to a change in the aquaculture of the estuary into which the Ballynahinch River discharges from salmon smolt rearing to marine fish production. There are no certainties in fishing but Colin's theory would seem a plausible explanation. If the change of aquaculture in Bertraghboy Bay is the reason for the increased runs of not only the sea-trout, but also the salmon, then it is disappointing to see that once again salmon smolt rearing has resumed in the bay (Newscast, January issue). The resumption of salmon smolt rearing is a little disconcerting for all concerned at both Lough Inagh and Ballynahinch, and hopefully this is a practice that will not continue for

The RSPB would not allow this to happen to a bird species. Do these fish not deserve to fulfil their evolutionary destiny (as sea-running brown trout), without having to face the gauntlet of coastal waters plagued with sea-lice? The irony is that it was once suggested that salmon farming could benefit our wild migratory species, when it has in fact turned out to be their nemesis. And yet as tenuous as their hold on life is, pockets of beleaguered sea-trout hold on, just waiting for a window of opportunity once again to run the rivers into the loughs of their ancestors. Such is the resourcefulness of nature: give it half a chance and like a good champion it will bounce back.

I'm looking at the 2008 angling report for Lough Inagh, and for sea-trout lovers it makes good reading. For the first time in over 20 years,

too much longer. It would have been interesting to see another year without a change of policy of the aquaculture for the estuary: who knows, the catch for 2009 could have topped 1,000 fish for the first time since the demise of the sea-trout runs in the '80s. A continuing improvement of the run would not only have produced increased numbers of bigger fish, but those adult trout returning from another season of sea feeding would have been returning in the 2½ lb-3½ lb – possibly as much as 4 lb – range. Much food for thought – and it could still happen.

Last July news was filtering through the Irish angling grapevine that Lough Inagh was producing some good sea-trout fishing, so with thoughts of fresh-run fish following several days of rain, and a favourable forecast, Larry McCarthy and I booked two boats for July 10. On arrival at Inagh the staff were positive about the fishing; the catches had been fairly consistent and anglers were returning for follow-up visits. In a year when globally we have been hit by a financial crisis and tourism is down for the west of Ireland, Maire O'Connor (the owner of Lough



**Left: Inagh rod, Tom Herd watches the top dropper.**

fish the shore at the top of the lough for our first drift, to try for one of the salmon which had taken up lies over the shallow sandy bottom. We had good cloud cover and a moderate west wind, but the wave on this sheltered shore was light. Drifting out from the river mouth and across the shallows in front of the peat hag produced a dry run. The salmon kept their heads down, and nothing moved to our flies. Such is the way of salmon.

So Tim and I thought it better to concentrate on the sea-trout. I turned the boat around into the wind, and motored over to the edge of the reed beds outside the river mouth. Here we drifted the edge of the reed beds, and out into open water. On mountain lakes such as Inagh one rarely sees the bed of the lake, as the water appears dark and peaty even when drifting over the shallows. This dark appearance to the water, allied to steep mountain contours all around gives a suggestion of great depth, but this isn't always the case and even when well offshore in certain areas the depth may be no greater than 8 ft-12 ft. There are several such areas on Inagh, broad-leaf pondweed beds growing in these shallower areas. The weed beds help the angler to mark such spots, and they are worth noting as both browns and sea-trout seem attracted to these areas, especially around the periphery of the weed beds.

We drifted the edge of the reeds outside the river mouth, and as we came to the outlying stands of reeds

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Inagh Country House Hotel) was pleasantly surprised by the amount of interest in the fishing. Obviously good news travels fast, and anglers from all over Ireland were returning to sample the sea-trout fishing. For the first time since the collapse of the sea-trout run, the number of angler visits had significantly increased.

Over coffee, Colin provided Larry and me with information about the lough and the best drifts in the prevailing conditions. Although the wind, a westerly, wasn't quite suitable, he suggested that we try an early drift for a salmon close in to the shore across the head of the lough. The wave in this area would only be a light ripple, but he thought it would be worth a cast, as there were some fish holding just off an old peat hag which had been washed down by the river.

Following coffee, we collected our boat keys and headed for the moorings. There are six traditional timber boats available for hire, and they nestle in a sheltered bay on the east shore, the road side of the lough. The moorings were busy as all the boats were going out, and the topic of conversation happened to be as always when anglers are

assembled together: the quest for the “killer fly”. Colin had great faith in a Daddy, in either silver or claret. The movement of the wings and legs of the Daddy when the fly is pulled through the water is a great attractor to the fish. A must-have fly for the lough, in Colin's opinion. My favourite pattern for sea-trout would be the Claret Bumble, so with Colin's advice ringing in my

ears, I put a Claret Bumble on the top dropper, a Silver Daddy on the middle dropper and a sparse Kate McClaren on the point.

I was sharing the boat with a guest of Larry's, Tim Rowley. Tim had come over to Ireland with his friend Dick Price for a few days' salmon and sea-trout fishing. With a portfolio of stories, Tim was great company in a boat. We elected to

**Below left: Drifting the shoreline on Inagh.**

**Below right: Larry McCarthy returns an Inagh sea-trout.**



**An Inagh cast: Claret Bumble on the top dropper, silver-bodied Daddy on the middle (Colin Folan's favourite), and on the point Dennis's Kate McClaren.**







A cast on the Trout pool on Inagh River, upstream of Derryclare Butts.

the wave here was building. Foamy slicks stretching away down the wind before us produced a positive air in the boat that something fishy was about to happen! Our optimism did not go unrewarded. Tim was fishing towards the last of the reeds, and I was fishing the open water to his left. Just as I was lifting off to make another cast, the water in front of me erupted and a fish broke through the surface and slashed wildly at my top dropper. It all happens so quickly: one moment you are in a reverie either looking around at the surrounding countryside, a bird or an animal may attract your attention, or you may be just talking to your companion in the boat. Even when you expect a fish to come at any moment, they still take you by surprise when you don't see them following. But you time the strike better than when they catch you off guard.

I was concentrating but was still amazed when this wild thing came slashing through the wave to take

the bob-fly as it lifted into the surface skin of the water. A moment's hesitation to let the fish turn with the fly and I tightened to feel firm resistance. Can there be a finer moment for the wet-fly angler than seeing a fish take the top dropper as we lift the fly to the surface? The moment the hook took a hold, the sea-trout was everywhere, running, jumping and boring down. They are spirited fighters – even the smaller fish – and this one was no exception. As I drew my fish to the side of the boat I could see it was very fresh. A few moments to admire my first sea-trout of 2008, then I released him – a fish of about 1¼ lb.

We continued with our drift, but after covering 100 yards of water with no further action I suggested to Tim that we cover the early part of the drift again. From experience I knew fresh-run sea-trout can be localised, and if you locate a taking fish there is a good chance that there will be other sea-trout present. Tim agreed, and we both caught a fish



**More sea-trout favourites: Dennis's Teal, Blue and Silver with a red cock hackle fibre tail for durability; a Dunkeld variant (a good late-season fly for salmon and sea-trout that have seen the usual suspects); and the good old Invicta.**

on the next drift covering the same area. Again the Claret Bumble on the top dropper proved a killer. There was no point in covering the unproductive water downwind from this area which we had covered previously. So we tried a different line, from the north-west corner of the lough across to the island. This would take us over the area with the broad-leaf pondweed beds I spoke of earlier, and it was

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around the edge of these that we picked up four more, all between 12 oz and 1½ lb, to the black and silver of the Kate McClaren, or the Claret Bumble.

The day proved to be a productive one, and we came off the water with our tally at ten fish to the boat. This, with a number of fish lost in play and some browns for good measure, turned out to be a rewarding day with the wet-fly rod. My best sea-trout, of about 2½ lb, fittingly came on the last drift of the day as we drifted the road shore back to the moorings. Larry and Dick had also fared well, bringing nine fish to their boat. So with 19 sea-trout plus a few browns to four rods, it was a good traditional wet-fly day with wild fish from a beautiful fishery.

Lough Inagh Lodge was a sporting lodge when Maire and her late husband acquired the business in 1988. In 1989 it was turned into a four-star country house hotel. When the sea-trout runs failed, a change of marketing strategy was required if the business were to continue. A lot of people would have walked away from such a situation, but Maire didn't. Instead she targeted the tourism market, and built the



Vaughan Lewis fishes Lough Lehanagh, one of a number of hill loughs that provide a useful back-up if dry weather prevents the salmon and sea-trout running.

**Andrew Boyd with a 1¼ lb September sea-trout.**



business up. The ambiance is very much that of a country house, with friendly staff and open fires. Many of the visitors are regulars. The hotel is set in a valley surrounded by stunning mountain scenery, and is ideal for people wishing to visit Connemara and Ireland's west.

It can be frustrating for the visiting angler when weather conditions conspire against the pursuit of migratory fish. This can be disappointing, particularly when time, money and planning have been invested into a trip planned to coincide with the main run of fish. But provided one is open-minded, all is not lost if the weather gods choose not to support the angler in his quest for sport. The brown fishing on Lough Inagh and the neighbouring hill loughs can provide some very useful back-up fishing. The main lough produced four browns over 8 lb last year. So there is always the chance of a big one.

For those who enjoy combining a walk with some fishing, then the hill loughs surrounding Inagh provide the perfect solution. But whatever lough or river system we choose, in long spells of dry weather the fishing for

migratory fish will always suffer.

Salmon have always supported the fishing interest (2008 produced 85 fish). As well as the lough, the noted beats for salmon are the Derryclare Butts, Corlool, Glendollagh Butts, Green Point and the Trout pool. The Derryclare Butts is a well-known cast for salmon, but with a rise in water any one of the beats could produce a fish. Salmon always add that little extra spice when fishing for sea-trout, which is one of the charms of fishing a migratory system such as Inagh – we just never know which species of fish may move to our flies.

When it comes to predicting migratory fish runs, the number of fish returning cannot be guaranteed – all we can do is wait and see if the runs do materialise. But if the run of sea-trout continues to improve, this would be good news all round. Those anglers from Ireland and the UK who share a passion for traditional wet-fly fishing for sea-trout will really have something to look forward to this year. I, for one, can think of no better place to spend a few days chasing these game battlers than on beautiful Lough Inagh.



Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel.

### Factfile

**Season:** Feb 1-Sep 30 (although fishing doesn't really pick-up until May).

**2008 catches:** Salmon, 85; sea-trout, 759; brown trout, 231 (including four fish over 8 lb).

**Fishing prices:** Salmon fishing, 80 euro/day; Lake fishing, 60 euro/day; engine hire, 20 euro/day; gillie/guide, 80 euro/day; equipment hire, 15 euro/day; flies, 2.50-3.50 euros; Government licence 34-150 euros.

Lough Inagh Lodge Hotel also offers special packages for fly-casting instruction and fishing breaks (2-5 days). Two days' bed, breakfast and dinner and one day's salmon or trout fishing from 260 euros (May and September). The hotel is also holding an outdoor "watercolour workshop" for non-fishing guests or partners in April.

For further information, tel 00 353 95 34706, visit [www.loughinaghlodgehotel.ie](http://www.loughinaghlodgehotel.ie) or e-mail [inagh@iol.ie](mailto:inagh@iol.ie)