

SCOTCH STREAMS AND LAKES.



CHAPTER XXXII.

Rivers, Streams, and Lakes in Scotland—The Tweed—The Lakes and Streams of Argyleshire—Loch Awe—A Contest with a *Salmo ferox*—Inverness-shire, Ross-shire, and Sutherland—Pike not an *injurious* destroyer of Trout—Char—The River Shin—Pertinacity of Salmon in ascending Streams—The Beauly—The Findhorn—The Spey—The Dee—Decrease in the number of Salmon ; its causes and its cure—Extent of the trade of Fly-making.

MANY and varied are the streams and lakes of Scotland, and scarcely any two of them contain trout of exactly similar appearance. Although of the same species, and alike in all the essential parts of their anatomy, etc., in outward appearance, shape, and colour, trout vary more than any other fish. As I have before observed, these fish have the power of either voluntarily or involuntarily taking, to a remarkable degree, the colour of the water in which they live. In the same way do they derive their brown and yellow hue from the



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stones on which they are accustomed to lie. Few Highland streams contain very large trout: the feeding is not abundant enough, the cold waters not being sufficiently productive of animalculæ and small insects. Fish are as dependent on the nature of the soil through which a stream runs as oxen are on the richness of the meadows on which they pasture. The reason is obvious: a river which runs through a fertile country always abounds in flies, worms, snails, etc., on which its inhabitants feed; whilst a mountain stream, which flows rapidly through a barren and rocky country has not the same supply.

I will not pretend to give a descriptive list of all the rivers, streams, and lakes in Scotland, where the angler may find employment for rod and line: they are too numerous for me to do so; nor is my knowledge of them sufficiently complete.

There are few districts, from Ayrshire to Caithness, where trout and salmon are not to be found in tolerable abundance. Many streams run into the Solway Firth which are plentifully supplied with good trout, fed on the insect population of the fertile fields of Ayrshire, Kirkeudbright, etc. Many fine lakes, abounding in trout, char, and pike, are also to be found in that district. But mines, and other similar works, are already beginning to

fill that part of the country with a population peculiarly destructive to fish and game.

The Tweed and its tributaries are known to all as the angler's classic ground, and have been so often described by abler pens than mine that I will say nothing about them.

Loch Leven trout are famous throughout Scotland.

Then come the lakes and streams of Argyleshire, beautifully situated in a wild and rugged country, but overrun of late years by cockney and summer tourists. Loch Awe will, however, always maintain its high repute for its large lake trout, which rival the pike in size and voracity, but are stronger, and far more wary and difficult to catch. A "*Salmo ferox*" of fifteen or twenty pounds weight is no mean adversary. His first rush, when he finds himself firmly hooked, is nearly strong enough to tow the fishing-coble after him. And then comes the tug of war. The monster, held only by a slight line and tapering rod, is one moment deep down boring his head to the bottom of the lake, with every yard of the line run out, and the rod bent into the water; the next he takes a new freak, and goes off near the surface like a steamboat, and before you can wind in he is right under your boat and close to the bottom of it, your line being you know

not where. Again the reel is whirring round so rapidly that you feel your line must break in spite of all your fancied skill. But no—he stops suddenly, and again seems inclined to wind your line round and round the boat; or, by Jove! to upset you, if he can, by running against its keel. If there is a projecting nail, or a notch in the wood, he manages to get the line fixed in it. After you have cleared your tackle from this danger, off he darts again. Your Highland boatman swears in Gaelic; you perhaps follow his example in English—at least, to a certainty you blame him for rowing too fast or too slow, and begin to think that you would give a guinea to be honourably rid of the fish without discredit to your skill as an angler. At last your enemy appears exhausted—you have been long exhausted yourself—and floats quietly near the surface. But, at the critical moment of placing the gaff in a position to secure him, he flaps his tail, and darts off again as strong as ever, taking good care to go right under the boat again. At last, however, patience and good tackle and skill begin to tell; and, after two or three more feeble efforts to escape, your noble-looking fellow of a trout is safely lodged in the bottom of the landing-net.

Inverness-shire and the west of Ross-shire and

Sutherland are intersected by numerous excellent salmon rivers and beautiful lakes, full to overflowing of trout and pike. It is a fallacy to suppose that pike are at all detrimental to the sport of the fly-fisher—at least in a Highland lake, where there is depth and space enough for both trout and pike to live and flourish in. Of course pike kill thousands and tens of thousands of small trout. But the principal thing to be regretted in almost all Highland lakes is that there are far too many trout in them, and that the fly-fisher may work for a month without killing a trout of two pounds weight. Pike keep down this overstock, and yet still leave plenty of trout, which are of a better size and quality than where they are not thinned. I have invariably found that this is the case, and that I could kill a greater *weight* of trout in a loch where there are pike than where they had not these their natural enemies to keep down the undue increase in their numbers. Pike, too, are by no means exclusively piscivorous; they are as omnivorous as a pig or an alderman. A great part of the food of a pike consists of frogs, leeches, weeds, etc. etc. Young wild-ducks, water-hens, coots, and even young rats, do not come amiss to him. Like a shark, when hungry, the pike swallows anything and everything which comes within reach of his murderous jaws.

If the fact could be ascertained, I would back a "Salmo ferox" of ten pounds weight to kill more trout in a week than a pike of the same size would do in a month. I never killed a tolerably large trout without finding within him the remains of other trout; sometimes, too, of a size that must have cost him some trouble to swallow. In fact, I am strongly of opinion that pike deserve encouragement in all large Highland lakes where the trout are numerous and small. There is also no doubt that trout follow up the *lex talionis*, and feed on the young pike as freely as pike feed on young trout.

There are numberless fine lakes in the interior of the northern counties, situated in wild and sequestered spots remote from roads and tracks, the waters of which are seldom or never troubled by the line of the angler. During my search for the breeding-places of the osprey and other rare birds in the north of Sutherland, I have come upon lakes situated in those rugged wildernesses, and frequently high upon the mountains, where I am confident no human being ever practised the "gentle craft." The only enemies that the trout have in these lonely lochs are the otters who live on their banks, or the osprey who builds her nest on some rocky islet, safely encircled by the cold depths of the surrounding waters.

There is also in many of these lakes plenty of char, a fish of mysterious habits, never or seldom taking the fly or any other bait, but at a certain season (about the middle of October, as far as my experience goes) migrating in great shoals from the deepest recesses of the lake, where they spend the rest of the year, to the shallows near the shore. During this short migration they are caught in nets, and frequently in great numbers.

On the east of Sutherlandshire there are several excellent salmon rivers: amongst the best, if not quite the best, of these is the "Shin," which flows out of an extensive lake of the same name, which is full of most excellent trout. In some parts of this county the propensity of salmon to ascend streams is most strikingly exemplified; nothing can exceed the determination with which they work their way from river to lake, from lake to burn, and so gradually ascending every running stream until at last they reach rivulets so small and shallow that you wonder how two salmon can pass each other in them. Taking advantage of every flood which swells the burns, they work themselves up shallows and narrow places where apparently there is scarcely sufficient water for the smallest trout to swim. When they have fulfilled their spawning duties they drop back during the winter floods to the larger

streams and thence to the sea, where they become reinvigorated and increase in size with a rapidity which would be incredible had it not been fully ascertained by frequent and specific experiment.

On the east coast of Ross-shire, between Sutherland and Inverness-shire, there are few streams of any size or value.

The Beauly is a noble stream, as well for the angler as for the lover of natural beauty, being surrounded with most magnificent scenery.

But above all rivers, "*ante omnes*," the Findhorn holds with me the highest place, not only for the abundance of its fish, but for the varied country and beautiful scenery through which it passes, from the dreary brown and gray heights of the Monaghleahd mountains, at its source, to the flat and fertile plains of Morayshire, where it empties itself into the salt waters; and, beyond a doubt, the beauty of the scenery and banks of the Findhorn for several miles is not to be equalled in Scotland. Most interesting, too, and varied, are the wild animals and birds which frequent its rocks and banks, from the stag and eagle, which add to the wild grandeur of its source, to the wildswan and gray goose, which feed at its junction with the bay.

I do not know that the Findhorn can be called

a first-rate angling river ; for, although frequently almost full of fish, it is so subject to floods and sudden changes that the fish in it do not generally rise well, being constantly kept on the move.

Although these violent and often most unexpected risings of the river add much to its interest in the eyes of the artist or spectator, they militate sadly against the success of the angler, who has frequently to gather up his tackle as he best can, and run for his life ; or, after having made up his mind to a week's good fishing, finds the river either of a deep black colour, or of the hue and almost of the consistence of pea-soup, overflowing bank and brae, owing to some sudden rain-storm in the distant mountains of the Monaghleahd.

The Spey is another glorious river—a finer river for salmon than even the Findhorn : indeed the rent paid for the salmon-fishing at the mouth of this river proves it to be the best supplied water in Scotland. Everything in this matter-of-fact age brings its real and marketable value ; and, from the amount of rent paid, the number of fish which inhabit each river may be very nearly ascertained by a simple arithmetical process, as all fishing-rents are proportioned correctly and carefully to the number and value of salmon which can be caught. The Spey is a fine wide stream, with a great volume

of water ; and although, like all Highland rivers, subject to floods, is not liable to such sudden and dangerous risings as its neighbour the Findhorn.

The Dee, and many other rivers and streams, all gladdening to the eye of the fly-fisher, pour their waters into the German Ocean : with none of these, however, have I a sufficient personal acquaintance to enable me to describe their merits or demerits.

It is a matter quite beyond doubt that salmon are decreasing every year in most of the Scottish rivers. With short-sighted cupidity these valuable fish are hunted down, trapped, and caught in every possible manner ; and in consequence of this reckless destruction the proprietors of some salmon rivers will, before many years have elapsed, lose the high rents which they now obtain from sportsmen and speculators. Prolific as they are, fish, like all other animals, must of necessity decrease, unless allowed fair play and time to breed.

It is not the angler who injuriously thins their number. The salmon is too capricious in rising at the fly to make this possible. Nor, indeed, do I think that any extent of fair river-fishing can exterminate them. It is the system of stake-net and bag-net fishing which requires to be better regulated, and placed under more stringent local laws. As the fishing is now carried on, the salmon are almost

precluded from reaching their breeding-grounds. The mouth of every river is flanked and hemmed in by stake-nets and similar obstructions, against which the poor salmon have not the least chance. Coasting along the shore in search of fresh waters, they find a fence which they cannot get through, and which leads them directly into an ingenious but most iniquitous puzzle of a trap. In fact, if the object of proprietors and renters of rivers was to exterminate salmon, they could not devise better means to do so than those now practised. On the other hand, the rents are so high—and they still go on increasing—that the lessees are obliged of necessity to use every means in their power to pay all their heavy expenses and to obtain even a moderate profit.

The individual who hires a salmon river as a matter of trade and speculation cannot be expected to be influenced by any other motive than wishing to make the best of his bargain. His outgoings are great ; he pays a large rent for the privilege of dragging a net through the water ; he pays a rent for the right of putting up stake-nets, bag-nets, cruives, etc., all of which are exposed to injury and destruction by flood and storm ; he pays numerous servants and watchers, and has also the great expense of making and renewing his boats, nets, and

other valuable tackles—and yet he is the person usually blamed as the destroyer of the salmon, whereas, in fact, he is actually compelled, in self-defence, to take every fish he can catch, in every possible manner, as the only chance he has of meeting all these heavy expenses. At the same time it must be remembered that no one single proprietor can do anything towards putting down this ruinous system unless the neighbouring owners on the same line of coast co-operate with him. A pause for a few years in this wholesale destruction would bring the salmon back to something like their former numbers, and enable proprietors of rivers to ask and obtain the same rents as they now do, from English and other sportsmen who come northwards for angling. At present, fly-fishing, in many rivers which were formerly abundantly supplied, is not worth the trouble—a mere *umbra nominis*—excepting during the run of grilse; and this can only be remedied by a system of unanimous and general preservation of the fish.

There is no necessity for restricting the sport of the fly-fisher. Salmon will never be injured to any great extent by this mode of taking them; and were the net-fishing better regulated, and diminished, higher rents would not be grudged by the sportsman.

Excepting amongst anglers, the extent of the trade of fly-making is little known. The number of hands employed, men, women, and even children, whose small fingers are the best adapted for imitating the delicate wings of the midge or ant, and the variety of materials used, would astonish the uninitiated. If any person will examine the wings and body of a single Irish salmon-fly, he will perceive how many substances are used, and how many birds from every quarter of the globe are laid under contribution to form this tiny but powerfully attractive bait, which, were it less carefully and skilfully constructed, would never entice the wary salmon out of his resting-place under some stone or rock, where, like a gourmand in the snug corner of his club-room, he patiently but anxiously awaits the arrival of some delicate morsel.

