

Highland treasure

**KATHLEEN and
'JP' PICCIN** explain why
they keep returning to
the north-east's
River Don

It was one of those damp, bleak days. Tree tops and hills had disappeared into the clouds and everything was grey. A light breeze blowing directly from the Pole found its way into every nook and cranny. So it was with little enthusiasm that I began to prepare my rod and fly line. Suddenly an old man appeared. "Beautiful day for the fishing," he said, admiring the bleak sky. Ignoring my hesitation he went on, "you know, there are some really big fish here, but you'll have to work for them. You have to take your time with this river, not just skim over it, read it like a poem, don't rush. Follow your intuition; go back and fish the best spots again and again ... that's the only way to appreciate it."

I listened to this wise advice, and little by little, the River Don began to reveal some of its secrets. At first, it was just a discreet little rise in the middle of the current during the day; then in the evening, just before dark, the bigger trout rose more aggressively, vying to catch my attention in case I passed by without seeing them. I immediately fell in love with the River Don.

"Excuse me, sir, could you fasten your seat belt we are beginning our descent to Edinburgh Airport." The stewardess woke me from my day-dreams of my last trip to the River Don. I hadn't fished the Highlands for seven years, but

had recently read that the Don was probably still the best river in Europe for dry-fly fishing for brown trout, so we decided it was time to go back.

From Edinburgh, Scotland's capital city, it's a three-hour drive due north through wild, unspoilt countryside. We were to meet Hamish, a fellow fly-fisher whom I'd been talking with on the internet and who had offered to show us the river. Of course, the meeting place was in a pub in the middle of nowhere. He was already waiting at the bar when we arrived - solid and silent as the blocks of granite which littered the valley around us. After a quick introduction we got straight down to business. "I don't know if today's a good day for dry-fly fishing. We hadn't had a drop of rain for a month and a half and now it hasn't stopped for the past four days. The water might be a bit high and it won't have cleared yet."

It only took us a few minutes to get to the river. Fortunately, the valley floor is mainly peat which acts as a sponge and holds back a lot of the water. The river was certainly high, but was already clearing to its normal whisky hue and as if to welcome us.

Some small trout had begun to rise. We immediately tried to tempt them with the best of my fly box but to no avail. From my previous experience I remembered that at this time of the season the main hatches did not begin until later in the day. So I decided to explore a bit and look for some big trout. Moving slowly and carefully along the bank, ignoring the currents, I quickly found the ideal spot - a bend, some big rocks to slow down the flow, a deep cut-out bank shaded by century-old trees: this was where I was going to wait.

The first insects had not begun to hatch when suddenly a 'nose' broke the mirror-like

surface, probably a BWO emerger ... Then just five metres from where I was sitting, the rises came more regularly. Very carefully I cast and slowly followed my CdC, hardly visible, floating low on the water and - Bingo! - I hooked her first time. As soon as she realised she'd

been hooked she began leaping, rushing up river, down river, and it was only after a long battle that I was able to release her back to the river.

After all this commotion I decided I should move on and look for another spot. After walking for a few minutes I came across a magnificent long pool with some rising trout. Ignoring the smaller ones which would usually have delighted me, I decided to try for one of three big ones rising regularly. Same fly, same result, except this fish headed downstream to a fast current taking 20 metres of my line. So I ran along behind trying to turn her towards the bank and eventually landed another lovely, round 3lb wild brown trout. Despite all the agitation, I managed to get back into position and her two sisters followed suit. What a day! High water, bright sunshine, incessant wind ... unbelievable fishing!

The next day we decided to head further downstream. Near the village of Alford, the river becomes larger and flows through fields and farmland. Sir Archibald Grant had offered to show us the 20km (44 miles) of river that runs through his land.

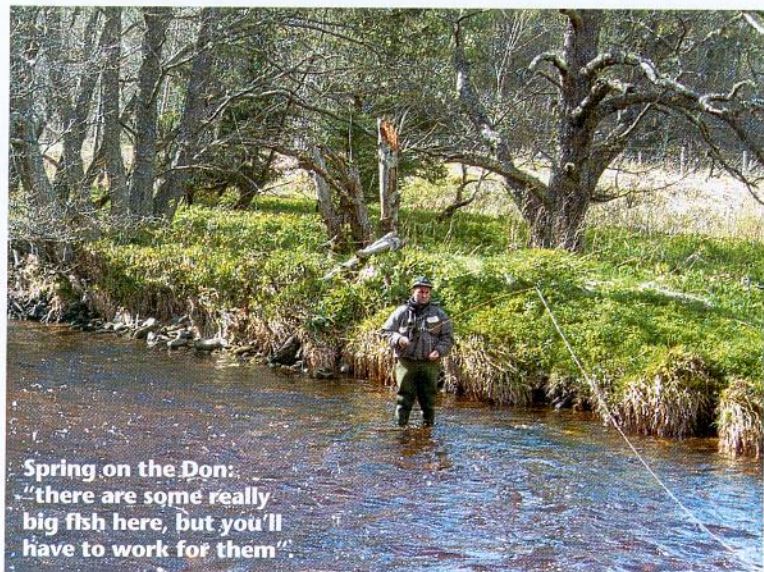
The "very private" beat next to his house can only be described as sublime! We have been lucky enough to travel the world to fly-fish, and have spent many days fishing some wonderful rivers - but none as memorable as this. Even if I only did catch one trout ... the others all got away ...

In the 250-metre-long pool where I fished all day, I saw the biggest wild brown trout I had ever seen in my life. I 'walked' on fish between 1lb and 2lb without even casting so as not to spook the bigger ones rising nearby.

Because the water was so calm I was using a very long, fine tippet so my fly would float naturally but my 6X broke after only five seconds; the 5X and 4X only resisted slightly longer, but what a sensational day!

We decided to go back to the same section the next day to fish the Grant Arms Hotel water. My first impression was that the river was even better - a series of riffles and long pools, shaded banks with ancient trees and a path by the river that had been traced by generations of fly fishermen. The trout were just as big as elsewhere, but a bit more discerning. However, one of the first sea trout of the season rose to a fly and put up some resistance before I managed to tire him out.

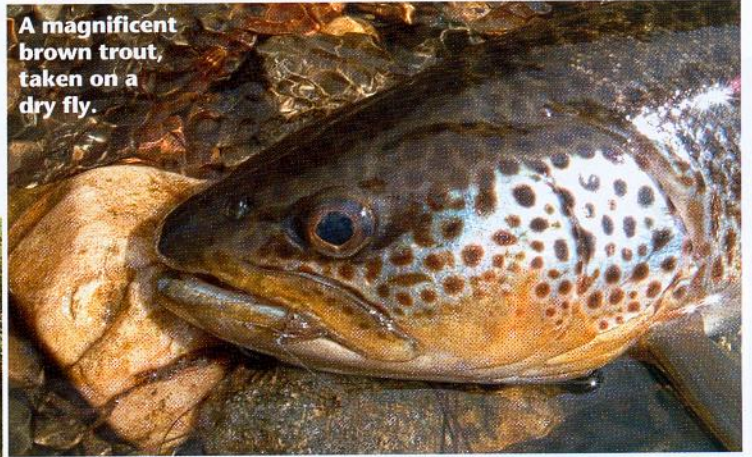
I then moved on to fish a spot halfway between these two beats where the river flows through fields and hills with here and there an old wood cabin overlooking the best pools and offering shelter from the Scottish elements. Things did not seem as promising today. So I waited under one of the rare trees on the river bank, frozen by the wind that was roaring down



Spring on the Don:
"there are some really
big fish here, but you'll
have to work for them"

RIVER TROUTING

A magnificent brown trout, taken on a dry fly.



Tackle

There's no need to bring a powerful rod for the River Don as you never have to cast far. There are very few obstacles in the river, and landing fish is not difficult. A 9' rod and #4 line is ideal for trout. A fly line that cuts through the wind is a good idea because you're never far from the coast here. For salmon, a 9' one-hand rod, or 12' two-hand will do.

Flies

May and June appear to be the best months for dry-fly fishing wild brown trout. Hatches are very long, sometimes non-stop, from 11 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon.

The most common hatches during the day are iron blue dun (*Baetis niger*) size 16, March brown (*Rhytrogena germanica*) size 12, and dark olive (*Baetis rhodani*) size 14.

In June, after a warm sunny afternoon, a Grey or Cinnamon Caddis pattern just before nightfall can be very effective with the big trout.

When there are no hatches, the hawthorn fly (*Bibio marci*) is a very useful terrestrial pattern.

Below: A superb wild Don-caught brownie.

'I ONLY MET THREE OTHER FISHERS - AND THAT WAS ON A PUBLIC HOLIDAY'

Highland heaven: great fishing in a beautiful setting.

river. Time went by very slowly with no sign of movement on the water.

Eventually I decided to go back to the cabin and have lunch. Head down against the wind, I walked down the bank looking for a spot to wade back across the river when, in the middle of the surf, I saw some small rises. Once again, my Olive CdC tempted a lovely brown trout, but why did I have such a small tippet?!

A bit further down, in a shallow, another big one had already begun lunch but with the wind and my shortened tippet, I only succeeded in spoiling her appetite when my line fell right on top of her nose.

But I'm sure she will still be in the same place next year, because during my week here I only met three other fishers - and that was on a public holiday.



RIVER TROUTING

Dark Olive Spent Emerger.



Dark Olive Spent Emerger

Hook: Kamasan B400, size 14.

Thread: Green.

Tail: Pardo 'flor de escoba' coq de Leon feather.

Body: Haretron golden brown dubbing.

Thorax: CdC dubbing or hare's ear mixed with Antron dubbing.

Wings: Two grey CdC feathers placed horizontally.

'WE HAVE SPENT MANY DAYS FISHING SOME WONDERFUL RIVERS - BUT NONE AS MEMORABLE AS THIS ONE'

Species on the Don

Essentially wild brown trout throughout the river. In spring, salmon and sea trout begin heading back up river. Thanks to new rules on netting in the estuary, the population of salmon and sea trout is increasing.

March Brown

Hook: Kamasan B400, size 12.

Thread: Black.

Tail: Pardo 'obscura' coq de Leon feather.

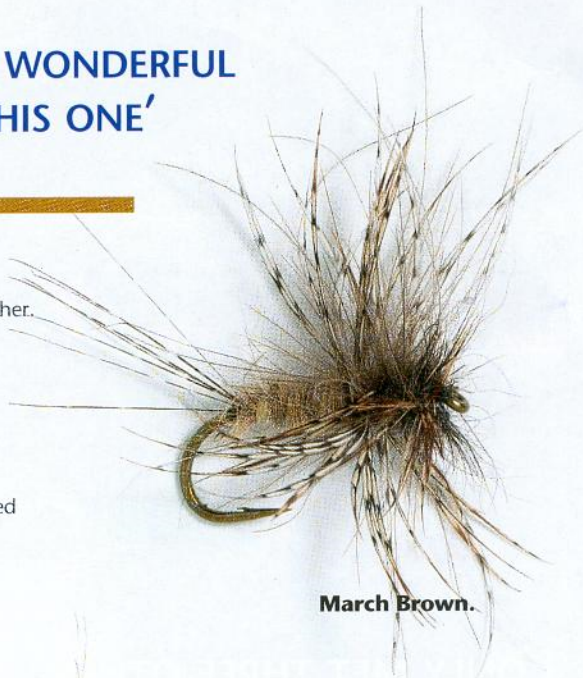
Body: Golden hare's ear.

Rib: Pale green silk thread.

Thorax: Dark brown hare's ear.

Wings: One or two turns partridge feather; two or three turns grey CdC feather (do not cut the points).

Tip: When it rains, CdC can be replaced by deer hair for better floating.



March Brown.

Information

Getting there: Fly to Edinburgh or Aberdeen. All major car rental companies have offices at both airports.

Where to stay: The Grant Arms Hotel, Monymusk, Aberdeenshire AB51 7HJ. Tel. +44 (0)1467 651226. Fax +44 (0)1467 651494. The Kildrummy Inn, Kildrummy, Alford AB33 8QS. Tel/Fax +44 (0)1975 571227. Colquhinnie Hotel, Strathdon, Aberdeenshire AB36 SUN. Tel. +44 (0)1975 651210.

Map: Landranger Ordnance Survey. Nos 36, 37, 38.

Web: www.visitscotland.com

Books: Bruce Sandison's *Rivers and Lochs of Scotland*; *Scotland for Fishing 2004*.



Hawthorn Fly.

Hawthorn Fly

Hook: Tiemco TMC100BL, size 16.

Thread: Black.

Body: Dark brown peacock herl.

Wings: Dark grey CdC feathers and dark brown Z-lon or Pardo 'obscura' cock feather.

Hackle: Dark grey cock hackle.

Legs: Pheasant feather fibres knotted to form joints.

Editor's Quill

Scotland possesses some excellent gamefishing. No, I mean it. Despite its problems with sea trout and salmon on the north-west coast, its failing spring run, and the general downward spiral of salmon stocks, there are still plenty of good fishing stories to tell.



For instance, it has some great wild trout fishing. By that, I don't mean deep, dark lochs containing myriad six-inch browns waiting to grab your fly as soon as it hits the surface; some of the river fishing is of the highest quality, and many of the lochs hold superb wild fish, in numbers that can produce memorable days. One such river is highlighted in the 16-page supplement, *Fly-fishing in Scotland 2004*, supplied with this issue.

I remember Oliver Edwards, a few years ago, returning to Wakefield and his beloved Wharfe, spluttering in disbelief at the insect life he had just encountered whilst sampling during a fly-fishing and fly-tying weekend demonstration.

"Where were you?", I asked, expecting Hampshire to be the answer. "Aberdeenshire, on the Don", he informed me, and then proceeded to describe the awesome quantity and variety of invertebrate life his kick-sampling had produced. His verdict was that if I was within a two-and-a half hour drive of the Don, then I really should consider getting a season ticket.

The quality of some of the fish that inhabit the Don is demonstrated in Kathleen and 'JP' Piccin's 'Highland treasure' article (*Supplement p.xii*), but the fact that I've only once made the trip to the Don since Oliver warned me about its terrifying insect population might tell you that it isn't the only good wild-trout venue in Scotland. (However, I must admit that, reading the Piccins' article, I'm beginning to get the urge to return to Aberdeenshire again).

Geoffrey Bucknall knows a thing or two about wild-brown trout fishing, too. Having pursued them throughout the UK for decades, it's uncanny how he gravitates north - the Far North - to Caithness, every summer. The attraction of Mayfly and quality, fin-perfect wild trout on a seemingly forgotten loch, surrounded by curlews and watched by ospreys is difficult to resist, I suppose. If fly-fishing has pinnacles then this, surely, has to be near the top?

However, talk to many a fly fisher about wild trout, and he will always see Ireland as his goal. His nirvana. Ireland has always been seen as fly-fishing's Holy Grail, and why not? For decades it has been supported by a pro-active tourist board that recognises its potentials, and its fisheries are nurtured by regional fisheries boards. Now Wales is following suit, already reaping rewards from the EU money it has received (*Morgan & Son, p.80*). Its fisheries are supported by the Environment Agency and, backed by the Welsh Tourist Board, the concept of fishing is being used as a rural economic tool.

Ironically, Wales realised just how valuable angling is to its rural economy during the restrictions of foot-and-mouth disease, when many fisheries were closed, anglers stayed away and local business suffered. Now, wild fisheries in Wales are enjoying good times, and the money being ploughed into them is a sound investment for their future.

Why Scotland does nothing to promote or enhance its own superb wild trout potential remains a mystery, but also a worry. If nobody at government level recognises their value and potential, who is going to look after and protect these fisheries? Surely, it's time Scotland took a leaf out of the Irish and Welsh angling tourism blueprint. In the meantime, *FF&FT* readers will be able to keep it to themselves.

Mark Bowler