

Manager's Report on Season 2022 to the Helmsdale DSFB on 6th May 2023.

2022 reported catch was exactly 1300, 137 caught on the Lower Helmsdale. The rate of returned fish was around 96%. The 10 year average for the 6 beats is now 1322 salmon and grilse.

2022 was a season of sharply varying rod catches. Catches were poor through March, April, May and June. There was low water for most of the time, but unlike in 2021 there were occasional modest spates. These produced higher numbers caught, but not the head of fish hoped for. At the end of July fortunes turned and 100 were caught one week on the private beats, the highest catch in this week for 10 years. Catches in August sagged once more to be followed by over 400 on the private beats in a September of exceptional fishing weeks.

The grilse run was deemed by ghillies and anglers to be an improvement on the previous year.

Condition of salmon and grilse was normal. High weights early on were thought to be related to exceptional feeding from large shoals of capelin off northern Iceland.

The fish counter was out-of-action for the whole season so numbers of fish in the river were conjecture. Minor repairs were done by the Board, guided by Marine Scotland. The counter is on a government list of fish counters bidding for funds for repair work going forward.

Disease in 2022 was insignificant.

The Board participated with many other rivers in the government's Adult Salmon Sampling Programme. This reports length, weight and condition of individual fish along with samples of scales. It enables government to ascertain the state of stocks, the health of fish and whether any can be retained for eating. Before salmon netting was abolished netsmen used to provide this information.

Neighbouring rivers reported catching stray pink salmon from Norway. Few were caught on the Helmsdale.

The Board conducted its usual electro-fishing programme and has improved storage of its information bank now going back a long time. It was gratifying to learn that from results collated by government for 2021 the Helmsdale had the highest densities of young salmon in any Scottish river out of 48 except the Beaully. Young fish numbers are in an excellent state. This attests to the good habitat condition in the upper catchments where salmon reproduce.

Spawning in 2022 was good. Salmon waited on small rises in water levels and got high up the burns.

The Board did its annual research work for Forest Scotland on the River Halladale.

No seals were killed. Killing any seal has been illegalised, barring in very exceptional circumstance. The Norwegian Institute for Marine Research has calculated that whales and seals eat six times as many ocean fish as humans eat in European waters. The seal shooting ban was introduced in Scotland to protect exports of Scottish farmed salmon. America ruled it would import no farmed fish whose production entailed loss of life to sea mammals. In a dry summer like 2022 it is thought that seals preyed on considerable numbers of migrating salmon waiting for rain off the coast.

The Board acquired a license to kill sawbill ducks again in 2023. The purpose is to protect young salmon and sea-trout. In 2022 four sawbills were reported killed by Board employees.

51 broodstock salmon were caught for the hatchery. This effort was assisted by local anglers and a few early season fishing tenants. The winter has been good despite low water temperatures

without damaging floods. Around 150,000 ova survived to become fry and were reintroduced to burns by mid-April this year. Temperatures rose exactly when reintroduction took place, providing ideal conditions for growth of fry.

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