

Manager's Report on Season 2023 to the Helmsdale DSFB Annual Meeting on 11th May 2024.

2023 reported catch was 1108, in addition 92 caught on the Lower Helmsdale. The rate of returned fish was 97%. The ten year average for the beats is now 1281 salmon and grilse.

The June catch was notably disappointing, however both September and July recorded over 300 fish. Beats 2 and 3 Above and Beat were the highest-yielding beats.

The summer was characterised by low rainfall. May and June were very dry and catches reflected this. When rain came catches immediately rose. On 10th July eight fish were caught on Beat 1 Below by 10.30am. Rain fell abundantly in Mid-September and there were catches of over a hundred fish a week in the last fortnight.

As a general comment the dry summer showed again that the amount of fishable water on the Helmsdale can be limited. Fishing early and late evening produces better results, avoiding over fishing shrunken pools in hot weather with high sun.

The usefulness of Badanloch dam was in its release water being able to create some flow in which anglers could move the fly rather than in releasing large amounts of water to make fish move upstream.

Condition of both salmon, grilse and sea-trout was good.

There was no serious disease on the Helmsdale in 2023. Research into saprolegnia is ongoing and the complexity of the condition becomes clearer.

The Board undertook training in electro-fishing for the manager of the Benmore River on Mull.

The bailiffs did their usual electro-fishing programme reaching as many part of the catchment as possible. In general terms young fish stocks in the Helmsdale catchment are healthy and good. Upper tributaries which are shady, of which there are few, produce less young salmon and sea trout and they tend to be smaller.

The Board did its normal research work on the River Halladale under contract to the Forestry Commission.

Refurbishment of the fish counter at Torrish is in a joint funding partnership project with Marine Scotland. Identifying a contractor within the budget was unsuccessful in the last funding round. It is hoped that re-application in the 2024/2025 round will be more successful. The counter has been broken now for 3 years and its information is missed.

In order to manage the sluices at Badanloch Dam in a more up-to-date and formalised way the Board is acquiring a data logger which will record levels of water on Badanloch in real time. The head bailiff's laptop this coming winter will record rising water as it happens.

The hatchery programme for 2023 had to be abandoned on 21st October when a landslide in the hatchery burn fouled up the water and brought down a torrent of dirt, lumps of peat and tree bits. The bailiffs had valiantly fought for 48 hours to maintain the inflow. In the end extreme weather conditions overcame them. One hour after the landslide the rain stopped and water levels began to fall. 60 brood fish were released unharmed to spawn naturally. This is the first time that the young fish rearing programme has been abandoned in many years.

The Board acquired a sawbill license to remove a stated number of mergansers over the winter and Spring and this quota was completed.

Spawning in 2023 could not easily be seen owing to dirty water and high levels of rain. To some extent the failure of the hatchery may be compensated by the increase in the area available to spawning salmon venturing high up in the burns and streams.

With regard to the statutory obligations relating to “good governance” placed on the Board under the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003, as amended, these have been complied with as follows:-

1. Annual Accounts are published on our website and intimated to Scottish Ministers
2. Annual public meetings of both the Qualified Proprietors and the District Salmon Fishery Board are advertised publicly with corresponding Minutes published on our website and intimated to Scottish Ministers.
3. A Complaints Register is maintained. No complaints were received for 2023.
4. A Register of the Members’ Interests is maintained and published on our website.

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