

## Manager's Report on Season 2024 to the Helmsdale DSFB Annual Meeting on 10th May 2025.

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2024 reported catch was 1196, in addition 140 caught on the Lower Helmsdale. The rate of returned fish was 97%. The 10 year average for the private beats stands at 1271.

May was a good month and delayed arrival of grilse meant that almost all fish were springers. By August catches had mirrored rainfall. August catches were low. September reverted to what has become the usual pattern of high late-season catches with rainfall. One week produced a catch of 159. This was the highest salmon catch in one week for many years.

As a general comment, dry weeks showed again that the amount of fishable water on the Helmsdale can be limited. Fishing early and late produced better results than continuously fishing low-water pools in high overhead sunlight.

Both sea trout, salmon and grilse were in good condition on the whole.

There was negligible saprolegnia disease or 'red belly' in 2024.

The bailiffs did their usual electro-fishing programme in a team of 4. Results reflected the huge spates in autumn 2023, with smaller numbers of fry and sometimes larger numbers of parr which were better able to survive. The bailiffs did their customary research work on fish and habitat for the River Halladale under contract to Forest Scotland.

During 2024 the completion of work on the fish counter on Beat 2 Below was completed. Weather was favourable and the contractors Fishtek did a good job. Financing was a public/private partnership between the Board and Marine Scotland. The Board looks forward to getting data from the Counter which in the past has been invaluable in assessing the annual migration.

Another improvement has been the installation of a data logger at Badanloch Dam. This enables the head bailiff to see on a dedicated laptop how water levels are changing on Loch Badanloch without needing to drive 9 miles to inspect personally. Its purpose is to aid management of the dam levels to help mitigate, as far as possible, extremely high water from flooding downriver. Installation of the data logger was funded by HRB.

The hatchery programme resumed in 2024. 60 brood fish, equally male and female, caught on rod and line, were used for ova collection after the angling season had finished, under government license. Continuing frosts in early spring helped to prevent too-early development of young fish and the release back into the headwaters of approximately 160,000 unfed fry was achieved satisfactorily.

The Board has resumed its partnership with the University of the Highlands and Islands in Inverness into genotyping Helmsdale fish by comparing fish taken from the river in summer to

genotypes of brood fish in October. The purpose is to ascertain the contribution by the hatchery programme to the migration. 2026 should show the first set of possible matches to take this forward.

The Board acquired a sawbill license from Marine Scotland for the removal of a stated number of mergansers. This quota was completed.

Spawning in 2024 was eminently visible owing to stable water levels and steady conditions in early November. Spawning was completed fast and spawners drifted downriver thereafter. Anecdotal evidence suggests spawners accessed high-up parts of the catchment on even small lifts in water levels.

With regard to the statutory obligations relating to 'good governance' placed on the Board under the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2023, 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 in 2024.
4. A register of Members interests is maintained and published on our website.

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