

Pursuits

The things we long to do

“I can remember all the salmon I’ve caught,” says Charlie Whelan. “I remember the ones I’ve lost even better” ➤➤

Gordon Brown’s former spin doctor takes Bob Sherwood fly-fishing



41
Second opinion
Below the belt:
vaginal cosmetic
surgery

42
Road test
Audi’s RS6: so
good, the sun comes
out in your mind

44
Try this
Photographing
all creatures
great and small

➤ It is the most exciting moment in fly-fishing, and arguably the most difficult to achieve.

In a shallow run on the mighty River Spey in Scotland, an Atlantic salmon has taken my fly and is slaloming around rocks in an attempt to head back towards the sea. I am grateful for the power of my 15ft, Scott double-handed rod as I try to subdue what turns out to be a 9lb salmon, fresh off the tide.

Later, when my adrenaline levels have subsided a little, I e-mail Charlie Whelan, former spin doctor for Gordon Brown, and tell him the news as we arrange to fish together the following day.

When we meet on the Old Spey Bridge at Grantown, his greeting is typically robust: "You f**king bastard." Whelan is yet to catch a salmon from his river this season.

"That'll annoy Tony," he says, referring to one of the local fly-fishing band, when I tell him where I caught my salmon. "That's his favourite pool."

Whelan, who achieved notoriety as the then-chancellor's bluntly spoken press secretary, lives just half-a-mile from the Spey in the Scottish Highlands, and is often found on its banks around midnight on summer weekend evenings, pursuing sea trout. Although Whelan was rather spectacularly forced to quit in 1999, he has hardly retired and commutes weekly back to London, where he is political director of the union Unite.

Whelan takes me to the "long pool" on the Upper Castle Grant beat. This is famous water, where the celebrated salmon fisher Arthur Oglesby ran his casting school. This is also the pool where Whelan caught his first salmon on his first day of salmon fishing – a rare feat.

We both make our way out into the swift currents, punctuated by large and small boulders, which can make Spey-wading treacherous. Whelan points out the lies where running salmon rest as they migrate from the sea to the upper reaches of the river to spawn. We both fish down the pool without a touch to



Charlie Whelan, right, with Bob Sherwood on Scotland's River Spey

The fish is running amok on a short line. "There it is," shouts Whelan, but the light is gone and I just can't see

our flies. I catch a tiny trout, hopelessly outgunned on the big rod, and I can hear Whelan's cackle coming down the pool.

We move up to the "Lurg", a favourite pool for Grantown anglers. Whelan is tense, constantly scanning the water with predatory intent. A trout rises and in an instant Whelan is in the water, casting his shorter rod – he always carries two – with a dry fly. "Look at that bastard," he mutters. "I'm going to have him."

He does catch the trout, but the salmon remain elusive. As we cross back over the Old Spey Bridge, Whelan spies the aforementioned Tony fishing. There is some banter. Tony, it appears, is also yet to catch a salmon this year.

Whelan isn't one to wax lyrical about the sport, but he is plainly captivated by the fishing here. When I wonder why he moved to Scotland, hardly a typical residential location for one of Labour's inner circle, he replies gruffly: "Do you really need to ask?"

Over lunch in a local café, still clad in our waders, he rails against water extraction in the Spey catchment area. Similar remarks had recently caused something of a local media storm on TV and in the press. But really he just wants to talk about fishing. "I can remember all the salmon I've caught," he says. "And I can probably remember the ones I've lost even better."

"When you have fished all those hours and you finally get one and it comes off, I think it's the worst feeling in life."

As we emerge, Whelan diverts me to the high-street offices of the Strathspey and Badenoch Herald, which apparently prints the details of every salmon caught from the Grantown water. As I have caught a fish, Whelan has deemed it appropriate for me to meet the editor. We march, unannounced, into his office. I have been in many newspaper editors' offices, but never before in waders which leave wet footprints on the carpet.



Later that night, we meet again to try for a sea trout as the daylight fades. The water is quiet at Whelan's favourite sea trout pool but around 9pm, his mobile rings. It is Tony, phoning from downstream with news that he has caught two salmon and seen lots of fish moving upriver. About an hour later, the fish arrive.

With heightened expectations, I fish down again with no success. But before I have even waded out of the pool, Whelan shouts and his single-handed sea trout rod is doubled over. On such a light rod, he has little control over the fish and cannot risk letting it run downstream.

Whelan barks at me to get the landing net as I stumble to the shore. The fish is running amok on a short line and thrashing at the surface. "There it is, there it is," he shouts, but the light has gone and I am still wearing my polarising sunglasses. I just can't see the fish.

I fumble to change my glasses and Whelan's earlier words about losing fish are ringing in my ears. As are his expletive-laden cries at me to net the fish. If the fight goes on much longer, he is sure to lose it. He has it on the surface again and this time I make no mistake and engulf the fish in the mesh.

It is awe-inspiring. At 14lb, silver and solid with an enormous tail, it is Whelan's biggest ever fly-caught salmon. And to take it on such a delicate rod and fine line was a masterful piece of angling. We sit on the bank in the disappearing light, both still shaking, replaying the fight. He is buzzing.

I'm just relieved that I didn't make a mess of the landing and lose the fish at the net. I think I might have got quite an ear-bashing. ■ **Bob Sherwood is the FT's correspondent for London and the south-east.**

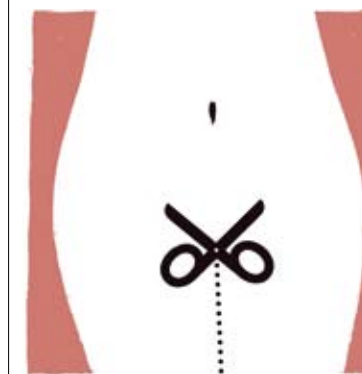
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Second opinion By Margaret McCartney

“Hail the designer vagina. While I was busy thinking that cosmetic surgeons were still sucking fat from hips and erasing bags

from under eyes, I have missed the latest money-making trend. Two professors of uro-gynaecology at King's College London recently observed that women are seeking surgical procedures to improve their intimate aesthetic appearances. Writing in *Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Reproductive Medicine*, the professors attributed this trend to "aggressive marketing" in the US and UK, combined with media coverage.

Some types of vaginal surgery are reasonable. For example, it may be necessary to treat the symptoms or side effects of cancer. Such procedures have been developed over the years, and are backed by research. Vaginal aesthetic procedures,



meanwhile, have been created to meet a demand, although the source of this enthusiasm is not exactly clear.

The hymenorrhaphy procedure recreates a hymen, which supposedly reconstitutes the appearance of virginity. Has the demand for this been created out of a desire to appear "virginal", or has momentum been ensured by surgeons willing to perform it? Many women have had their hymen broken during sporting activities. Performing surgery only keeps the myth of the "intact hymen"

alive. Then there is the offer of G-spot amplification, in which collagen is injected into the vaginal wall. This US invention comes with the proviso that it cannot "represent a promise, guarantee or warranty that any patient who undergoes the G-Spot Amplification/G-Shot will achieve a particular result. Individual results do vary, and no responsibility is assumed for failure to achieve a desired result."

As for labial reduction surgery, the professors from King's College draw a distinction between women asking for this procedure because of pain during sex and those motivated by cosmetics. In all cases, women may report psychological distress because they perceive their genitals as being in some way abnormal. But there is such a wide range of "normal" that many women may be misinterpreting their own appearances.

Some will say that if a woman wants the operation and pays for it, what's the problem? I would argue that while patient autonomy is necessary, medical professionalism should dictate that operations are not just a business transaction. A procedure should not be performed, far less billed, if it comes with risks but no clear benefit. There is no reduction in psychological distress or obvious improvement in sexual function as a result of aesthetic surgery. The market

that has evolved to take advantage of this new "distress" seems all too willing to nurture it. **Margaret McCartney is a GP in Glasgow. margaret.mccartney@ft.com**

For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at blogs.ft.com/mccartney