

Pursuits

The things we long to do

“For once,
I have not travelled
north for the king of fish” ➤➤

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salmon river – in search of giant trout*

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➤ The majestic River Tweed is flowing weakly. It hasn't rained for months in Scottish border country,

and the depleted river is a sight to make any ardent angler's spirits plummet.

The UK's most productive salmon river is so low that few of the migratory fish have returned to the river of their birth in the annual spawning ritual. Many anglers are not even bothering to fish beats that they have paid handsomely to book.

And yet I am itching to start fishing, and not just because of the blind optimism that my angling obsession routinely inspires. For once, I have not travelled north for the king of fish – I am here for trout, sea-trout and grayling, which also thrive in the Tweed, but are often overlooked. In a flying visit, I'm aiming to catch all three species.

Though the Tweed's run of salmon in the first half of this year has been disappointing, all the talk among local anglers has been of big trout. The river has produced some huge wild specimens this year.

Bill Drew, who runs the angling service Tweedguide, leads me with a confident smile down to a stretch of the river known as The Nest. Like almost every other visiting angler here, I have previously focused my efforts on the salmon. Drew is keen to show me what I have missed.

I waded out into a fast, shallow run and fish a team of three nymphs on a short line. The technique favoured by local anglers is to use a 10ft rod, flicking the heavy, sinking flies upstream and then following them as they trundle down almost under the rod tip. This style, which originated in central Europe, is known as "Czech nymphing".

Almost immediately, the line pulls away and I find myself hooking a succession of small trout. Towards the end of the run, as I nonchalantly expect to swing in another tiddler, the rod bucks and something heavy pulls back. At 10 inches long, it's a reasonable wild trout, and after the string of babies it is enough to get the heart pounding.



Bill Drew (left) and Bob Sherwood wading in the Tweed

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Drew gestures at me to follow him downstream, where, in the tail of a long pool, trout are rising everywhere to hatching flies. I try to spot the better fish, and raise many of them to my flies. But this spate of river-trout is lightning-quick, and almost all manage to evade the hook.

The next morning, I return with Ron McCombe, Drew's guiding partner and a grayling fanatic. He is determined to help me complete my trio of the Tweed's second-class fish. McCombe leads me to a pool where a few weeks earlier an American client landed two gigantic grayling, weighing 3.5lbs and 4lbs. The visitor was hardly impressed, not realising his achievement. But McCombe is still buzzing from the captures. "I'm sure there's a British record grayling in this river," he says.

With his words in my ears, I'm concentrating on every twitch of the line. After some more small trout, a heavy fish takes one of the flies and holds hard in the current.

At another 10 inches, it's a long way off the record, but it is nonetheless the second part of my trio.

Further downstream, McCombe points me towards a torrent pushing under Ashiestiel Bridge. The wading is treacherous: even with a staff, I'm struggling to balance, and trying to hold the long rod as high and far out as I can. Just where the current seems to be at its fiercest, the end of the line hesitates. I lift instinctively, and pull back at something alive and angry. It is all I can do to remain upright and hang on, as the big fish powers across the flow. The pounding of blood in my ears obliterates the crash of the white water. The fish's strength against such a heavy flow is staggering.

Then the line becomes a dead weight. I stand immobile, holding the rod high for a few seconds, unwilling to believe what my brain is telling me. One of the trailing flies has stuck fast among the boulders while the fish, almost certainly a large trout, has broken



THE DETAILS

Bill Drew and Ron McCombe operate Tweedguide, which provides trout and salmon fishing packages on the Tweed: www.tweedguide.com Castle Venlaw: www.venlaw.co.uk



free. I feel empty as I fight the current back to shore.

That evening, Drew suggests we try for a night-time sea-trout. There's an added incentive – the staff at Castle Venlaw, the 18th-century baronial hotel in Peebles where I am staying, will cook any sea-trout I catch.

Almost all sea-trout landed on the Tweed are caught accidentally by salmon anglers. Drew is convinced that the species is a neglected resource. "The run of sea-trout in this river is fantastic, and often comes at a time when the salmon fishing is poor," he says. "I would love to open up sea-trout fishing on the river."

But there are difficulties. Salmon fishing commands high prices that sea-trout anglers are unwilling to pay. It is also necessary to take two days' fishing, since wary sea-trout are best hunted after midnight. Drew is certain that better arrangements can be reached, particularly on the upper river, where salmon fishing does not begin in earnest until October.

The long Scottish summer days mean we do not begin casting for sea-trout until almost 11pm, when the light fades. I work down to a narrowing of the river, where a previous flood has dumped a cluster of rocks.

I am fishing with two flies using a muddler, a lure with a large head that disturbs the water and, in theory, attracts fish to the trailing fly. It works: a sea-trout strikes tight to the far bank. In an instant, the fish thrashes on the surface and plunges downstream, then turns and charges back towards me, creating slack in the line. The rod tip springs back as the hook falls out.

I look at Drew. There is nothing to say. Don't think that salmon are the only challenge on the Tweed. ■

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Second opinion
Just forget it

By Margaret McCartney

“The test was going okay, until I got to this: name four creatures whose names start with the letter ‘S’. It took me several seconds to get spider and seal. It took me three more hours to remember slug, even though one had appeared on the kitchen floor that morning. Scorpion and sea anemone came much later. Overall, I didn't do terribly well.

This could have been worrying. The seemingly innocuous question was part of the simple test that, if you believe the tabloid press, “can detect Alzheimer's in five minutes”. It is not difficult – who is the prime minister, when did the first world war start – but, having completed it, I found my memory wanting. And here's the thing: I'm not very bothered about it.

The test, recently published in the British Medical Journal, was billed by its authors as a fast and easy way to screen for Alzheimer's disease, enabling treatment to start early.



It sounds good, but there are a number of problems.

The first is the accuracy of the screening method. The 50-question quiz was trialled on patients who had been referred to a clinic after complaining of memory problems. Their test scores were compared with those from controls – usually relatives who had accompanied family members to the clinic.

So, the test is not designed to detect problems in people who might just want “a memory

check-up”. It is 92 per cent sensitive for detecting Alzheimer's disease, but only 82 per cent specific for it. This means that, though it will miss only 8 per cent of people who have Alzheimer's, it will sometimes detect not Alzheimer's but another problem. It will sometimes be wrong. And if the test score is low – less than 42/50 – it diagnoses nothing. It merely suggests that further investigation is required.

The researchers also excluded patients with depression from the study. In research terms, this was probably sensible, but the issue of depression and memory still requires attention. At present, and in the “uncontrolled” real world, we are unable to test quickly to see if forgetfulness is down to depression or dementia.

What of other people wanting an “early warning” that they may develop Alzheimer's? Ordering one's life affairs is all very laudable, but there are plenty more declines and deaths that come with no warning. Alzheimer's shouldn't be the only thing that hastens us to prepare a last will and testament.

As for treatment, I am afraid I think the marketing has been optimistic in terms of what can be achieved. The bottom line is that new medicines do not appear to delay the need for institutional care. For all that, this might be a very useful test, but not one that everyone should take.

“www.tinyurl.com/klepuk; www.tinyurl.com/mo5wus 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