

BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE

WYNN DAVES enjoys a day on a fascinating lake in spectacular Snowdonia

A horizontal lunch break at Nantlle, where migratory fish mingle with brownies.



A drift on Llyn Nantlle, which has an average annual catch of 411 sea-trout.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE CONTINUED

← ONE OF THE great delights of fly-fishing is the re-acquaintance of old friends when preparing for a fishing trip – the planning, talking, fly-tying (or in my case fly-acquiring) is all part of the enjoyable build-up to the big day. And one of those days found me once again on the shores of Llyn Nantlle talking with Edwyn, a wonderful fly-fisherman and

one of nature's true gentlemen. The lake lies at the head of the River Llyfni and extends to 50 acres. It is situated between a rock and a hard place. At the eastern end of the lake is Drws y Coed Pass, one of the most spectacular views from a boat anywhere and a panorama that reveals the "rock", namely Snowdon flanked by the Elephant and Tal y Migneidd mountains. At the western end of the lake lies the "hard place", in the form of the Dorothea mine,

part of what was once one of the most productive slate-mining areas in the world. The Dorothea flooded in the late 19th century with great loss of life, whereupon the course of the river was altered and deepened. Before, there had been two lakes – the Upper Nantlle and Lower Nantlle – afterwards, only the upper lake survived and it is this lake that we know today as Llyn Nantlle.

Nantlle is a shallow, fertile lake, with an average depth of ten feet and a maximum depth of just over 20 feet in a small area near the outfall of the river. Don't overlook this spot – Nantlle is one of several lakes in Wales which hold migratory fish but one of few which attract anglers, and it is in this deep area that salmon and sea-trout hold after running the river.

The rod catch for the Llyfni in 2005 was two salmon and 221 sea-trout, while the ten-year average is 19 salmon and 411 sea-trout. A few years ago there was a counter on the Llyfni, which recorded some large fish moving into the river in early spring; whether

these were big early sea-trout or springers nobody knows, but there is talk locally of when there used to be a good spring run of salmon.

And it was this discussion that I was having with Edwyn as we tackled up. Although we were a few weeks early for the traditional sea-trout run, the amount of rain God gave us in June was enough to satisfy the most ardent fisherman, and Edwyn and I were convinced there were migratory fish in the lake.

There is no history of salmon and sea-trout lake flies in Wales and most migratory fish caught in lakes are a by-product of fishing for resident trout. In the part of Ireland where I fish for salmon, they use Shrimp trebles in the river, but as soon as the salmon enter the lough, they turn to size 12 trout wet-flies; same fish but vastly differing tactics. You have to admit that it lacks a certain logic, but someone at some time proved the methods worked.

With this in mind I started making up my cast, which was when my fly-acquiring skills came



Another of Peter Thurnall's Dabblers.



Nantle killer: the Partridge Hare's Ear.

to the fore. The point fly was a Sparkling Olive Dabbling, my middle dropper was a Sparkling Black Dabbling – two great brown trout lake flies tied by Peter Thurnall, a wonderful West Wales fly-tyer – and for my top dropper I turned to Edwyn, asking if he, by any chance, had a Partridge Hare's Ear? He generously gave me a few. Make no mistake, this fly, tied by Edwyn's son Kevin, is a top dropper *par excellence* for wild trout, but it also catches sea-trout and grilse. I have learned this the hard way, fishing with Edwyn in the past, where I would stick to my flies and Edwyn would wipe my eye comprehensively, thanks to this fly. Having completed my cast and acquired even more flies, I was ready.

As we rowed the short distance to the deep holding area, the lake had cleared perfectly, there was a nice wave and cloud cover; it looked promising. However, after

fruitlessly fishing the area thoroughly, it was time to rethink tactics. Edwyn was fishing with an intermediate line and I was on a floater, each with different flies, and yet neither of us had seen or touched anything. So we decided to rest the area and move down the lake. We chose not to change flies or tactics as the sea-trout could have distributed themselves around the lake. This decision brought us in contact with the wild brown trout population. While the average weight of these trout is 6 oz-8 oz, fish up to 1 lb are not uncommon and even larger fish are caught. This, however, should not be reflected in your choice of nylon, so use a minimum of 6 lb and preferably 8 lb, as that small feisty brown trout might turn out to be a large and angry salmon or sea-trout. As to whether one should tighten into the fish, this has been covered before, and all I can say is that, the



Yellow enhances this Dabbling.



Sparkling Olive Dabbling.



A lovely fishing day, following recent heavy rain.



A basket of typical Nantlle brownies.



A fat little brownie on Edwyn's Partridge Hare's Ear.

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← bigger the fish, the slower you should react. Not particularly helpful, I know, but the best I can do and the theory applies only to visual takes – if a fish takes underwater, the problem disappears. A word of warning: a gentle take underwater does not always mean a small fish.

When Edwyn and I fish for wild trout, we do not compete against each other but against the lake. We just keep a count of the number of fish we catch and the number of fish we miss; every fish missed is one for the lake. I urge you to try: it's great fun and provides interesting banter when one misses more than the other.

As we fished down the lake, it was evident the trout were up in the water because I was catching fish and Edwyn, on an intermediate, was struggling. To overcome this, Edwyn fished a short line and the results were immediate – he started catching and missing fish, which caused great mirth. As we moored the

boat for lunch, the lake was winning by a considerable margin, but we had caught nice trout to 10 oz, but of salmon and sea-trout we had seen no sign. Over lunch, we consoled ourselves with the theory that the fish we were missing were small ones and that the bigger fish tended not to miss the fly but take it with gusto and hence were more likely to be hooked.

With lunch over and Edwyn changing to a floating line, it was a time to redress the balance of our tally against the lake. And redress it we did, for a short time. We increased our tally and everything was working as it should until, inexplicably, the fish began to come short, their tails slapping the flies. The only fish we were connecting with were sub-surface, so with the trout feeding deeper it was time to revert to an intermediate line. Still we caught only the occasional fish. Even though it was July, the wind had a cold edge, so an evening rise did

not materialise and we decided to call an end to an enjoyable day.

Nantlle has an abundance of food and we saw olives, alders and silverhorn sedges in profusion. The only worrying aspect was the presence of cormorants. The damage these birds can cause is immeasurable and we hooked salmon parr that had the tell-tale scarring of a narrow escape. It concerns me greatly that, after all the excellent work undertaken by the Seiont, Gwyrfai and Llyfni Fishing Society, Environment Agency and local farmers to restore habitat on the catchment above and around the lake, these birds should be protected and allowed to wreak havoc in what is, after all, not their natural habitat.

If you do fancy tying some of Edwyn's Hare's Ear flies, the tying is as follows: primrose silk, body from the mask of a hare, a gold rib of two twisted strands, and a grey partridge hackle.



One last cast in a quiet corner of Nantlle.

Factfile

The lake is run by Seiont, Gwyrfai and Llyfni Fishing Society, which provides three boats and one Wheelyboat at an accessible and well-built mooring. The society has an excellent website where you can see a plan of the lake with depth contours.

Visit: www.hgt.gwynedd.gov.uk/SG/Llyn Nantlle day permits: £17. Boat: £20. Engine: £8. For more information, contact the secretary, tel: 01248 670 666. For bookings, tel: 01766 890 321. For more information on fishing in Wales, visit: www.fishing.visitwales.com To order a brochure, tel: 08701 211 252.