

NESS INFORMATION SERVICE
NESSLETTER 115
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FISH POPULATION

In response to references about fish counts, populations and weights per area in recent Nessletters, I received a letter from Max Coventry. Max lives in Caerwys, Wales, and is a keen angler who has on and off over the years fished for pike in Lake Bala, North Wales. While he does not refer to the Bala monster reports, he does say it is a very interesting lake and likens it to a miniature Loch Ness. Some 4 miles long and about half a mile wide with very steep underwater sides, a relatively flat bottom averaging 100 to 150 feet deep. The welsh Dee runs through the lake and large numbers of salmon used to swim up into Bala, 15/20 years ago it was something like 15,000 a year. Max says these numbers have unfortunately been drastically reduced lately. Sea trout also migrate into the lake and there are brown trout, pike, perch, eels and other coarse fish as well as the unique gwyniad. Which is a type of freshwater whitefish which feeds on plankton deep in the lake and is closely related to similar fish in other glacial lakes including Max believes, Loch Ness. When pike fishing he always uses a boat and rows slowly around the margins trying to follow the 20 to 30 feet contour trailing the baits behind, similar to anglers trolling for salmon. Ideally he requires the bait to be about fifteen feet down in twenty feet of water. He says that while the sides are steep, in places there are shallows before the underwater edge is reached, and although the water seems clear it is not easy to see the bottom in more than about four feet of water. this can cause problems, he is either forever getting caught on the bottom or fishing fifteen feet down in much deeper water. the answer was an echo sounder and for years he had a fairly basic set which simply had a red light on a dial indicating the depth. When this went wrong last season he looked around for a new set. Attracted by the manufacturers claims he purchased an American 'Eagle' Fish Finder, which has proved to be a revelation. There is a moving graphic display which very clearly shows the bottom under the boat, whether it is smooth, rocky or a mixture. it also shows any fish anywhere between, it also beeps when it thinks it has seen a fish. Max says that doubtless some of these 'fish' are parts of logs stuck in the bottom or sticks etc, but he is sure that most really are fish. He makes the point that there are very few fish in the mid or upper reaches of the water column as compared with the numbers near the bottom. He suggests a ratio of about 1:25, mid/upper: bottom. He thinks that is not surprising as small fish find insect and plant life to eat on the bottom and big fish (pike, big trout, eels) lurk around there to eat the small fish. He says that while he is talking about relatively marginal conditions, perhaps less than 50 feet deep (maybe less in Loch Ness with limited light penetration) but against that the eel population will be almost 100% bottom dwelling and for most of the year the whitefish population will be out of reach of the sampling for the fish count. it seems to him therefore that figures in the order of 3 to 4 kg of fish per hectare are fine for an 'open water' ie, upper/middle water column figure for a deep loch like Ness (or Bala), but to arrive at anything like a total fish weight this figure would need to be multiplied by whatever the proportional figure is. He has already suggested earlier that is x25, that would give a figure of 425 metric tonnes which sounds more realistic to him, than 30 tonnes.

I mentioned in the Nessletters that perhaps the salmon tend to swim round the margins, which would preclude many from the open water figures. Max's latest copy of 'Trout and Salmon' records the total (rod and line) catch of these in the River Ness as, 1992: 404, 1993: 356. He says it is well known that anglers catch a very small proportion of these fish as they swim upstream. Not least because of course they do not feed in freshwater, the remarkable thing is that any are caught! Depending on the river, conditions etc, the figures may well be as low as one salmon caught for every 100 that pass upstream. Even if the figure is one caught to 50

making it into Loch Ness and taking the average weight of salmon, from those caught, as 5kg which seems about right. We finish with this:-approx 400 salmon caught x 50 not caught x 5kg av.wt.= 100 metric tonnes. ie, there are probably 100 tonnes of salmon to add to the eels to add to the whitefish to add to the 'water column' estimate of 425 tonnes! He knows there have been estimates of Loch Ness salmon populations far in excess of the above, the most accurate way of course is a count in a fish ladder, (there is not one on the River Ness), but he doubts his estimates are too high. It seems to him therefore, speaking from a position of very little information, a total population weight in Loch Ness of say 700 metric tonnes is far more in tune with reality than the almost incredibly small figure of 30 metric tonnes.

Max says that he speaks from a position of very little information. I am not sure about that. He obviously has studied fish and their behaviour for many years which coupled with figures from a national angling magazine should enable him to come to a well informed conclusion.

EELS

Another angling NIS member, Ted Garside from St Annes-on-Sea, recently sent me the Roving report column by Viking from 'Salmon, Trout & Sea-Trout' Feb '93. One of the topics was eels. After hints about cooking and skinning them, Viking went on to say that very little was known about the life history of our eels until quite recent times. Young eels change completely when they enter a river. They are quite a different shape in their larval marine form and were thought to be a separate species called *leptocephalus*. In 1904 a Danish research ship, the Thor, caught a *leptocephalus* in a plankton trawl off the Faroes, giving a slight indication of where they may come from. Johannes Schmidt, a young oceanographer, was so interested he persuaded the Danish Government to allow him to try to discover the oceanic spawning place of the European eels. It took him until 1922 tracing the larvae step by step across the North Atlantic following the Gulf Stream to find where they spawned and hatched in the Sargasso Sea. The eelers that make their way up our rivers can spend eight to twenty years growing in freshwater reaching an average weight of 3lbs before they migrate back to the sea for spawning. These are all female as the males stay in brackish estuarial water. Eels in some Scottish lochs seem to forget to return to the sea, they just slowly go on getting bigger and bigger. Viking goes on, 'At the end of the first world war, a mine-sweeper was on her way through from Fort William in the west to the Beauty Firth in the east, by the Caledonian Canal that connects the great lochs to the sea. On her way down Loch Ness she passed over the depths below Urquhart Castle, which are a favourite of the 'Beastie'. The crew had been celebrating peace all the way and still had depth charges ready to launch. Some one had the bright idea of having a go for the monster, so they set off a charge and up came two gigantic eels. One was 11ft long and the other 9ft, but that was only the tail-end!' Viking said that is a true story. I wonder how, after seventy years such facts could be checked? Lobbing live depth charges into Scottish lochs would hardly be legal, even in celebratory high spirits, so I doubt if any official record would have been kept.

However he does go on with an account of an incident which happened to him. Saying, 'An old friend of mine, now long gone to the 'fishers tryst', was trapping salmon for the hatchery on the River Garry at the top of Loch Ness. The fish he trapped were kept in a long iron tank until they were ready to be stripped of their eggs. The water supply was piped from the tail-race of the small hydro-electric generating station a short distance upstream, where the blades in the Francis turbine could chop up migrating eels. A chunk of eel had blocked the pipe which was 5 inches in diameter. It must have come from an eel at least 10 feet long.'

I always find these large/giant eels accounts intriguing. Unfortunately most of them are told at 3rd, 4th or more hand and impossible to confirm. In the above, Viking would seem to be telling about a personal experience and can be accepted as fact.

STEVE FELTHAM

I received a letter from Steve last November. He has Produced some copies from the old LNI sighting report form, which he hopes will help him obtain written accounts from local witnesses. He has found that while he can get them to relate their experiences, when he asks if they will let him have a written account they never seem to get round to it. He says they seem not to like the idea of putting it on Paper, and letting the Public read it. He had three out at that time. One to a local chap from Foyers who saw a neck on the same night that Edna McInnes saw whatever she saw. One to a Foyers, who's living in Doros just now, who says that he and his wife watched two on the surface at dusk time along opposite the Clansman, in the very early part of 1993. The other is with Roland O'Brian, who on August 10th '93 had an excellent sighting of a back standing maybe four feet out of the water in Doros Bay. Steve thinks that it is the best sighting of '93. Roland fishes every night during the summer from dusk till about 2-3am at the Foyers end of the village. He has done so for about ten years. Steve says he knows the water better than anyone and if he says he has seen something which cannot be easily explained, he should be taken notice of. A report appeared in the Highland News on August 23th, when Steve spoke to Roland about it he said it was alright but he could write a much more detailed account. Steve is now waiting for it.

I have a copy of the H.N. story. Roland was waiting for a fishing mate but started to fish from the shore below the 30MPH sign at the Foyers end of the village. After some ten minutes something caught the corner of his eye, at first he did not take any real notice but its behaviour made him look again. 'I saw a large dark hump about 500 yards out from the shore and heading towards the buoy in Doros bay. From the size of the buoy, I would estimate that what I saw was between eight and ten feet long. It was about four feet out of the water at its highest point, making it higher than the buoy. It moved rapidly for about five minutes and seemed to be making lots of splashing in front of it. It came to a stop, then started again. It stopped again then started off again a third time. About 50 yards from the buoy it stopped, appeared to turn round then headed back. Then it sank on the spot without trace.' He was not frightened just shocked rigid and not sure what to do. Then after about a minute it reappeared. There was no great commotion it moved reasonably slowly back towards him at about a 60 degree angle. He said, 'The shape was the same as before. It looked fairly bulky. Swimming back from the buoy it came to about 350 yards from me. I watched it again for about five minutes. About half way into the second sighting, there was a big splash beside the hump. The splashing continued for a couple of minutes, then it sank again, and again it left no trace.' Altogether, he had a grandstand view for something like ten minutes in excellent visibility with the loch calm. He has been watching Loch Ness for something like ten years and has seen something twice before, but never anything like this time. Roland says, 'Any talk of logs, dogs, cattle or deer swimming is nonsense. What I saw was large and capable of going from standstill to extremely fast in seconds. Not only that, but when it turned, I seemed to see something light. There seemed to be a lighter underside to the creature.'

The experience of the witness, the size of the hump along with the length of time it was in sight over the two periods make this an exceptional report. Steve was very disappointed as he was down at Fort Augustus on the evening in question. If he gets any further information from Roland he says he will let us know.

Now back to his letter. He says that it seems that all the sightings during '93 have been in the Doros area. He has enquired extensively in Fort Augustus and Drumnadrochit, trying to establish if things have been seen in other parts and reports have not filtered through to him. Despite asking Post Office staff, barmen, shop keepers and lock keepers all people who would surely pick up on local gossip if anyone saw anything. He is fairly sure that is not the case. Steve wonders if one of the main reasons for Doros Bay being so prolific is the presence of the fish cages. He

often speaks to Ali MacLeod, the son of the owner along there, who also works on the farm, and has been told that because of the feed that is put into the cages, there are a lot of wild fish in the area eating the surplus that falls through the bottoms. Steve asks, is it merely coincidence that bigger creatures are being seen about the area? He also says that most sightings seem to in the hour before dusk.

e had been talking to Adrian Shine, discussing the number of seal sightings there have been, including the one that Steve filmed in '91. There had been two separate ones that year, none in '92 and one in '93. Adrian had pointed out that while there is proof of these being in the loch, very few people reported seeing them. Steve says the one he filmed had made it all the way to Fort Augustus, taking two weeks from being seen in Urquhart Bay. Yet very few people saw it, in August at the height of the tourist season. Which suggests, he thinks, that even quite big animals are not that easily spotted in the loch.

When he wrote he said they had the first covering of snow on the beach two weeks before, and it was a wonderfully still autumn morning, no boats and great clear visibility. He also said that this winter could be financially difficult but he is positive it will be far from his last one. Let us hope he gets through alright and that things go well in the future, with him getting the evidence he is seeking.

SUBMARINE

Doug Macfarlane sent me an article and advertisement from the 'Diver Magazine', December '93, concerning a submarine that is to be used in Loch Ness. Since then it has featured in other sections of the Press as well as radio. It is a 34 foot Canadian built vessel which can dive to depths of 1000 feet, and has two observation domes, one at the front and the other on top, as well as having forward search sonar, cameras and floodlights. It is to be based at the Clansman Marina from March '94, and will be used for research work, however its operators have decided to extend its operations to the public. They are offering a Pre-dive briefing and then an hour dive to the loch floor, some 210-230 metres down. It will take up to six passengers along with its pilot, giving a unique chance to see life at depths not ordinarily reached, even by divers. The cost will be about £70 a dive (they did a Christmas Present reduction offer for anyone booking as a present), equivalent to the cost of a trip in a hot air balloon. The advert says that places that will be limited, for full information and bookings contact:- AMMN (UK), The Taut, Oakridge Lynch, Gloucestershire, GL6 7PA, tel. 0295 760762. I have received word from Andreas Trottmann that he has booked his trip, going down on May 12th at 11am.

In his letter Doug said they had a quiet year at the loch. Eight visits to the loch totalling 20 days, recording 99 hours of camera watch and only 8 hours with the echo sounder, when they teamed up with Andreas for two days, in May 1993.

As I finish NIS116 a brief reference to the W.W.I mines mentioned in NIS113. A N.I.S. member has reminded me that Hugh Gray was on board H.M.S. Welbeck, not the vessel that attempted retrieval. I should have noted that discrepancy in the Courier letter as that is what Nicholas Mitchell says in 'The Loch Ness Story'.

That's all for now. Please remember your news and views are always welcome. Consider letting me know if you are going to the loch and would like to try to meet up with others while there. My address remains:- R.R. Hepple, 7 Huntshieldford, St Johns Chapel, Bishop Auckland, Co Durham, DL13 1RQ. tel. 0388 537359. Subscriptions, U.K. £2.75. U.S.A. \$12.00.

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