

Monthly Report – May 2023

Smolt Tagging and Transport

As we enter June our smolt operations are all but finished as the run comes to an end.

Despite the low water, we managed to keep the rotary screw traps on the Meig turning and transported 6,652 smolts downstream to their release site, below Tor Achilty dam. This is above the previous 4 year average of 5,700.

In total, 2,151 of these fish were PIT tagged as part of the night release trial. It is hoped that by releasing these fish at night the predation pressure will be reduced as they make their way to sea, resulting in lower in river mortality. We will see how they fare when they return to the river in a year or two's time.

The smolt run from the Bran was slightly less encouraging. Whilst the smolts were of good size and condition just over 1,000 fish were caught, far lower than the 4 year average of 2,400. With such low flows, we suspect their migration through the loch would have been slower and mortality due to predation higher. There are still smolts holding above the trap but with no rain forecast for early June it is unlikely we will see a late surge before we have to close the trap.

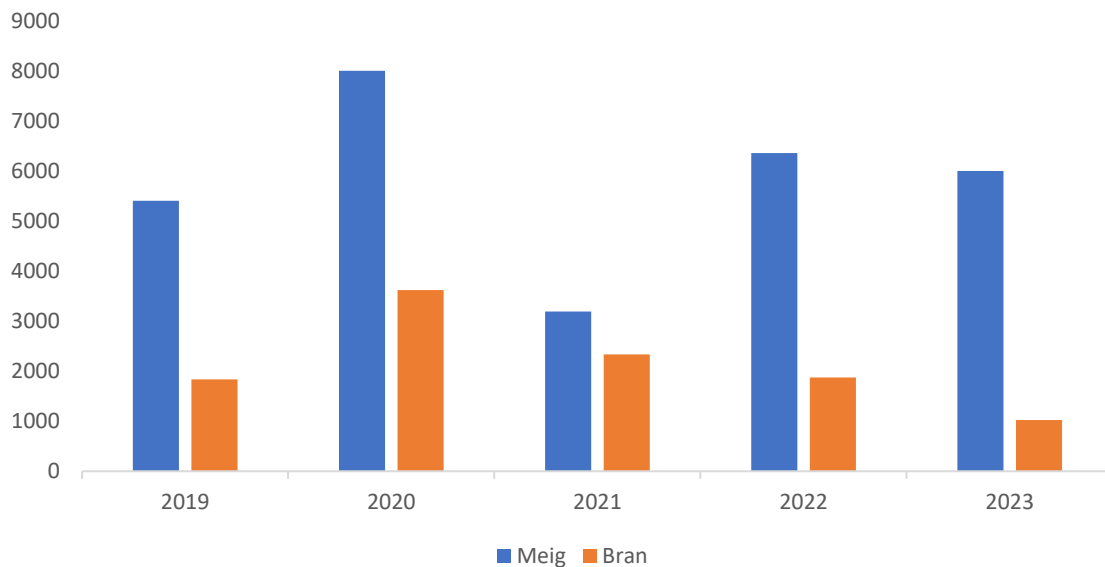


Figure 1: Number of smolts caught in rotary screw traps and wolf traps at the Meig and Bran, respectively (2019-2023).

Bird Counts

The team have continued to undertake regular bird counts on both the Conon and Alness during the smolt run. Numbers remain relatively low on the rivers but some large groups of Mergansers have been spotted in the tidal areas around the river mouths.

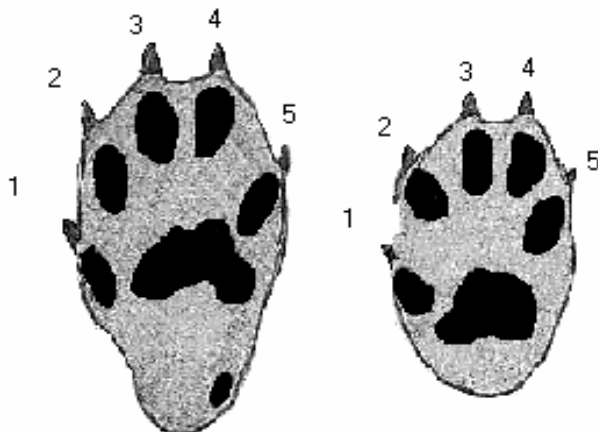
Our fisheries officers have been out scaring birds at dawn and dusk, whilst smolts are migrating. This disrupts their feeding and may help minimise their impact on the fishery. Shooting under licence and shooting to scare have also been undertaken throughout April and May.

Mink Movements

We have received several reports of mink sighted on the Conon in recent weeks indicating that animals are now back out and looking to feed. Our staff will react and deploy traps or arrange for a volunteer to trap when a mink is sighted.

Please keep an eye out when on the river for any signs of mink, the best thing to look out for are their prints in sand/mud on the riverbank.

If you do see any signs of mink, please contact Trudi Clarke, our INNS officer, who will arrange to deploy traps. Email: Trudi.Clarke@Cromartyboard.com



Mink (or polecat)



Left: Mink prints to look out for on river sediment. No bigger than a 50 pence piece. Only black parts usually visible. **Right:** James spraying a stand of Giant hogweed near Barbaraville

Invasive Non-Native Plants

Trudi and the rest of the team have been out spraying all known American skunk cabbage and Giant hogweed throughout May with only 2 Giant hogweed sites remaining.

Again, if you see either of these plants, please report them immediately to Trudi and we will arrange to get them treated.

Balnagowan Estate Visit

The biology team visited Balnagowan estate to assess the weirs on the river and whether they pose significant barriers to fish passage. One weir was confirmed as a problem and the team will work with the estate to secure funding and undertake works to ease passage or remove the weir completely.

Bailiff Report

Board staff continued with regular patrols across the district during May. This resulted in a total of 4 persons being removed from the Conon catchment for fishing without permission.

Discussions were held with Police Scotland regarding joint patrols on the river. A series of these patrols will be held over the coming season.