

Monthly Report February 2024

Contin hatchery and egg stocking

Unseasonably warm weather and high river levels put a hold to any stocking efforts during the first half of February. However, staff have jumped at the last few days of cool and clear weather conditions and successfully stocked over 200,000 eggs into the upper Blackwater.

We have been closely monitoring water temperatures in the hatchery and comparing them to stream temperatures in the upper catchment. Luckily the forecast for the first week of march is looking promising and we should start to make significant headway into this year's stocking. The eggs are strongly eyed, and we have maintained low hatchery mortality rates throughout the season. This is a very exciting time of year for staff at CFFB as we make every effort to maintain the next run of Blackwater salmon.

Bird counts

CFFB staff plan this year to increase the number of bird counts on the Conon mainstem. At the time of writing, we are wating for high water levels to abate but plan to carry out at least one survey every month beginning in February. These patrols are often carried out at dawn so serve also to keep an eye on any illegal fishing activity on our river.

Fish passage

Last year an initial bid was made to OpenRivers.eu to fund the removal of the redundant weir on the Balnagowan at Marybank. This month we received word that the project has been shortlisted for full funding, we have therefore been invited to submit full proposal with detailed costing and timeline.



Plans to open the Orrin

Through partnership with Strathconon Estate and Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE), The Board are committed to opening up the long neglected upper Orrin. This is an ambitious project which hopes to deliver a run of smolts out of the system by 2029. We are currently in discussion with local stakeholders, an innovative tech company in the USA and a hatchery facility in Lochaber to look into the logistics of a multi-faceted approach to overcome the obvious and significant obstacles to fish passage that are Orrin dam and reservoir. A novel smolt guidance system is to be trialled on the Meig in 2024. Details on this project will follow in due course but we hope to start shipping equipment from the states in the next few weeks.

Abhainn na Glasa catchment restoration

After a number of site meetings and discussions online, Board staff are now working with Kildermorie Estate on the Alness to look into priority areas for riparian planting. In line with a water quality audit of the Abhainn na Glasa we hope to identify factors limiting juvenile production in the river. We also hope to continue trials of nutrient restoration through the addition of salmon feed pellets and deer waste material at a select number of sites.



Cromarty Firth Watershed Environment Trust

The Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust has held a number of meetings this month to determine the most appropriate way to move forward regarding both employment of a member of staff and partnership with Lockett Agri Environmental. Trustees have unanimously agreed on a name (CFWET) and are appointing their solicitors to move forward with a transition to a SCIO (Scottish Charity Incorporated Organisation).

The long-term outlook for the trust is to commit to large scale ecological restoration at a catchment scale. We hope to work with local landowners and Estates to protect not just the rivers in the district, but also the land which they drain. We are currently drafting a business plan and will be entering the recruitment process in the coming months.

Conferences & Outreach

Staff were in attendance at this year's Scottish Fishery Coordination Centre Biologist's meeting in Pitlochry. As ever it is an excellent opportunity to take a look at what neighbouring boards and trusts are doing, and to share ideas for the practical management and conservation of Atlantic salmon and freshwater biodiversity. It has been confirmed that, due to a lack of government funding, the national electrofishing programme for Scotland (NEPS) will not be going ahead this year. Regardless of available funding, CFFB are committed to an in-depth assessment of juvenile densities within the catchment and will be going through with fully quantitative surveys of juvenile populations on all major tributaries of the Conon and Alness.

One of our staff was identified as a key stakeholder in methodologies for surveying fish populations in freshwater lochs. As such we were invited to attend a workshop in Creiff led by CREW (Scotland's Centre of Expertise for Waters) and UHI IBFC (Institute of Biodiversity and Freshwater Conservation). This was an opportunity for involvement in an expert led session to work toward a standardised approach to survey freshwater fish in lacustrine environments. Representatives from local boards, trusts, consultants, Scottish government and researchers were all in attendance, including Marine Directorate, SFCC, APEM, SCENE, NatureScot etc.



This year CFFB staff were contacted by the organisers of NoWPaS, an International Workshop for PhD and post-doctoral fellows on anadromous Salmonid research. To see if we could offer an overview of the work fishery boards do in Scotland.

NoWPaS is an annual workshop, which aims to build and maintain an international network of young scientists working on salmonids. The workshops have helped

facilitate the sharing and dissemination of salmonid science and have also been instrumental in initiating new international collaborations. Joined by SSE's Fishery Biologist, Dr. Ross Glover, Board staff gave an in-depth tour of our hatchery facilities and key sites. This excursion was met with considerable enthusiasm from delegates and the day was a great success with the weather playing ball!

Bailiffing

With the fishing season underway, our dedicated team of bailiffs are now undertaking routine evening and weekend patrols of all areas of the catchment. Part of this involves, as ever, checking fish passes for winter debris making sure our salmon have a clear path to spawning grounds in the upper catchment.

We would like to take this opportunity to wish all ghillies and guests on the river 'tight lines!' and to extend the offer of getting in touch if they require any more information on the projects above or any aspect of work at the Fishery Board.