

Monthly Report – June 2024

Smolt Run and Guidance

The end of June brings with it a closure of the Smolt Guidance Study on Loch Meig. As part of this study 1000 smolts were PIT tagged and released in a delayed release cage on the shore of the loch (**red circle below**). Whilst there is some evidence that the guidance system is an effective barrier, there is little to suggest that it has effectively guided fish toward the fish pass during the low late spring flows. Currently just 20% of the tagged fish have been detected moving through the decoder in the fish pass, and although we can expect a few fish to pass through undetected, the results are not heartening. A full analysis of the data, including flow levels and environmental factors will be undertaken shortly with results to follow.



The modifications made to the Rotary Screw Trap site, in the form of flexible gravel bags, however, has made a huge improvement to the capture efficiency. We expect that we have moved from around 45% efficiency to nearly 70%. This means that during ideal flows we are capturing the vast majority of migrating smolts and saving them from the high mortality associated with traversing Loch Meig and Loch Achonachie, not to mention Loch Luichart on the Bran. As ever, our primary objective must be to get as many of these fish safely to sea as possible. Although previously reported, I include here our final numbers for the season as RST's and all guidance system infrastructure have been uplifted.

Table 1: Total number of smolts captured and transported in 2024.

River	Number of smolts captured
Meig	6385
Bran	1926

SFCC Electrofishing training

In partnership with the Ness DSFB, Cromarty Firth Fishery Board have been leading all Scottish Fisheries Coordination Centre (SFCC) Electrofishing training courses for the north of Scotland since 2023. This has continued this year with courses based out of Drumnadrochit on the River Enrick. This year we have had candidates from all over Scotland, including representatives from SSE, local Boards and Trusts, FMS and various ecological consultancies. Courses (including team leader qualifications) will run into July all ensuring that electrofishing surveys are done to a high standard across the Board.



Kildermorie strategic riparian planting

Given the pressures associated with high density, non-native forestry plantations, the board have engaged several landowners in the district to open discussions on the feasibility of moving toward delivery of native, broadleaved forestry schemes along riverbanks of important spawning streams and rivers.

Temperature warming models indicate that certain streams could warm to dangerous temperatures in future seasons, with increased droughts and hot spells severely impacting salmon survival. Kildermorie Estate and fully engaged with this and are looking at developing several strategic planting schemes upstream of Loch Morie. The board hope to assist in both the design and delivery of these schemes with assistance from Kildermorie's Foresters and colleagues at The European Nature Trust.

River Restoration and Funding (Balnagowan & Glen Ord)

Whilst we are still awaiting a decision regarding the funding bid to remove Marybank Weir, Board staff have engaged SEPA's Hydromorphology team to undertake a site visit looking at risks and suspected channel response to the demolition. We hope to get an answer soon as the window for instream works has already opened and will not run beyond September.

Better news on the fish pass at Ord Distillery on the Logie Burn; Phase I is now complete, with only slight modifications to the flood bypass channel to be undertaken. A phase II proposal has been submitted to SEPA to look at re-meandering a lower section of the heavily channelised concrete channel, which runs through the distillery grounds. Phase II is expected to begin in spring 2025 and all going well, we will see an increase in available habitat as well as clear improvements to instream morphology and in stream cover.

Fish eating birds

Concern raised at the March Public Board Meeting has facilitated action in terms of coordinated bird counts across different parts of the river, as well as undertaking licenced control of these birds in new areas. Thankfully, we have the support of several head Ghillies on the river and now have a much better picture of the number of these birds and their locations and feeding habits during the smolt run and early summer. We expect that taken together, this information will make future applications to NatureScot much stronger.

Temperature loggers

As the rivers begin to warm, our biologists are out retrieving and redeploying temperature loggers across the catchment. This data feeds into the Marine Directorate's maps and models on high priority areas for warming rivers and can help us identify areas most at risk of thermal stress. Pictured below is the Orrin, above Orrin Reservoir from above Inverchoran.



Website design

Given the digital age we live in, and the importance of communication online, The Board have decided that updating the website must be a priority. We have opened discussions with a local web developer who plan to have a draft website shared with us for feedback by midsummer. I would take this opportunity to reach out to any readers who might be able to share high resolution photos of our rivers which we could use to promote angling in the district. We are looking into the possibility of hiring a professional photographer to do this but given the high cost of website design, already covered this may be prohibitively expensive. Overleaf is a sample of the kind of content we are looking for. Help in this matter would be greatly appreciated.



Invasive Species

As the weather improves (or not, as is the case up north at the moment!) our SISI project officer is busy keeping stands of invasive plants under control. We now have several licensed members of staff who can assist with despatch and have opened discussions with several estates regarding concerted efforts to eradicate the American mink from as much of our catchment as feasible. This invasive mink is a voracious predator known to feed on fish and birds and is not helping these fragile highland ecosystems with its presence.

Bailiff Report

As summer approaches, staff are very busy patrols across the district. As smolt trapping closes, we have three full time Bailiffs and Fishery Officers who are dedicated to the protection of our rivers. Patrols are carried out at all times of day, both on foot and by vehicle.

The Institute of Fisheries Management has confirmed that the Warrant card of our most recent accredited Water Bailiff has been printed and is on its way to the office. This will mean that the Cromarty Board can field up to five Water Bailiffs at any one time. Despite this, we still rely on anyone who spends time near the water getting in touch with us if they spot any suspicious behaviour.