

Protecting the River Spey



SFB Operations Manager Duncan Ferguson keeps a watchful eye on the River Spey.

The Spey Fishery Board's team of Water Bailiffs protect a catchment of 3,008Km² (1,880 square miles) from illegal fishing, including twenty miles of coastline that extends three nautical miles out to sea. Whilst the level of poaching activity and the number of convictions may have fallen in recent years, the professional commitment shown by the Spey's Bailiffs has provided a considerable deterrent to poaching on this magnificent River.

Recent History

During the 1990's, Spey Bailiffs typically reported poaching incidents almost every night during the season, with regular involvement from known "gangs". Poaching activities throughout Scotland were considerably more prevalent than they are today, with each District Salmon Fishery Board (DSFB) attaining four or five convictions each year. Throughout the decade, typically between April and June, the Spey's Bailiffs encountered considerable problems with poaching on Association waters, frequently involving poachers from Scotland's central belt, whereafter attention tended to turn to the lower River for the remainder of the season.

The Last Decade

By the early 2000's the concentration of Bailiffing activity in previous years had done much to eradicate a considerable amount of poaching on the Spey. The same was true elsewhere in Scotland, although in part this has also been due to the

diversification of known poachers in to other forms of criminal activity. The Bailiffs' role up until now had predominantly been that of a River Policeman, but this was about to change significantly; the reduction in poaching activity, coupled with the retirement of the Spey Board's last Superintendent and the appointment of a Director to succeed him, heralded a new era for the Spey Board. It also marked a change in approach, not just on the Spey but elsewhere in Scotland, as Boards began adopting a higher-profile, more professional and science-driven approach to fishery management.



Head Bailiff Richard Whyte (left) and Operations Manager Duncan Ferguson (right) are fully-qualified Tree Surgeons as well as qualified Bailiffs. (Photo: Roger Knight)

The Countryside Manager

Since 2002, the Spey Board has developed new hatchery operations at Sandbank and Tulchan, requiring full-time hatchery management instead of the part-time oversight it had received before. It also required a greater time commitment

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from our remaining Bailiffing staff. Since then, the role of our Bailiffs has also changed, with a much broader remit than they had had before which now sees them employed as much in river restoration and habitat management (particularly during and since the CASS Life Project) as it does in the more traditional river protection role. All of them have received chainsaw training (with the two senior Bailiffs now fully qualified tree surgeons) and they regularly remove fallen trees from watercourses where these provide obstacles to fish passage. Indeed, they are Countryside Managers, rather than just Water Bailiffs. They are also better educated and trained than before; today's Bailiffs have all passed the Institute of Fishery Management's (IFM) Certificate in Bailiffing and Keeping and Scottish Fishery Law, a qualification that didn't exist during the previous era. They take part in river works consultations, IFM meetings and liaise closely with bailiffs from other DSFBs. And they now work closely with the research team from the Spey Foundation, a practice that was seldom operated when the Board and the then Research Trust were very separate organisations.

The Patrol Boat

Apart from protecting our Rivers, the Spey Fishery Board also operates a Patrol Boat to protect our coastline from illegal netting. When Head Bailiff and Patrol Boat Coxswain Richard Whyte joined the Spey Fishery Board in 1997, approximately forty to sixty nets were being recovered from our coast each year, although in more recent years this has been reduced to only three or four nets per year. However, the operation of the Spey Board's Rigid-hulled Inflatable Boat (RIB) has provided a significant and highly visible deterrent since its inception. The Grampian Police Operation Fishnet also helped raise public awareness of poaching along the coast, as well as providing significant funding for the purchase of our current RIB.

All of the SFB's Bailiffs are trained to Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Power Boat Level II (Inshore and Coastal)

and Richard Whyte has achieved the RYA's prestigious Advanced Level. Anecdotal evidence has reported illegal nets being placed in areas where it is known our Patrol Boat does not operate and suggests that were it not for our Patrol Boat operations, the Spey's coastline would be festooned with illegal nets. Indeed, the success of our Patrol Boat operations has now led to the SFB being contracted to undertake coastal patrols for other DSFBs around North East Scotland



Head Bailiff and Coxswain Richard Whyte aboard the SFB's RIB after another successful patrol along the River Spey's 20 miles of coastline. The SFB's jurisdiction extends 3 nautical miles out to sea. (Photo: Roger Knight)

In Summary

Whilst the level of successful poaching activities may have diminished in recent years, the presence of known poachers about the River Spey catchment during the season has not only continued, but increased in recent years, possibly as a result of the economic downturn. Indeed, Grampian Police have noted considerable poaching activity on the neighbouring River Lossie, a matter which is now being addressed by effective Bailiffing. Whilst the numbers of convictions may currently be low, the deterrent effect of the Spey's Bailiffs should not be under-estimated. Were it not for their maintained efforts and vigilance throughout the season, the River Spey – and its coastline – would fall victim to considerable illegal fishing activity.

The Spey Fishery Board now has a new-look website, packed with news, information, weekly fishing reports and fishing availability. You can find it at:

www.speyfisheryboard.com

SPEY FISHERY BOARD RESEARCH OFFICE
1 NETHER BORLUM COTTAGE, KNOCKANDO, MORAYSHIRE, AB38 7SD
TEL: 01340 810841 FAX: 01340 810842 E-MAIL: research@speyfisheryboard.com