

Sea-trout on the Slaney

Famous for its spring salmon, Ireland's River Slaney can produce decent sea-trout fishing, too, as *Chris McCully* discovers

THE RIVER SLANEY runs south through Carlow and Wexford in Ireland's sunny south-east. It can be a wonderful spring salmon water, and I first encountered the stream vicariously in the pages of Kingsmill Moore's *A Man May*

Fish, where he recounted a couple of lovely Slaney salmon anecdotes.

Kingsmill Moore had a cottage on the river at Clonegal, in Carlow. Reasoning, I suppose, that because the great man hadn't written about Slaney sea-trout fishing then the Slaney's sea-trout simply didn't exist, for many years I completely ignored the potential of the river as a sea-trout water.

I wasn't just relatively but entirely wrong to have done so.

It was late last July before I was able to visit. "You're a month too late," said David Dobbs, who had kindly invited us to fish his beat of the river at Clohamon, below Bunclody. "The sea-trout came up in numbers at the end of June this year. Three weeks ago and you could have had your pick of fish. We had 18 one evening..." I asked whether some fish had run throughout July. "A few, maybe," said David, "but then again, you're unlikely ever to see the Slaney so low."

The Slaney was low and warmish, too (17 deg C measured at 4 pm on July 30). The river wound slowly through banks lined with rosebay willow-herb, gathered into stream-heads that were trickles, drew thin breath in the deeps of pools and reluctantly gathered into glides at pool-tails. As we walked the two miles of the beat, and although his enthusiasm for the life in and around the river was untiring, David's face grew longer. As we gathered for an



Chris McCully has written, co-written or edited more than 20 books, including five angling titles. He is currently working with James Sadler and Ken Whelan on a book about Irish sea-trout to be published by the Medlar Press in 2013.



Chris with David Dobbs, surveying the Ash Tree pool in dead-low water.



early-evening meal (a splendid supper of sea-trout caught in the pool running not 50 yards from the cutlery), even Michael Donohoe, who has gillied at Clohamon for over 50 years, was cautious. "You'll see some fish tonight, all right," he said, rather too guardedly. Gardiner Mitchell asked Michael how many sea-trout were represented in "some fish". "Well... You'll get two, I think – at ten minutes to ten. And after that..." Michael shrugged. It was one of those meaningful angling shrugs that tacitly assesses abject failure as odds on.

Over supper I quizzed David about the Slaney and its salmon and sea-trout. "You're right," he said. "It used to be, and still can be, a great spring salmon river. Here at Clohamon we had 130 springers in 2006, and the ten-year average is, or was, around 80. But in 2007, following scientific advice, the river was closed altogether, and only reopened for sea-trout in 2010 and for salmon fishing in 2011. Our season began on May 12, so we lost March and April, which can be the best

months for salmon. All the same, between May 12 and mid June we had 26 spring fish, all mandatorily released. And then the sea-trout came. They started to run up here on June 10."

I asked David whether the salmon and sea-trout fishing had improved as a result of the drift-net ban. "No question that it has.

"What's been hugely important is the cessation of the draft-net fishing"

Last year my estimate was that at Clohamon we caught and released around 400 sea-trout. But what's also been hugely important is the cessation of the draft-net fishing in the estuary. There were once 80 licensed draft-nets working below Enniscorthy, and they clearly took bigger sea-trout as well as salmon. But those nets came off in 2007, and it's made a massive difference. The average size of the sea-trout is

almost imperceptibly increasing, too. The biggest we had in recent years was 7 lb. Now, I hope you've got some Kill Devil Spiders..."

Mark Corps had advised me before I set off for the Slaney to tie some Kill Devil Spiders, and therefore I had some in my box, tied on size 10 and 12 hooks. It wasn't a sea-trout fly I'd fished before, and looks rather like a mutant version of a Coch-a-Bonddu: it stylises insects, rather than fish. Nevertheless, on the Slaney and more widely on the east coast of Ireland, it's a much-used fly. David inspected my freshly tied offerings and tried to be polite. "They're...sparse, aren't they?" He dived into his own box, producing yet more Kill Devil Spiders, his own more heavily hackled with several turns of furnace hen and some extra weight tied in below the silver body. "Here, try these."

I gratefully accepted David's offer, and mounted the Kill Devil (size 10) on a dropper four feet above a Teal, Blue and Silver variant (another size 10). The leader was childishly simple:

The Slaney often fishes well at dusk.



KILL DEVIL SPIDER

Hook Size 10 Kamasan B175 **Silk** Brown
Hackle Natural red or Greenwell
Body Two strands of peacock herl
Tag Flat silver tinsel with fine silver wire over

8 lb clear Maxima, a brand and strength I use for almost all my Irish sea-trout fishing.

As we walked down to the river at dusk, David, and Ashley Hayden, who does a great deal of guiding on Ireland's eastern and south-eastern waters, fell to talking about the success of the Kill Devil Spider. "Have you noticed," said Ashley, "that the Kill Devil works best at and just beyond dusk, whereas the Teal Blue or the Butcher works better after dark?" David paused. "You mean that in the half-light, the sea-trout take the Kill Devil for some kind of sedge, whereas in the full dark they're more prepared to take fish-suggesting patterns? Well... It may be so. Yes,

A 1½ lb sea-trout comes to the net in the Ash Tree pool.

I think you're probably right..."

Clohamon offers several promising streams, glides and pool-tails, but of these, the Ash Tree pool, and the pool 500 yards below it, are probably the prime holding waters on the beat. While two of our number disappeared to the pool downstream, David, Gardiner and I crossed the Slaney below the Ash Tree then waded gingerly up the far (left) bank towards the head of the pool. There was still plenty of daylight left in the sky, but David told me that the river often fished well in the hour before sunset – particularly if you had a Kill Devil somewhere on the leader.

Local advice notwithstanding, we were well beyond sunset – and beyond Michael Donohoe's estimate of ten to ten – when the sea-trout began to move. They moved at first in surface activity that showed as energetic circles. Then, out there in the gathering darkness, there were wild splashes and whirrings of fins. Upstream, there was a quiet call of "I'm in." Squinting into twilight, I caught David rod's bent against the very last of the light, and it wasn't long before he'd returned a beautifully marked cock sea-trout of around 1¼ lb, a fish which had

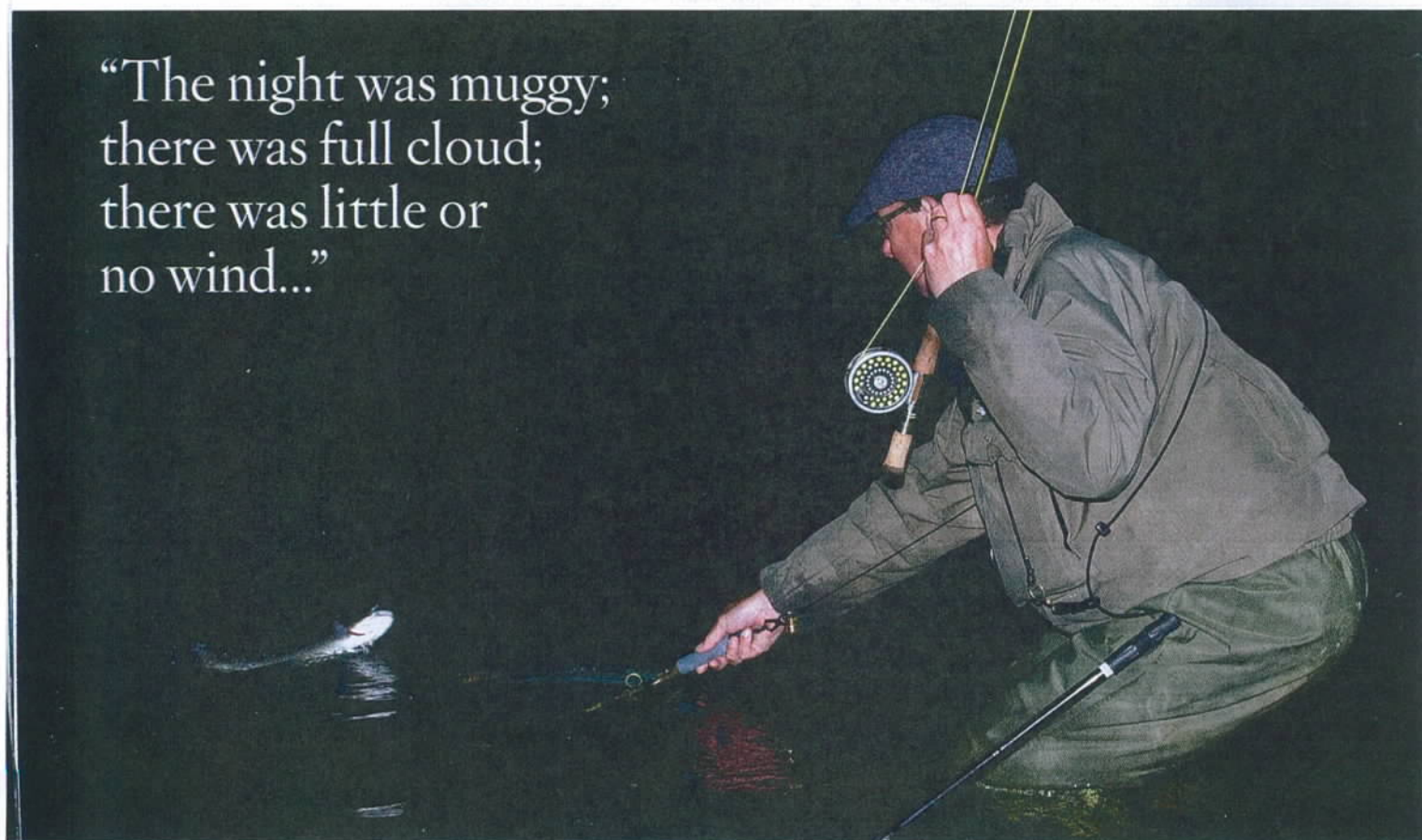
taken the Kill Devil as if it had heard our conversation of an hour before.

Between 10.30 and midnight David released another four sea-trout, all of which took the Kill Devil. Three of them were finnock, but the best was close to 2½ lb so far as we could judge, there in the full dark and the red light of head-torches. Meanwhile, and typically, I was slow to get off the mark, moving the first sea-trout – another finnock – only at 11 pm, and then another, five minutes later. The first had taken the Kill Devil, the second a Teal Blue. When towards midnight the



Another victim of the Kill Devil Spider.

"The night was muggy;
 there was full cloud;
 there was little or
 no wind..."





Chris with a typical, though not very fresh, Slaney sea-trout.

line drew again, in the head of Ash Tree, I expected the rod to pull into yet another finnock, but as the line tightened and stayed tight, I was at last into a better sea-trout. This one was, we thought, around 1½ lb, and it spared my blushes – another fish that had fallen for the Teal Blue fished on the point.

After we'd recrossed the river and joined the rest of our party after midnight it appeared that between two groups of fishers we'd caught and released 15 sea-trout, the best over 2 lb.

I tried to gauge what our prospects might be if we were to cover the same water at dawn. The night was muggy; there was full cloud; there was little or no wind...

Mark and I set alarms for 4 am. Having napped in the fishery cabin, we struggled awake into a dawn that carried a fine, seeping, dismal rain. We crossed the river again, waded gingerly up the left bank, worked again over the head of the Ash Tree. The morning lightened around us, while downstream we heard sea-trout – by the sound of their movements, all smaller fish – crashing out of the water. At 5 am there was the first bird-song – a wren in a bush, startling itself awake. By that time, we'd begun to see the fall of the fly-line and leader, and we'd returned another three fish – all finnock, but welcome nevertheless. All had taken the Teal Blue.

By 6 am it was over. Our thoughts turned to tea. As I took down my rod I reflected on what a

prolific night it had been. Yet as David Dobbs had already pointed out, the Slaney doesn't always fish for sea-trout quite so well, and it would be a mistake to think the sea-trout stocks are evenly spread throughout the river. The trick, if it is a trick, is to fish the good holding pools, and these take some getting to know, since of two apparently promising-looking reaches, one will hold taking fish, while the other well may not. At the Ash Tree, we'd been lucky in that we'd had outstanding local advice...and the right weather conditions.

To illustrate how fickle the Slaney and its sea-trout can be: the Ash Tree, one night later. The river was at the same height; the weather conditions were apparently similar (full cloud, light wind, though even more muggy). Ashley Hayden and I fished the same water, starting at the same time of the evening, using the same flies. Were the sea-trout active? No – we saw a mere handful of fish on the surface before midnight. By 10.30 we'd moved nothing, and hope had given way to bafflement. Did we catch anything? Where the night before we'd anticipated sea-trout on almost every cast as the flies swung, a night later we moved only one big fish and eventually caught one finnock.

Before we left Clohamon I asked Mark and Gardiner to summarise what, for them, had been significant memories of our visit. For Gardiner it was the quality of

the river, its clear flows, flourishing weedbeds, its stock of pristine little brown trout and abundant insect life including a late hatch of Mayfly. Mark thought the Slaney offered "proper fishing" – a fine head of sea-trout (and, given water, occasional grilse), good wading, and at Clohamon, privacy. I agreed with all that, and will add only that Clohamon, precisely because of its privacy, relative safety and sheer loveliness, would be an excellent place to fish for those curious to learn about fly-fishing for sea-trout at night. Given any reasonable water level, mid June to mid July would be the optimal time to visit... and don't forget the Kill Devil Spiders.

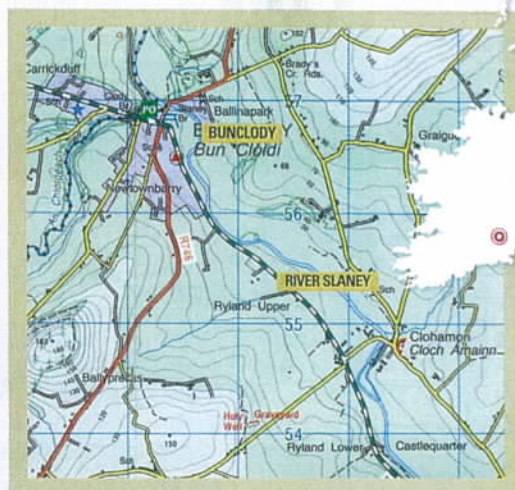


FACTFILE

◎ **Clohamon fishery**, two miles below Bunclody, has an active salmon fishing syndicate but can be quiet during the sea-trout fishing period. There will be limited availability for salmon fishing in 2012, but for the sea-trout enthusiast there is currently good availability. Enquiries should be e-mailed to David Dobbs at adobbs@eircom.net. There are several other beats of the Slaney (and its tributaries) for which tickets are available, and a good starting-point would be www.slaneyrivertrust.ie.

◎ **The estuary below Enniscorthy** offers free fishing to those in possession of a national salmon licence, as do Slaney tributary streams such as the Boro and the Urrin, which enter the estuary south of Enniscorthy. Salmon and sea-trout over 40 cm (15.7 in) must be released; two fish below 40 cm may be taken (per angler, per day). Sea-trout begin to run on the first flood of June and the season ends on September 30: the mid-June to mid-July period is optimal, given water. Sea-trout patterns should include the Kill Devil Spider, Black Pennell and Teal, Blue and Silver, in sizes 10-14.

◎ **General information** about salmon and sea-trout fishing on the Slaney may be found on the Inland Fisheries Ireland website: www.fishinginireland.info/salmon/east/slaney.htm Ashley Hayden's angling blog can be found at www.anirishanglersworld.com



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