

Sea trout in the Bevern



English rivers were colonised by sea trout at the end of the last ice age and their descendants are the populations of brown and sea trout that we have today in rivers and streams like the Ouse, Bevern and Plumpton Mill. Though both fish share the same Latin name, *Salmo trutta*, resident and migratory characteristics have developed within individual catchments so that some fish remain permanently resident (brown trout), some always migrate (sea trout) and others can do either, depending on the circumstances. It's believed both genetics and environmental factors, such as habitat quality and food availability, play a part in whether or not a trout migrates to the sea.

Sea trout in the Ouse catchment return to spawn relatively late in the year, once their favoured streams are flowing with good volumes of water. When the female (hen) fish has reached her chosen spot she excavates a redd (nest) from a suitable gravel site and lays several thousand eggs, which are fertilised by the male (cock) fish. The hen then covers the eggs with more gravel and the adult fish return to the sea. Unlike salmon, many sea trout return in following years to breed again in the same spot. The eggs will hatch in two to three months, depending on water temperature. The larval trout spend 2–3 weeks in the gravel until they are about 25mm long, when they emerge to begin feeding in the water column and start their 1–3 year journey to the sea.

The variable nature of the sea trout's life cycle is often specific to the river, as are the vast range of threats to which fish are exposed during their migratory lives. The main threats in rivers are water quality and habitat loss (currently no English rivers are rated as having 'high' ecological status under the EU WFD); a particular problem on the Ouse is man-made obstruction to migration. Even though these fish are prodigious jumpers and can surmount obstacles one metre high, currently only about half of the potential spawning streams are available to them on the Ouse. Despite these challenges, the Ouse sea trout have possibly the heaviest average weight of any English or Welsh river. Typically they weigh 2.5–3kg and 55–65cm long, but may reach more than 7kg in weight and more than 75cm in length.

So, next winter, from December to January, when you walk over a bridge across the Bevern or Plumpton Mill Stream, stop and look – you may just see one of these impressive fish coming home to spawn.

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March 2011