

THE BEST SALMON RIVER IN EUROPE?

Andrew Graham-Stewart experiences the remarkable River Gaula and detects signs of a sea-change in Norwegian attitudes to salmon management and conservation

Tilseth pool, a Norwegian Flyfishers' Club water on the middle Gaula.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREW GRAHAM-STEWART

ANY SALMON ANGLER venturing to one of the great rivers of Norway for the first time must surely be aware of following a well-trodden hypothetical path, steeped in history. Of course it was the British who, almost two centuries ago, first developed angling for salmon in Norway. From the 1820s many of the titled, the great and the good made annual pilgrimages across the North Sea in pursuit of a class of salmon that few home rivers could match. Such was the vogue for these Norwegian adventures, the leading British tackle manufacturers were soon offering all manner of equipment and flies and lures specifically designed for “heavy Norwegian angling”.

My destination was the Gaula, the most prolific river in the Trondheim district. With a length of 90 miles (migratory fish have access to some 60 miles until their progress is blocked by the Eggafall), the Gaula drains 1,412 square miles (by way of reference this compares to the Spey’s catchment of 1,097 square miles). A critical feature of the river is the Gaulfossen, which separates the lower river from the middle reaches. This temperature barrier is half a mile of virtually unbroken raging white water – an awesome sight even in lowish conditions. Salmon do not generally ascend this major obstacle until the second half of May when the concentration of snowmelt starts to dissipate. When one sees the Gaulfossen, one soon appreciates just how powerful Gaula fish must be to negotiate it.

British expeditions to the Gaula began in 1825. These either involved a bone-shaking 200-mile journey via horse-drawn carriage over the Dovre mountain range from Oslo or (the less arduous route) a voyage by boat direct to Trondheim and then on to the Gaula valley. Steadily the river’s reputation for angling

excellence – disseminated by sportsmen such as Mr Andrews in the Storen area in the 1830s and Messrs Rogers and Hunt (who one year caught 266 salmon in 26 days) in the 1840s – grew and soon the influx of Britons, with their vast entourages, became a major annual summer pilgrimage, leasing fishings and properties up and down the valley.

Jones’s Guide to Norway and Salmon Fisher’s Companion, published in 1848, extolled the virtues of the Gaula: “It is not only renowned in Norway, but its fame has spread far and wide, and it is held by all who have visited it, to be one of the noblest streams in which the salmon fisher ever wetted a line. Wondrous has been the sport met with by our countrymen; and, to this day, the Guul [sic] is remembered by them with feelings that none but a real lover of the Art can enter into or appreciate.” Jones celebrates a Mr Hornden, who had once killed “three hundred weight of fish on the Guul in two days” and had been known to swim to the opposite bank to land a salmon of 30 lb.

Later in the 19th century the railway further increased the ease of access to practically the whole fishable length of the river. The benign summer invasion from the other side of the North Sea continued until the start of World War I, resuming in the 1920s and 1930s up to the advent of World War II. The latter, of course, took its toll and in the aftermath of 1945 few foreign anglers returned. Local angling associations soon exploited the vacuum, reaching agreements with the riparian owners to tie up much of the Gaula for the benefit of their members. Since then there have been few privately fished beats.

As one who takes a close interest in salmon exploitation levels and conservation issues, especially in the context of declining marine survival over the



MANFRED RAGUSE

last 40 years, I have long viewed the failure by the Norwegian authorities to take appropriate action to reduce substantially the number of fish killed as inexcusable. I have to say that, following my visit to the Gaula, such criticism may now be misplaced – at least as regards the Trondheim district and the Gaula in particular. Perhaps the authorities now realise that salmon are no longer an inexhaustible resource and the precautionary principle should now prevail.

Back in the 1970s it was not unusual for an angler fishing the lower Gaula to be obliged to leave a pool in order to make way for a net being hauled by a boat, tractor or horse. Such indignities ceased when in-river netting was stopped in 1979. Thereafter the main threat was the vast off-shore drift-net fishery. The government finally acted to outlaw the drift-nets in 1988; in their last year they had been responsible for 50 per cent of all salmon killed. Rod catches in the Gaula increased significantly – until the Trondheim Fjord bag-nets intensified their activities (1995 was their “record season”) and, with an average annual (2000–2004) take of 53 tons, they were soon accounting for 50 per cent of the declared catch.

In 2005 the association of Trondheim Fjord river owners concluded a true milestone, an NASF-inspired buy-out agreement with the great majority of the bag-netters. Five-year contracts were signed by these

RECENT HISTORY OF THE GAULA’S IN-RIVER CATCH

| YEAR | TOTAL GAULA CATCH IN lb | TOTAL ROD CATCH IN lb | PER CENT |
|------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------|
| 1973 | 37,287 | 27,965 | 75 |
| 1974 | 34,535 | 29,009 | 84 |
| 1975 | 33,437 | 24,074 | 72 |
| 1976 | 34,563 | 31,798 | 92 |
| 1977 | 35,077 | 31,920 | 91 |
| 1978 | 33,600 | 29,904 | 89 |
| 1979 | 36,241 | 33,342 | 92 |
| 1980 | 45,039 | 45,039 | 100 |
| 1981 | 57,129 | 57,129 | 100 |
| 1982 | 47,665 | 47,665 | 100 |
| 1983 | 53,906 | 53,906 | 100 |
| 1984 | 60,481 | 60,481 | 100 |
| 1985 | 67,085 | 67,085 | 100 |
| 1986 | 53,418 | 53,418 | 100 |
| 1987 | 53,317 | 53,317 | 100 |
| 1988 | 34,045 | 34,045 | 100 |
| 1989 | 60,940 | 60,940 | 100 |
| 1990 | 60,013 | 60,013 | 100 |
| 1991 | 57,138 | 57,138 | 100 |
| 1992 | 45,427 | 45,427 | 100 |
| 1993 | 40,949 | 40,949 | 100 |
| 1994 | 51,610 | 51,610 | 100 |
| 1995 | 50,056 | 50,056 | 100 |
| 1996 | 42,706 | 42,706 | 100 |
| 1997 | 16,350 | 16,350 | 100 |
| 1998 | 42,508 | 42,508 | 100 |
| 1999 | 39,549 | 39,549 | 100 |
| 2000 | 85,292 | 85,292 | 100 |
| 2001 | 107,165 | 107,165 | 100 |
| 2002 | 72,342 | 72,342 | 100 |
| 2003 | 85,098 | 85,098 | 100 |
| 2004 | 59,980 | 59,980 | 100 |
| 2005 | 75,191 | 75,191 | 100 |
| 2006 | 98,484 | 98,484 | 100 |

Final year of in-river nets
Rod catch double that of 1979
Final year of offshore drift-netting
Recovery of rod catch
80 per cent of local bag-nets bought out
Top river catch in Norway, 2005 and 2006

“In the 1970s it was not unusual for an angler to have to



Manfred Raguse into a fish on the River Gaula's Renna pool.

make way for a net being hauled by a boat, tractor or horse”

netsmen (whose operations were responsible for more than 80 per cent of the catch), whereby they are paid not to exercise their rights; the cost to the river owners is some £350,000 per annum. Then, early this year the Norwegian Government acted decisively and unilaterally, in the interests of conservation, to curtail the impact of the remaining bag-nets by delaying the start of the netting season until June 22 in the inner Trondheim Fjord district and July 7 in the outer district. These additional restrictions are of great benefit to the large early-running salmon; by all accounts these heavy fish were far more numerous in the rivers during the 2008 season than has been the case for decades.

With netting effort reduced to a pale shadow of its former self, it was inevitable that much focus of attention would switch to exploitation levels by rods. There is no tradition of releasing fish in Norway and indeed some of the authorities are firmly opposed to this practice; however attitudes are changing with the influential Institute for Nature Research and local river authorities now in favour. Manfred Raguse (chairman of the Norwegian Flyfishers’ Club) has been a redoubtable champion of salmon conservation over the last two decades. He is acutely aware that a scenario of greater numbers of fish having free passage

into the Gaula only to be killed by rods would amount to a huge political own goal, given the strong lobby for the netsmen. He has been a strong advocate of catch-and-release – not only on the NFC’s Gaula beats (where 39 per cent of salmon were released in 2007 and 60.5 per cent in 2008) but also further afield through the national media. In 2007, 4.5 per cent of the total Gaula rod catch were released. This has jumped dramatically in 2008 to 22 per cent (a provisional figure), representing a seismic shift in attitudes by anglers.

In parallel, the Gaula has introduced a pragmatic bag limit of ten salmon and five sea-trout per season. The bag limit per day is one salmon or sea-trout; once a fish has been killed (for whatever reason), then the angler must stop fishing until midnight.

Of course one of the main attractions of the Gaula (and other Norwegian rivers) is the size of its salmon. The Gaula has indeed produced its fair share of leviathans although to date no-one has collated all the details. Curiously Fred Buller’s *Domesday* book of salmon over 50 lb fails to include any Gaula fish. Yet in researching his forthcoming book *Record Atlantic Salmon*, Ronald S Swanson has unearthed five rod-caught fish in this class: 1955 Unknown tourist, Bridge pool, spinner, 59 lb; 1950 Einar Tilsteth, Near Storen,

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harled spoon, 55 lb; 1950 Even Wollan, above Gaulfossen, spoon, 55 lb; 1907 J Mellish, Station pool, Langlete Durham Ranger, 51 lb; 1947 Einar Tilseth, 50 lb.

On the Gaula, the nature of the pools and the fact that they are generally fished from the bank ensures that it offers a better chance than most rivers of a genuine fly- or spoon-caught leviathan. The heavy fish are still much in evidence. In July 2007 the Swiss underwater photographer Michael Roggo was filming a small shoal of Gaula salmon in the 20 lb to 25 lb class when suddenly a massive fish three times as large cruised into the pool. The average weight of the top ten salmon caught on the Gaula in June 2008 was 40 lb (the smallest was 37 lb). According to the 2002 figures, fish spending three or more winters at sea constituted 34 per cent of the total number caught on the Gaula; two sea-winter fish amounted to 43 per cent and grilse just 23 per cent. In 2008 the share of three sea-winter fish was an astonishing 43 per cent. It is worth noting that apart from the pool immediately below the Gaulfossen, there is very little harling on the Gaula.

The Gaula is a remarkably natural river – with no impoundment and no hydro dams (mining activity in the upper river at Roros ceased 50 years ago). There are very few fish farms in the Trondheim Fjord (in contrast to many other important wild fish areas, which are overwhelmed by farms) to the benefit of outgoing smolts. The river was previously stocked but now probably only five per cent of Gaula fish are descendants of the hatchery programme. Given the wonderful natural spawning and juvenile habitat in the middle and upper reaches, enlightened current thinking is that a hatchery would serve no useful purpose and would probably be counter-productive.

The Gaula's rod catch can now amount to more than 11,000 fish. This is achieved in a short three-month season. Given these numbers, one could certainly argue it is currently the best angling river in Europe. Of course, one Scottish river might challenge this on the basis of numbers but it has a ten-month season...

■ *For further information on the Norwegian Flyfishers' Club, visit www.nfc-online.com or telephone 0049 405 892 302. The fishing season runs from June 1 to August 31. The Gaula is free of Gyrodactylus salaris (Gs) but it is vital that anyone fishing in Norway ensures that all tackle and waders are disinfected before they are used again in any UK water.*

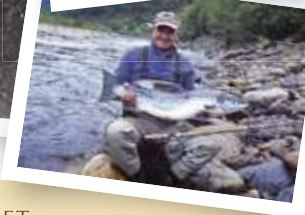


The white-water, white-knuckle ride that is the Gaulfossen.



Einar Tilseth's 55-pounder, caught in 1950.

Below: Manfred Raguse about to return a fish in Renna pool.
Bottom: Chris Henshaw with a 20-pounder.



RUNNING THE GAUNTLET

I visited the Gaula as a guest of the Norwegian Flyfishers' Club (NFC). Established 20 years ago, it offers private access to some of the best waters on the river. NFC founder and chairman Manfred Raguse has invested a tremendous amount of energy in negotiating leases with different riparian owners (ownership of fishing rights cannot be legally severed from ownership of riparian land). By consolidating these short sections he has created some ten miles of first-class fly water, divided into beats, on the middle Gaula (centred on Støren).

The NFC water is well organised with highly proficient gillies available as required. A high percentage of the fishings is taken by the same anglers year after year, but the clientele is very much international.

The NFC water now tops the league table for catches on the Gaula; this has been achieved on a fly-only basis – most of the river's other fisheries are all-method.

The beats are fished on a rotational basis (two rods per beat); the rotation includes some water downstream of the Gaulfossen. In addition all NFC rods have access at anytime to several "free for all" beats. There is certainly no shortage of fishing –

particularly given that most pools are more than 200 yards long. The rotation moves on every six hours and operates round the clock. There is much night fishing (it hardly gets dark in June and July) and one's sleep pattern tends to be governed by the prospects of the available beat (inevitably some are more productive than others), rather than the hour.

I fished for five days in late June – the tail end of the Norwegian equivalent of our spring fishing. The water was crystal-clear snowmelt. There had been a heatwave two weeks earlier but during my visit the weather was unusually cold (more akin to northern Scotland in March) and frequently the air

temperature was lower (dropping to zero one night) than that of the water; consequently fish were not as free-taking as they can be.

June on the Gaula is really sunk-line fishing and I found that, with my usual double-taper full-length Wet Cel II line, I was very much under-gunned. Fortunately, I was lent a balanced shooting-head outfit. I found this a revelation – not only is much greater distance achieved with consummate ease but also with a fast-sinking head one's fly is fishing at depth within moments of hitting the water.

Inevitably with a big fish river, many of the NFC pools are the stuff of legend – none more so than the Bridge. This great holding pool lies just above 300 yards of hurtling white water. If a hooked fish elects to leave the pool, then the angler has little choice but to follow. This sounds simple until one learns that the tortuous route necessitates clambering at a sprint up and down over buffalo-sized boulders, all the while praying that one's backing does not run out. At the end of the white water there is a fleeting opportunity to land a fish. By all accounts, successfully "running the gauntlet" (as it is now known) has become something of a rite of passage on the NFC waters.

And how did I get on? Sadly I never had to run the gauntlet. My only success was a 16 lb salmon in Renna pool – a mere tiddler by Gaula standards (June fish average more than 20 lb). Few rivers offer such excellent odds for the fish of a lifetime. I spent my last evening on the Tilseth pool – with a salmon in the 40 lb class showing every few minutes... I shall be back.

The total catch for the 2008 season for the NFC's Gaula beats was almost 488 salmon and grilse with an average weight of more than 12 lb. The release rate was 60.5 per cent (43 per cent in June, 63 per cent in July and 70 per cent in August).