





51 lb, 33 lb, 14 lb,
13 lb: Bandon,
date unknown



Bigger fish,
60 lb 10 oz:
Baltic, 1995.

THE BIGGEST SALMON EVER CAUGHT



51 lb: Blackwater, 1930.



55 lb:
Alten, 1985.



59 1/2 lb: Wye, 1923.



No Weights:
Namsen, 1928.

Fred Buller's *The Domesday Book of Giant Salmon* is the result of 40 years of research. Here we publish some edited extracts

SOME THIRTY YEARS ago Hugh Falkus described his friend Fred Buller's *Domesday Book of Giant Pike* as "the most remarkable piece of research in the history of angling". Now Buller has topped this feat, certainly for game-fishers. The result of more than 40 years of note-taking, travelling and delving through pages of the *Fishing Gazette*, the book is a ground-breaking record, both for its photographs, a selection of which are reproduced here, and for its extraordinary accounts of fish landed – and lost. Here, as Roy Flury writes in the foreword to *Giant Salmon*, are fish so huge that most of us will never see one. →



53 lb: Alten, 1968.



45 7/8 lb: Baltic.



50 lb: Beauty, 1909.

BOZO IVANOVIC'S 50LB
ALTEN SALMON



Brooks's Sunray Shadow

The Nielo pool on Norway's Alten River lies between two small lakes through which the river passes as it enters a very deep gorge. This is where Bozo Ivanovic caught his big fish on a Brooks's Sunray Shadow fly. The beat is called Sautso, as is the camp that accommodates the fishermen.

Ivanovic sent an admirably clear account of the capture of his 50-pounder, in a letter dated September 7, 1994, to his friend Nathaniel Reed in Florida. Reed had been a member of the team the previous year:

Dear Nathaniel,

It was a great loss that you were not with us on the Alta this year. The season did not appear to be late – it was warmish and the water was quite low but few fish had appeared and we arrived to find that 33 had been landed in the previous six days. I started at the lower camp accompanied by David, Mark, Jim and George. The first three days were slow with perhaps 13 fish for the five rods. I had one in Slingerplassen, one in Bollo and two from Upper Gognes (the main Gognes, so great in 1993, was too low).

Off to the upper river and with great hopes I started at Steinfossen and, although there were a few fish there, no takers – a blank was saved by a fish from Barilla very high up under the left bank cliff. All these fish were on Brooks or Collie Dogs with floating line and short sink tip. We saw Alan Russell's 42 pounder when Harald brought it down. Hopes rose! I had a lovely blank night at Toppen catching a biggish trout from the tunnel and savouring the peace, the wildflowers and the mosquitoes. As we came down to finish off we saw David at Nielo fishing from the left bank just before it widened into the lower lake. He was clearly having some sort of action and came back shortly to tell of three fish risen there of which I think two were on for a while. Three offers in Nielo is very unusual as you know and I feared the fish would have moved on by the time I got there the next evening. Well they hadn't!

We started off at Nielo with Jan letting the boat down on the rope from the bank: that gave me just the right angle from which to cover the water.

Half way down we saw a movement – a sort of hump – not really a surface break. "A big one" said Tormod and the next

three or four casts were nail-biters. We reached the spot – no rise – as the fly came in close to the bank another fish took the Ally's Shrimp and luckily, very luckily, turned downstream at once. I let it run on down into the lake and we slid down past the "spot" as quietly as possible, landed the standard 10 kilo hen and paused for a conference.

Tormod thought we had better go straight back as fish don't stay long in Nielo, especially if disturbed. Jan was for giving it a rest and I gave the casting vote to go down to Valliniva. We saw a fish move by the big rock, so on with the Brooks and we got it on the third rise. With two fish under our belts we were ready for anything. Hasty checking of leaders, re-tying the fly and carefully starting Jan with the same length of rope from exactly the same place, I began to cover the pool. After about 20 casts Tormod said "This is the place" and with a small surface break the fish rose and was on. It immediately jumped clear out of the water and we knew we had a very big one. It tore up and downstream in Nielo, jumped and breached five times and then set off for the lake. Here the real battle began. Tormod was in agonies over all sorts of hidden rock outcrops, imagining every possible disaster. The fish was very hard to move even

when stationary and took out yards of line with each flick of the tail. Inch by inch I worked it in and after 20 minutes we had it near the boat in six feet of water – no current – and seemingly no chance of lifting it. I asked Jan to row to the only hopeful spot about 80 yards away where there was a shallower part about two feet deep. The shore was covered with trees to the water – water, water everywhere and not a beach in sight. Finally the fish rose as the gravel bottom rose and my heart sank as Tormod produced the Sautso gaff – a 6 foot knobby wooden pole with an old hook lashed to the top. Anyhow, in it went and Tormod lifted the fish out of the water. As he got it up it arched its back, snapped the gaff like matchwood and fell on the gunwale, 50/50 in the boat or in the water. You can guess: in the water, under the boat, line around the engine, but still thank God a good hold. More horsing of the fish and after a total fight of about 45 minutes both the boys got into the shallow water.

Tormod grabbed the 12 inches of gaff handle still sticking out of the fish, Jan grabbed the tail and between them they heaved it over the side whereupon it set about smashing the boat.

50 lb and beautifully fresh – no sea-lice. I expect it had been in a week and that David had risen it the previous evening. I had the scales read: four years in the river and four years at sea, a first time spawner. Lucky me! The week ended with still falling water; down to a foot or so, and 56 salmon and few, very few grilse. I gather the August week produced about 75 fish half salmon and half grilse with the water at least a foot minus and the boats unable to negotiate the rapids without the fisherman walking. All the very best – Bo.



"50 lb and beautifully fresh."



51 1/2 lb: Tweed, 1922.



60 lb: Alten, 1960.



61 lb: Vosso, 1924.



52 lb 10 oz: Mörrum, 1995.

MAHER'S 57LB SUIR FISH

Michael Maher took the Irish record rod-caught fish from the River Suir on one of his own home-made flies. Maher was a gillie on the Longfield water, which enjoyed good runs of salmon in 1874, when his fish was caught. The Suir is Ireland's most famous dry-fly trout river and, in the upper reaches, is not too dissimilar in character to the River Test. Sir Herbert Maxwell gave a full and exceptionally well-written account of the capture of Maher's salmon in his *Fishing at Home and Abroad*. So impressed was I when I read of Maher's ingenious preparations prior to catching this huge salmon that I read the account three times over:

The hero of this adventure and author of the fly in question was one Michael Maher, fisherman on Longfield water of the Suir, who started from home one spring morning in 1874, leaving his fly-book behind and taking only the Devon minnow as bait, for he had heard that the water was thick. He found it, on the contrary, very clear and, seeing a very large fish rise near a certain big stone – a grand taking place – he determined to avoid the risk of alarming him with a sunk bait, and to try a fly over him first. But never a fly he had on him – only a big hook or two for loach-fishing.

There was a farmhouse at hand, however, and therein a maiden with whom Michael was on terms of friendship. From her he begged a bit of silk and some feathers from which to tie a fly on the spot, eventually using the fringe of pretty Phoebe's pink shawl. There followed a pinch of yellow-dyed swan fibres from Phoebe's Sunday hat. In half-an-hour Michael had rigged up such a fly as had never been displayed on the Suir or any other water – pink worsted body, a yellow swan wing and the hackle of a recently slaughtered cockerel wound under the same; and off he hurried to the river again. The big fish seized the strange fly at the first offer, and within half-an-hour Michael was on his way back to Cashel, carrying his noble quarry with him. It constituted a record in weight for rod-fishing on the Suir, famous as that river is for big fish, for it weighed just 57 lb. Of course the first question asked by everybody who came to view the great fish was – "What fly did you get him with, Michael?"

And to every one the answer was the same – "Ah, that's a mystery."

When at last the secret did come out, "the Mystery," with suitable refinement of material and garnishing, was received with enthusiasm on many a river side, and was found to do quite as well as any other fly – and no better.

Viewed in the cold light of reason, such an incident as this ought surely to enable one to declare that it matters not one spin of a farthing whether the prevailing hue of a fly be red or blue, yellow or black, or an equal combination of many hues; and the only important consideration is that the lure be of suitable size and be given life-like motion. Well, that is the conclusion to which I have been driven, malgré moi; but such



The Suir, looking downstream from Knocklofty Bridge.

is the weakness of the human intelligence that I have found it beyond my strength to act upon it.

There is such a mute fascination in daintily dressed salmon-flies, their outline is so graceful, their tints so delicately blended or so cunningly contrasted, that no nature sensible of beauty can contemplate them with indifference.

Consequently, I suppose I spend as much time as anybody else at the outset of a day's fishing in hesitating between the modest lustre of a "Silver Grey," the sombre dignity of a "Black Dog," and the freakish gaiety of a "Popham," deaf the while to the monition of intelligence that the result must be exactly the same whichever is chosen. Truly it hath been said that salmon-flies are designed for the delectation of fishers than for the deception of fishes.

*There is a more elaborate account of the taking of Maher's fish in Sir Herbert Maxwell's *Memories of the Months* indicating that Maher had been fishing all morning (without success) with a "collie", a famous and peculiarly Irish bait consisting of a dead stoneloach fitted to a spinning mount. At a later date, artificial stone-loach baits were manufactured. The collie was used for salmon during the spring months when the water was cold. According to Maxwell, Maher's home at Cashel was six Irish miles (whatever that meant) from the Longfield water. Interestingly, Maxwell tells us that the Mystery fly, suitably refined, became the "deadliest of all [salmon] flies on the Redbridge and Broadlands waters of the Hampshire Test". One last nugget of information is revealed when Maher told the farm maid that he had seen the fish – "the biggest fish that ever swam in the Suir in Dawson's Cradle".*



Michael Maher's Mystery fly.

ATHOLE'S 72LB TAY SALMON

A letter from R. Anderson of 67 Prince's Street, Edinburgh, was published on page 176 of the *Fishing Gazette* on March 8, 1902: *DEAR SIR – I note in your last issue of the Fishing Gazette that a correspondent asks if there is any record of a 70lb salmon ever having been killed in the Tay. Perhaps the following may interest him:*

A member of the Athole family some time in the early years of the 1800's was fishing on the Tay at a pool called



63 lb: Vosso, date not known.



54 lb 7 oz: Mörrum, 1992.



55 1/2 lb: Grand Cascapedia, 1939.



51 lb: Awe, 1936.

the Fernyhaugh, about three miles above Dunkeld. He there hooked a fish on the fly, and after playing it from the boat for several hours, landed it at the Cottar Park Pool, fully a mile below the town.

My father was present and saw the fish landed, and also saw it weighed in the town, when it turned the scale at over 72lb. There was a rough wooden model made of it at the time, but since 1862 all trace of it has been lost. I have often heard my father and the late Mr. Charles Crerar, who was head gamekeeper to the Duke of Buccleuch, talk about the fish. Mr Crerar's father was the fisherman who gaffed it."

The above account of the 72 lb salmon has all the hallmarks of a true story. The only real problem some readers may have is that the incident happened a long time ago. My view is that distance in time is irrelevant – only the facts are worthy of consideration, and I thought that further research on this fish could pay dividends.

Perhaps the Athole or Buccleuch family records would hold details of the catch.

Accordingly, I wrote to his Grace the Duke of Atholl at Blair Castle in February 2006, being somewhat mystified by the spelling of Athole. My letter elicited a reply from Jane Anderson, the estate's archivist. "Dear Mr Buller," she wrote, "I can confirm that Athole is the Atholl family. The 6th Duke changed the spelling for some reason and the 7th Duke reverted to just the l and no e."

What was really exciting about this information was the realisation that if authentication of the fish could be found in the Atholl archives, it would go down on record as the largest Atlantic salmon ever taken on fly.

After further correspondence, I was invited to Blair Castle to inspect the records, particularly the letters written to the 4th Duke by his gillie, John Crerar – the gillie who had gaffed the fish for one of the Duke's family. This was probably one of his sons, but which one? Quite a puzzle considering that after John Murray became the 4th Duke in 1774 (he died in 1830), he had nine children with his first wife and two with his second.

Crerar sent regular reports on sporting matters to the Duke when the Duke was away in London, so I had to read summaries of all his letters to see if he had mentioned the capture of the big fish, but alas I could find no reference to it. I assumed that the fish had been taken when the Duke was 'at home'. The main difficulty was not knowing the year of capture. Since the Duke was a prolific letter writer all his life, the vast amount of correspondence to be gone through is a huge undertaking, without any guarantee of success.

John Crerar, I soon discovered, was a remarkable man. Born in Dunkeld in 1750, he lived at nearby Fernyhaugh ('haugh' means meadow beside a river) and looked after the Duke's fishings together with his substantial deer forests. The Dukes of Atholl owned a massive amount of land and let out sporting rights to many interested parties, including the Duke of Buccleuch. The Atholl estate included extensive fishings on the River Tay as far down as the Mill at Stanley, and on other rivers including the Tilt, Tummel and Gary. Edwin Landseer, the artist, was a frequent visitor to Blair Atholl (in 1824, 1825



Blair Castle, ancient seat of the Dukes and Earls of Atholl.

and 1826) as was William Scrope, who came to study deer. Indeed, during one of those visits, Landseer painted *The Death of a Stag in Glen Tilt*. John Crerar and his son Charles are featured in the painting. Charles was a stalker at Forest Lodge during its tenancy by the Duke of Buccleuch.

A final thought: was Mr Anderson's father – the man who was present when the fish was played, landed and later weighed in Pitlochry – the same man as James Anderson, falconer for the Atholl estate at the time? If he was, it would explain why Mr R. Anderson of Edinburgh was so knowledgeable about what went on at Blair Atholl.

The fish was hooked at Fernyhaugh and landed at Cottar pool on the Newtyle beat, a distance of at least four miles. This momentous fight, lasting for more than three hours, with what turned out to be a record fish, must have been talked about for years, at least locally, and I firmly believe that somewhere an account of this extraordinary battle will have been recorded. It is my hope that the publicity resulting from these observations will eventually lead to the discovery of a fully documented account of the taking of this staggeringly large salmon.

WAS THIS THE LARGEST SALMON?

The River Ewe may be only two miles long but it has a huge catchment area in Rossshire because it links Loch Maree, the celebrated sea-trout loch, to the saltwater Loch Ewe. The River Ewe is famous for big fish. An account of the largest fish ever caught there, written by Kenneth MacKenzie, was published by his brother Stuart of Poolewe. The following is an extract from *The River Ewe Reminiscent Recollections of a Ross-shire River* (2000), a book now sadly out of print. Thanks are due to the MacKenzies for allowing me to reproduce the story of a young man's struggle with an enormous fish:

Apparently one of the many working crofts which were situated along the west bank of the River Ewe was tenanted at



52 lb. Vosso, date unknown.



68 lb. Aaro, 1897.



60 lb. Alten, 1948.



48 lb, 40 lb, 30 lb: Aar, 1920s/'30s

that particular time by a certain crofter, who had originally come there from Muir-of-Ord years previously. This man, a popular and respected member of the community, was blessed with a name which was very common in the Poolewe area at that time so, to avoid confusion with others of the same name he became known locally as Ordie.

Ordie was married with a large family, and his eldest son, a big strapping young fellow by the name of Iain, was employed as a general estate worker and gillie by the local laird. He was permitted to fish for "one for the pot" during his leisure hours, and that's exactly what Iain was doing at the beginning of a fine summer evening leading up to the episode which later that same evening provided the river pool which is now known as the McCordie with its present name. After supper Iain took the big rod and went down to the west bank of the Manse pool which was not far from his father's croft. He started fishing there and after only a few casts he hooked a fish which, after swimming deep around the pool for several minutes, then sank to the bottom and refused to be moved. Iain tried everything he had ever been taught to do to move a sulking fish but all to no avail. There was absolutely no movement whatsoever and he eventually eased off the pressure but he had no sooner done so than the line began to move upstream!

As he tightened up his line again and set a good curve to the big, heavy greenheart rod the fish at the other end of the line suddenly really took off. Despite his powerful rod Iain could do absolutely nothing to control this fish, it just went on and on, up to the Hen pool, through that and on through the rough water beyond, not at any great speed nor with the usual surfacing and splashing about, but just as if it was swimming normally upriver. Relentlessly on and ever on it went until eventually it powered through into the actual pool which was destined in the very near future to receive a change of name. As the fish reached the deeper water of the pool it again sank to the bottom and came to a complete stop, allowing Iain to catch up with it, compose himself after the frantic scramble up from the Manse, and look around for a spot to beach it. But as Ordie's son and heir stood on the river bank, arm aching, soaking wet, the fish decided to get going again on its seemingly effortless journey up the river. As the line snaked out again Iain stood his ground and applied more pressure on the powerful rod but the fish just kept on going up through the headwaters of the pool and then steadily on into the smooth tailrace of the T-Pool.

As the big brass reel reluctantly released more and more line it began to look as if Iain's rod was connected to an unstoppable robot of some sort but, just as the salmon appeared to have effortlessly surmounted the powerful T-Pool current, the cumulative effects of its non-stop power drive up

from the Manse pool finally slowed it down enough to allow Iain to haul it back again gradually. Twice more it made a determined run for the T-Pool and twice more it was slowly reeled back in again, and eventually, after it had been "brought to heel" for the third time, it sank to the bottom of the pool as before and refused to be moved. For almost half an hour there was complete stalemate, but then the line started to move again, slowly at first but rapidly gaining speed as the salmon once more made a run for the T-Pool. Iain braced himself and applied more pressure and once again he managed to "put the brakes on it" and slowly hauled it back to the pool where it settled on the bottom once more. After this brief but still powerful breakaway the young ghillie relaxed and settled down for another wait but all of a sudden things really started to happen. The line began to move again, but this time, instead of powering upstream as before, the remarkable fish literally exploded through the surface of the water for the first time. From when he had first hooked it Iain had been left in

absolutely no doubt whatsoever that he was into a really big fish, but just how big it was he did not fully realise until that first leap exposed its true dimensions. It was absolutely enormous and the poor boy started to go weak at the knees. Each great leap and resulting splash on returning to the water caused such a commotion in the still of the summer evening that crofters working on their fields nearby were attracted to the water's edge, and soon there was a large audience of people of all ages gathered on the west bank of the river. Iain soon recovered from his

temporary shock and astonishment at the sheer size of this huge salmon and eventually, after a prolonged and exhausting struggle which gradually weakened it over a total period of almost an hour from when it first broke surface, the great fish finally turned over on its side for the last time at the water's edge and was expertly transferred to the river bank by two willing helpers armed with gaffs.

After having been suitably commented upon and thoroughly examined by the assembled crowd of men, women, and children, the bradan mor (big salmon) was carried along to Ordie's croft house where it was cut up and distributed among friends and neighbours within a wide surrounding area.

The pool became known to all, in Gaelic, as Poll MacOrdie (Ordie's son's pool). The great fish which played such a prominent part in the naming of the pool was never actually weighed but measurements were taken as follows – length sixty-three inches, girth thirty-nine inches. Those who carried it from the river to Ordie's croft house were reported to have been of the opinion that its weight appeared to be very similar to the weight of a bag of potatoes (one hundredweight, or one hundred and twelve pounds).



Looking upstream on the River Ewe towards the Manse pool.



70 lb: Tay (nets), 1870.



52 lb: Alten, 1926.

Order a specially discounted copy of *Giant Salmon* from *Trout and Salmon* for only £40 plus FREE P&P (RRP £50) by calling 01206 255800 and quoting TS1. Please note, the book is published (by Constable) on October 25 – copies are available from mid-October.

