

An Obsession with South Uist

by Robin Mulholland

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I first went to South Uist in the early 1970s with Nicky, my wife, three fairly small children and our Border terrier. We went there to escape the highland midge which had plagued us in the Western highlands and it was successful as there is almost always a breeze or even a wind! We fell in love with the island, the birds, the beaches and the machair. We caught lots of trout, fishing the club lochs and I caught some sea trout in various little sea lochs. The main salmon and sea trout lochs were beyond our means at that time. We did not get back to Uist until 2007 due largely to our having become heavily involved with salmon and following Nicky's death in 2009. My companion and boat partner became my long time fishing friend, Alan Ayre. By this time the ownership of the island had changed, there had been a crofters' buy out from the owners, a syndicate of business men, and the island is now managed by Storas Uibhist. The fishing is well run and the boats are good. The company control all the main salmon and sea trout lochs and most of the machair trout lochs. The Angling Club control many of the better lochs on the gneiss and have boats on them but there are dozens of lochs which are rarely, if ever fished, and it is the practice that if one has bought a club ticket then one is free to fish all of these lochs. Some of them are very good and can be very useful for family outings or when the wind on the machair is too strong.



Bornish, the classic machair loch

The island began life as a ridge of rock (gneiss) in the Atlantic and the ocean has added shell sand on the west side to form the machair. There is some machair on most of the Western Isles but it is most extensive on South Uist and is generally about 2 miles in width along the whole length of the island. The principal machair lochs are Grogarry, Stilligarry, Bornish and West Ollay and there are a number of others. Machair lochs are alkaline and hence rich in food for trout but there are no spawning burns and hence no direct recruitment. The trout come from lochs on the gneiss and migrate down burns during wet winters. I call these burns and that was what they would be originally but agricultural activities have converted them into ditches. Fortunately the company has realised the importance of keeping these ditches clean in order to allow free passage of trout. For example Grogarry is supplied with trout from Druidibeg by way of Stilligarry. The lochs on the gneiss are typical Scottish hill lochs, where the spawning is good there are lots of small trout but where the spawning is not so good there are fewer but larger trout. This is a broad generalisation and there are variations on this. The sea trout have now gone from the east side of the island due to salmon farming and the two systems which provide the salmon and sea trout fishing are on the west side and consist of the Howmore system, lochs Roag, Fada, Schoolhouse and Castle, and the Kildonan system, lochs Lower Kildonan and Mill. Until this year Alan and I have gone twice, once in June to fish for trout and once in August/September to fish for sea trout and salmon. Over the years both have been successful although the salmon and sea trout fishing can be a plodding business if conditions are not right or the runs are poor. This year we decided to go in late July for two weeks to try and combine the trout fishing and the migratory fish. We therefore arranged alternate days of trout and sea trout/salmon. We arrived in a heat wave (for Uist) and the lochs were low. Contrary to expectations the trout fishing was good in spite of the bright sunshine and this good trout fishing continued for the whole stay. At the end of the two weeks we had had 115 trout for 6½ days of trout fishing with the best at 3 pounds 6 ounces. The climax was a day on Grogarry when we had 30 trout which we guestimated at 28 pounds with the best at just over 2 pounds. A number of larger fish were lost; they either came off or got into weed. Alan and I agreed that this was the best day of loch fishing that either of us had ever had. All the trout fishing was done from a drifting boat with floating lines and traditional cast of three wet flies. The machair trout are in wonderful condition and are obviously fast growing. One variation which came into being in 2016 was a trip by argocat into the hills. There are three large lochs in remote hill situations which for us are only reachable by argocat. We took a day off from the machair and fished Corriemalsie in 2016 and Stulabhal in 2017. On both occasions we were fortunate with the weather and caught large numbers of trout which averaged about 6 ounces and we killed a few of those to eat. In 2018, Snigisclett is our target, the largest and most remote of the three. John Steel, the fishery manager, has been kind enough to put a boat on these lochs for our use and we will probably be the only anglers to fish them during the whole season.

By contrast the sea trout and salmon fishing this year was very poor, low levels and bright sun were not helpful. For 5½ days we had two salmon hooked (both by Alan) but lost and one small sea trout. The salmon normally run in July and while some had come there were not many. Sea trout run from the end of June through to October and again there were a few but not many and I think that it turned out to be a poor sea trout year.

We stay in a very good B&B at Kinloch run by Wegg Kimbell. Wegg was a Society member in the 1980s but gave up his job in advertising to go and live in Uist. He now runs this very comfortable, if slightly eccentric B&B. He advertises regularly in our



Looking east from Stillgarry to Hecla and Ben Mohr

journal. The house is very comfortable and the cooking outstanding. There is also a good changing room for anglers which is important. When I say that it is slightly eccentric, guests need to be able to advise on how to start Wegg's mower or tell him which of his hens are in lay and which are not and so on. He has however a great ability to be selective in who he takes in. The B&B sleeps 5 so if there are two of us there may be others but invariably they are interesting people and we have some good conversations around the dinner table.

The bird life is outstanding, May and June for the breeding birds and August onwards for the winter migrants. There are regular sightings of both Golden and White Tailed Sea Eagles. Always there are lots of Greylag geese.

For 2018 we have booked two weeks of trout fishing in July and will pray for some good weather. If anyone is planning a trip to South Uist I would recommend that they buy the Ordnance Survey maps well in advance and study them to give them some understanding of the island otherwise the plethora of lochs and water can be confusing.