

A HOY SEA-TROUT!

*Looking for adventure? Orkney's wild beaches and spring tides
prove irresistible to **Rob Denson***

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROB DENSON

Fishing the ebb
tide at the Bay
of Creekland.

I DON'T ALWAYS KICK OFF MY season with a one-thousand-mile road trip to fish for sea-trout, in the sea, when it's still officially winter; but when I do, I head for Hoy.

A telephone conversation with an Orcadian customer who was sourcing fly materials for the rapidly approaching sea-trout season led me to probe further: where, when, how?

"Hoy, on the beach in front of my house, end of February, with intermediate lines and full neoprene body protection."

Now, I don't do neoprene; I try not to do February, either, but for some strange reason unknown to me, my interest was irrevocably piqued. I felt it would have been rude not to invite myself for a short stay. Tides and work commitments conspired (thankfully) to rule out the opening week (at the end of February) and plans were made for the next favourable tides in mid-March.

I left Lancashire with a typical mid-March mix of sleet and hail chasing me all the way to the Borders and beyond. Regardless of the weather or the route, driving the length of Scotland is an undertaking which should, like the national drink, be savoured and not in any way hurried. I intended to take it slowly, hugging the magnificent mountainous west



ABOVE: A pair of typical Orkney sea-trout patterns.

BELOW: One from Moaness on the Orange & Pearl Muddler.

coast rather than taking the more direct A9. Four days was more like it, allowing me to take in a little landscape photography at some favourite haunts such as Glencoe and Assynt, and new ones like Torridon, Kylescu and Laxford Bridge. Suitably stunned by the previous 400 majestic, meandering miles from Loch Lomond to Scrabster, I boarded the first of two ferries that would take me to Stromness then over the western reaches of Scapa Flow to Hoy and part two of the trip.

As I rolled off my final ferry at Lyness I spotted a fervid-looking figure clad in 8in-thick neoprene waders and more layers than an onion; this was my man on Hoy, Donald McIsaac. I was already beginning to rue my decision to make do with lightweight summer breathables and a baseball cap.

After a hearty handclasp and a few pleasantries Don was eager to show me his home "beat", Klebreck Sands and the Bay of Creekland, a 15-minute ride to the north end of Hoy. The lack of any real rivers on Orkney means that sea-trout are only targeted in the sea. Sport of sorts can be had all over the islands, but the most productive areas are shallow, shingly, seaweedy spots centred around Scapa Flow and the



ABOVE LEFT: A March sunset over Rackwick Bay. **ABOVE:** The Old Man of Hoy, probably only 250 years old and likely to collapse soon.

adjacent islands, such as Hoy. The season is from February 25 to October 31 with the front and back ends traditionally providing the cream of the sport. We were still well and truly at that front end, but Don wasn't at all happy about the lack of cloud, wind and Jupiter's position in relation to Neptune.

Don't tell me, Don: I should have been here last week. Where have I heard that before?

Still, as we tackled up at the foot of Ward Hill – at 1,500 ft, the highest point on Orkney – and I hovered close to Don, waiting for him to open his fly-box, I was buoyed to hear that he and his accomplice had netted several fish up to 4lb the previous week at Creekland. There was hope; when you're fishing a bay as awe-inspiring as Creekland, there's always hope. Everything about the place feels pristine, timeless and very, very fishy. Knee-deep in a gently flowing tide, with the sun dappling the landscape between toytown clouds, it could have been Cuba.

We wandered the "flats" for a couple of hours, fishing hard until the North Atlantic sucked back what was rightfully hers, making the tide race like a horizontal waterfall. When your knees start to flap in the flow it's time to get out – if you lose your footing here there's nothing to grab hold of until Newfoundland.

Fishless so far, Don suggested a move just down the road to Moaness where it would be more conducive to the state of the tide. Fishless again after 30 minutes, I could tell already the weight of my expectancy was bearing heavily on Don's shoulders. I convinced him, as one does, that a fish would only spoil the ambience. Another short hop south to the Bay of Quoys and with the warm mid-afternoon sun soaking into my face I felt like I was in Cuba again; seconds later everything went tight and I was into my first Orcadian bonefish. Okay, so we're talking ounces rather than pounds, but this diminutive specimen was as perfect in every detail and fought like a fish three times its size.

By rights, one of us should soon have been into another fish – Orkney sea-trout shoal, often in good numbers and two or three can often be caught at a time. Not today, though, but I was very happy and for an hour or two the trip felt complete. Well, almost.

We headed back to Creekland, curious to see if fishing a different stage of the tide would make any difference, but it didn't. I left Don, literally in his element, and headed over to the opposite side of the island to Rackwick Bay. Conditions looked good for a decent sunset over one of the most spectacular beaches in the UK. I had the whole bay to myself as a good North Atlantic swell rolled in, crashing over perfectly smooth, round boulders as big as washing machines. Be warned, though: come to Rackwick any later in the season and you may have to share it with a half-a-dozen tourists.

RIGHT: Donald McIsaac on his home patch: the pristine Bay of Creekland.



The setting sun indicated that it was high time I travelled the breadth and then the length of the island along Hoy's only two roads and crossed the causeway at Hoy's southern tip over to the small island of South Walls where my bed-and-breakfast hosts, Stephanie and John Hardcastle, awaited my arrival. Originally from Glossop, Stephanie and John, like many others, relocated to Orkney after falling for the charm of the islands many years ago and have never looked back. Apart from the joys of being looked after by fellow northerners, there was another reason for me choosing South Walls: my great grandfather, Mr Donald Harper Fiddler, was born there in 1875. For reasons we have not yet been able to establish, around the turn of the century he packed a bag, made a sandwich, and took off, relocating in Oldham, of all places, where he married in 1907. The farm, Aithsdale, on South Walls, where he was born and bred, is still a going concern. Stephanie and John, as it turned out, know the current farmers well and so introductions were made and I was kindly shown around the old homestead. As I left Aithsdale, I suddenly felt more Orcadian than I ever had; I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping to feel my bones buzzing with the



ROB DENISON has fly-fished for trout for 25 years, visiting all four corners of Britain and Ireland, combining his love of fly-tying, photography and a rolling wave. Web: robdenson.co.uk

force that might just help me catch a big one.

The next three days were spent hooking up with Don, as and when his commitments would allow; when they didn't, I combined a little walking and landscape photography, the highlight of which was a morning jaunt to the Old Man of Hoy – truly breathtaking and worth the trip alone; again, as with Rackwick, it was mine, all mine.

Hooking up with Don was one thing; however, hooking up with a substantial Orcadian sea-trout was proving an altogether trickier proposition and the spring-like conditions of day one had gradually deteriorated into something altogether more autumnal if not wintry. For the first time, Don's neoprenes began to look very attractive. On the plus side, though, this would make for better fishing – or so Don reckoned. Indeed, as we got within casting distance of our last location on day three, Rysa Bay, there was a palpable fishiness in the air and I was hopeful that my new-found connection with the islands would elicit a special prize.

It would appear, however, that harnessing the force takes a little more than sitting down for coffee and scones in your great-grandfather's kitchen. I still have much to learn. The force is strong in Donald McIsaac, though, and ten minutes into our last session, just as the light began to fade I glanced over in Don's direction to see a distinctly hoop-like curve in his rod. I dropped my gear on the spot and scampered over the seaweed, just about managing to stay upright and getting to Don in time to grab a couple of shots of his fish. And what a fish it was: a clean, lean, mean fighting machine. At 2½lb or so, it was nowhere near as big as you could encounter on Orkney (fish treble that size are not rare) but for my



ABOVE
A beauty for Donald on the Muddler at Rysa Bay.

“One packs away when the light fades and retreats to a warm, welcoming hostelry”

money, it was as perfect and as healthy looking as migratory salmonids get.

Don implored me to grab my rod and try to get in among the shoal. I only needed to be told once and was in position quicker than a tramp on a bag of chips. The shoal was still there and I got rattled two or three times, but nothing stuck. I moved up and down the shore for another half an hour, hoping to contact the shoal again, but fish have fins and they had used them to beat a hasty retreat. Eventually, we lost the light, which signalled the end of my Orcadian foray. This, however, was sea-trout fishing that I could get used to: one packs away when the light fades and retreats to a warm, welcoming hostelry with a well-stocked whisky shelf and the smell of home cooking wafting from the kitchen. As I awaited my evening meal, I vowed to return, maybe even next spring. I need to tussle with a couple of big ones; if I time it right, they might even be swimming in the bays that I fish. **T&S**

Where to stay, what to take

Orkney sea-trout season: February 25-October 31.

Accommodation: AirBnB with John and Stephanie Hardcastle, The Old School House, Longhope, South Walls, Hoy. Mob: 07585 005 090. E-mail: hardcastle913@btinternet.com Also try visitscotland.com

Ferries: North Link from Scrabster to Stromness, then Orkney Ferries from Houton to Lyness.

Flies and tackle: Don't worry too much about flies. Think red, orange (and fluorescents), Orkney peach, white, silver and pearl, and pretty much any combination thereof. These are tried-and-tested colours for Orkney. If fish see them, you'll catch. Proven patterns include the Stenness Stinger, Platinum Blonde and Potty Palmer. As it happens, I caught my fish on the only fly that I designed for the trip: as I was close to Moaness when I caught with it, I shall call it the Little Mo. Locals mostly fish a single fly – with all that seaweed and rocks, having droppers trailing all over the place isn't ideal when you hook a 7lb fish.

Take 9ft-10ft rods for seven-weight (or a weight either side) floating, intermediate or sink-tip lines. I survived without neoprenes, as I'm sure you will, but if you've got them, take them.

