

SIX GO TROUTING IN ORKNEY

Rob Denson and his experienced party enjoy their first visit to the fabled lochs of the northern horizon

AROUND SPRINGTIME EACH year my mother asks me where I'm going on holiday. Twenty-odd years into my addiction, she has finally caught on. She used to say things like, "Oh, County Mayo, that's nice. Why are you going there?" Or... "Iceland? Isn't it a bit cold for a summer holiday?"

When the holiday question arose this year, and I replied "Orkney", she looked at me with a smug sense of satisfaction, extremely pleased with herself for finally realising that I don't do Florida, or the south of France. With a wry smile she inquired, "Do they have trout in Orkney?" That smile was reflected right back as I told her I wasn't sure, but I intended to find out.

And so in late June this year a posse of six similarly afflicted trout seekers selflessly boarded the ferry at Cills Bay for the short hop to Orkney, on a mission to answer my mother's big question. Incredibly, with collective experience of fly-fishing for trout of 200 years, none of our crew had ever done so in the Orkneys. Lochs Watten and St John's were the closest any of us had got, and it was here we'd heard whispers and rumours of a land on the northern horizon with more lochs than supermarkets and more trout than there are stars in the sky.

It's 10.30 pm on Boardhouse and Dougie Skedd is still able to fish with the sun above the horizon.

The late-afternoon sail was choppy, initiating the obligatory and predictable crescendo of car alarms belonging to paranoid townsfolk as the 16.30 to St Margaret's Hope entered the North Sea. One hour later, safely ashore and on time, we pressed on, northwards, across causeways linking the islands and past the wreckage of the German fleet poking out of the margins of Scapa Flow. We passed plenty of fishy-looking lochs, and no supermarkets. Today was all about settling in, though, in Kirkwall, and later into its finest Indian restaurant where the talk was of the morrow and the Loch of Swannay, the first water to eliminate from our enquiries.

answered. Now we could go home... if we wanted. We didn't. Instead we settled into our "lived-in" traditional Orkney vessel. We settled into the wind, and the weather in general. We gradually got braver and braver, too, setting our drifts closer and closer to the shore, and the fishy-looking skerry water, said to hold the lion's share of the fish. It did. Looking around the loch, the rest of the crew were getting the same vibe, getting in close, and getting results.

By mid-afternoon a stretch of legs, and a dram on a friendly looking skerry, afforded the opportunity to swap our first Swannay stories. We had all had

began to thin, as if lifting the curtain on the land of fire a few hundred miles to the north.

It was getting on for midnight before we reluctantly began to pack up, slowly, taking in the end of an everlasting sunset. They have trout in Swannay. A few drams were downed after the 30-minute drive back to Kirkwall, and at 1 am, when the brief spell of half-light gave way to sunrise, we asked ourselves why we had come off? The best we could come up with was an admittance that, at our age, R&R was needed before tackling the lochs of Boardhouse and Hundland.

A small logistical problem (due to organising our trip slightly later than would have been ideal) meant that the crew would have to split for two days – four on Boardhouse, two on Hundland and vice-versa the next day. Visitor boats get snapped up early on Orkney, so book early, as they say, to avoid disappointment.

The day on Boardhouse started bright and breezy, and consequently slowly, but by late morning had suddenly become a dream loch-fishing day. Higher, drier cloud than on the previous day rolled in from the west, the wind eased, and with a slight but perceptible rise in temperature sport accelerated, quickly.

There are trout in Boardhouse, too. It seemed that whole families of trout were enjoying the improved conditions. "On the fin", "Fish soup", "Looking for trouble" – pick your own red-letter day phrase, or take the opportunity to make up a new one. The little 'uns and teens were hurling themselves at the fly, seemingly one every other cast. The grown-ups were a little more cautious, but only just, with good fish just either side of the pound mark, and a sprinkling of fish at a pound-and-a-half coming to the net every other drift.

Wet-flies of a traditional bent presented on floating or "slow" lines did the bulk of the damage. Shortish casts, steady away, lift, dibble, Bob's yer uncle. In a parallel universe, a few miles down the road on Hundland, a similar scenario was panning out.

As the evening approached and the wind eased, a steady trickle of caenis kept the fish looking up. It seemed the little 'uns had been

"...before Jim had finished describing what the back-end of a 3 lb Swannay trout looks like, we were back in the boats, wafting wets in the direction of his close encounter"



The crew: clockwise from back left are Stewart Barclay, Alex Ferguson, Jimmy Millar, Rob Denson, Dougie Skedd and Colin Riach.

The day was "drieich" as we set a drift on Swannay but spirits were high, if somewhat tempered by the cautionary words from some old sage, a Mr Stan Headley.

"Navigate the skerry-free water... the route to the west of Muckle Holm is for the suicidal and the terminally insane!" warned the ancient parchment.

Swannay is small enough to drift in a day, but large enough to keep you busy for months, if not years – providing of course that you don't travel to the west of Muckle Holm. The dark sky and the peat-stained waters of Swannay screamed "Claret", and ten minutes or so after setting our first drift, a small but lively dark Swannay brown trout came to hand, deceived by a Claret Crippler on the bob.

The question had been

fish, plenty of fish, and Jimmy Millar had moved a three-pounder to his Kate Muddler. Sadly it didn't stick, but funnily enough, before Jim had finished describing what the back-end of a 3 lb Swannay trout looks like, we were all back in our boats and wafting the wets in the general direction of Jim's close encounter.

As the late afternoon gave way to early evening and the wind dropped away to a sigh, thoughts turned to dry-fly. Still drieich, it was hardly the perfect dry-fly evening, but who can resist that drop in the wind when you've been grafting with the wets in a good old blow all day? The memory of that evening will stay with me a long time and, I suspect, with all the boys too. A truly biblical, apocalyptic sunset took place as the cloud to the north-west



Loch Harray, 11.12 pm, and four of the crew enjoy dry-fly sport into the night.

hastened to bed, while the grown-ups grazed on the party food. Dougie and I nestled into the shallows off the northern bank around the corner from "the narrows" and for a couple of hours enjoyed tremendous sport, with several fish getting on for two pounds. Mercifully, the caenis never reached "curse" proportions, and thanks to a sprinkling of sedges, the trout didn't become one-track minded. They did become a little more selective as the hatch progressed, but a well presented dry-fly or two and a little patience was duly rewarded with a better-than-average stamp of fish.

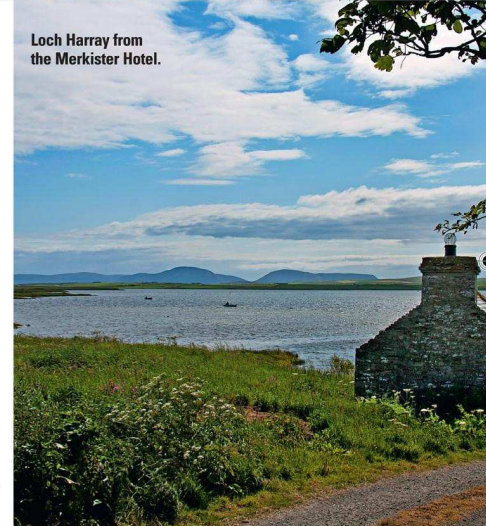
I don't think trout necessarily get ultra-selective in a caenis hatch. I'm sure one of the main reasons they can be tricky is down to their feeding *modus operandi*.

The fish know there will be a carpet of caenis, therefore they don't need the large "window" afforded by depth to spot their prey. Swimming close to the surface, practically hovering the caenis up, is more productive and energy-efficient.

Many times we watched trout take caenis just inches from our flies. The artificials were not, as it turned out, rejected, but simply not noticed. Swimming so close to the surface, the trout's window is tiny.

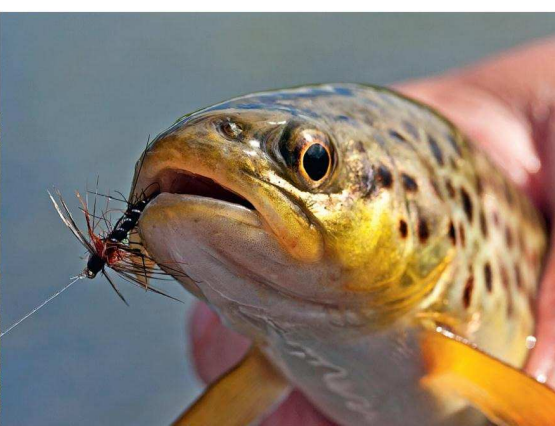
Back in the Barony Hotel bar after another spectacular two-hour sunset, and having forced ourselves off the water again, the Boardhouse foursome couldn't regale each other fast enough. Dry-fly had indeed been the order of the evening – Shipman's, Hogs, Klinks and

Loch Harray from the Merkister Hotel.



A Hundland trout, wild and wonderful.





SIX GO TROUTING IN ORKNEY *continued*

Above: (left to right) Rob, Alex and Jim ponder the afternoon's tactics on Swannay.

Above, right: a Harry trout on the dry-fly.

Crippled Midges had done the collective damage. The fish and the weather had been kind to us that day – I'm sure on other days it's not so easy. Davie, our polite host, made all the right "Oooh!" and "Aaah!" noises, and pulled interesting faces in all the right places. Something tells me, though, that he took in much more of the news items on the TV in the background than he was letting on.

We switched lochs the next day, and the weather decided on a change too. Boardhouse under clear skies was a mere shadow of the previous day. Strangely, though, and perhaps due in some way to its wider range of features, skerries and depths, Hundland provided sport pretty much on a par with the day before.

Our next day was rest day. Our 200 collective years of fishing experience have at last

taught us something. Mooching and moping around Kirkwall and Stromness, we all wished we were fishing that day. It's a bit like eating raw broccoli, or shopping with the wife – you don't really want to do either, but long term you know it will pay dividends.

And so it did. The next morning six coiled springs (well, almost) stood outside the Merkister Hotel and gazed in awe at the majesty of Harry.

Orkadian scenery is much of a muchness. Low, gently rolling hills, from top to bottom – interesting, as long as the light keeps changing. Pretty as it is, the magic and majesty of Harry, as far as anglers are concerned, lies beneath the waves. Gin-clear, and rarely more than a rod length deep across her length and breadth, Harry is a trout's and a trout angler's paradise. Bay after bay after skerry after skerry provide happy hunting grounds for both.

So where does one start? Leave your mooring, pick a spot – any spot – call it the beginning, and start there. Alternatively, throw a dart at the map. Harry is a 1,000 hectare trout factory, as Jimmy Millar put it at the end of our first day. There isn't an inch of this place that won't, on some days, most days, hold trout. Finding fish on Harry isn't rocket science, catching them isn't either, but keeping your hull and your prop intact might be. Respect, vigilance, fair weather and a pair of Polaroids should see experienced anglers safely through the day.

Less experienced fishers, though, would be well advised to secure the services of a gillie to guide them around the endless maze of skerries. The Merkister Hotel and The Orkney Trout Fishing Association can help.

In the main, classic, simple loch-style fishing – short, shallow lines with a team of three wet-flies

– was as complicated as the fishing on Harry got. Occasionally, when the action slowed up by mid-afternoon, we ventured into "deep" water, all 100 feet of it, and explored the "abyssal plains" (or Golden Triangle as the locals prefer to call it) with Di 5 sinkers. When was the last time you drifted a wild loch, drogue-free, over a full statute mile or more of productive water?

Colin Riach and Alex Ferguson enjoyed such a drift, all three hours of it, contacting fish all the way. We dropped lucky with the weather again each evening on Harry, the wind dropping and the all-too-rare evening rise actually materialising. As with Boardhouse and Hundland, a trickle of caenis and a few sedges prolonged the sport nicely into the gloaming.

I'd love to be able to tell you how we cracked the Harry code – the flies, the lines, the fishy lies and drifts. We didn't. We were guessing. Two days on such a giant

can only scratch the surface, but we caught fish until our arms hurt. Much had been read and researched about flies. Local contacts were grilled, and we listened. Must-have local patterns were tied up and given the front row in the fly-box, but most of them stayed there, for it was the old favourites, the Kates, the Dabblers, the Dunkelds and the Chiefs, that wreaked the bulk of the havoc. The bright, bold and graphic Orkadian patterns had their uses, especially on the faster sinking lines, but were left largely alone. In the top foot or so of the water, which accounted for 90 per cent of our fishing, the classic wet-flies from around the UK did us proud. Maybe we missed a few tricks and still have a lot to learn? Maybe. We'll look into it further next time. This time, though, we were there to answer a simple question. Yes, mum, they have trout in Orkney.

Above: A leisurely drift on Harry, with Hoy in the background.

Above, right: Out of the net and into the wellie!

FACTFILE

- There are two ferries for Orkney from Caithness – Scrabster and Gills Bay. We travelled with Pentland Ferries from Gills Bay to St Margaret's Hope. www.pentlandferries.co.uk
- We self-catered at the delightful Kingston House in Kirkwall, close to petrol, food and drink! Fishing was all 20-30 mins away. www.accommodation-in-orkney.com/kingston-house
- Fishing for wild brown trout is essentially free in Orkney. No licence, permits or day tickets required. We do recommend, though, that you join The Orkney Trout Fishing Association which preserves and enhances the wonderful fishing for all: £20 gets you a full year's visitor membership and access to facilities at most lochs. www.orkneytroutfishing.co.uk
- Boat costs vary from £12.50 to £22.50 per angler per day. For that you get your boat, engine, fuel and a full day's fishing, and that can be a very long day on Orkney. The earliest we left the water was 10.30 pm! See The OTFA site, or Stan Headley's *New Trout Fishing Guide to Orkney* for contact details. We took our Harry boats from the Merkister Hotel. www.merkister.com
- Gillies can be arranged through OTFA, and the Merkister Hotel. Prices vary.
- Tackle, flies and information: W.S. Sinclair, 27 John Street, Stromness, KW16 3AD Tel: 01856 850 469

FLIES FOR ORKNEY



DUNKELD VARIANT (STEWART BARCLAY)

Hook Size 10-12 B175 **Tail** Glo Brite No7 **Rib** Gold wire **Body** Flat gold **Body hackle** Fluoro orange cock **Wing** Bronze mallard **Head** Gold Micro-fritz

Stewart's most solid middle dropper performer, especially in the sunshine.



KATE MACLAREN MUDDLER (JIMMY MILLAR)

Hook Size 10-12 B160 or B175 **Tail** Golden-pheasant topping **Rib** Fine oval silver **Body** Black seal's fur **Body hackle** Black cock **Shoulder hackle** Red game hen **Head** Deer hair

Pretty much a permanent fixture on the top dropper for Jim. Caught fish on all the lochs.



GREY SHIPMAN'S (DOUGIE SKEDD)

Hook B170 or B400 **Rib** Mirage **Body** Grey seal's fur **Tail/breathers** White Antron or poly yarn **Thread** Grey

Dougie's "go-to" pattern, in various sizes in a caenis hatch.



GREY MONKEY DABBLER (ALEX FERGUSON)

Hook Size 10-12 Haybusa 761 **Body** Rear 2/3rds, amber/yellow seal's fur mix; front 1/3rd, silver grey seal's fur **Body hackle** Medium brown dun hen **Wing** Bronze mallard, two-thirds cloaked **Cheeks** Jungle cock splits **Thread** Uni-Thread 8/0 light olive

A spur-of-the-moment selection for Alex. Nicely shrimpy and sedgy.



KATE MACLAREN VARIANT (COLIN RIACH)

Hook Size 10-12 B175 **Tail** Golden-pheasant topping **Rib** Oval silver **Body** Black seal's fur **Body hackle** Black cock **Shoulder hackle** Red game hen **Head** Gold Lite-Brite

"Leave your Kates at home," Colin was warned. He'll be tying a few more of these for next time. As you can see, this one is well chewed!



PEACH HOG (SINCLAIR'S OF STROMNESS)

Hook B160 or B175 **Body** Peach seal's fur **Wing** Bunches of natural deer hair **Thread** Orange

Purchased on our day off. One of the few recommended patterns that excelled. Fished as well as a dry-fly as it did on a Di 5.



SKARA MONGER (ROB DENSON)

Hook Size 10-12 B175 **Rib** Gold wire **Body** Rear 2/3rds, Mirage; front 1/3rd, seal's fur mix (50:50 Orkney peach and fluoro orange) **Body hackles** Rear 2/3rds, fluoro orange cock; front 1/3rd, grizzle hen dyed orange **Shoulder hackles** Rear, red or orange GP body feather; front, grizzle hen dyed 'Silver Doctor blue' **Thread** 'Wine' UTC

Tied specially for the trip, a good performer on the middle, in sunshine.

A drift on Boardhouse.

