

Machair magic

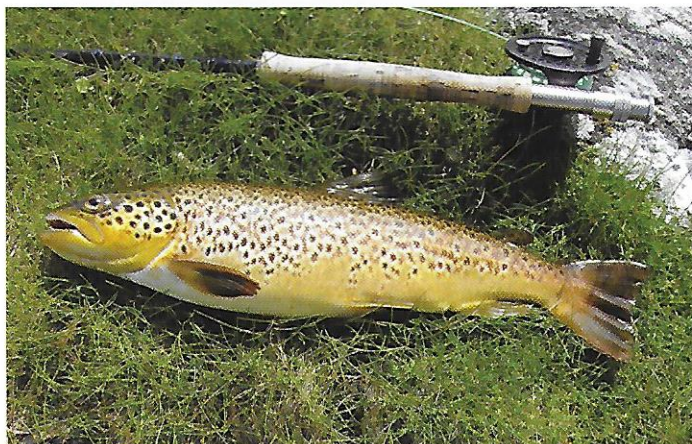
– where rods, like wands, are waved

NEIL PATTERSON returns to South Uist and is reminded that fly-fishing can be as magical it can be effective



PROFILE

Neil Patterson has fished all over the world and is credited with the development of many innovative fly patterns, including the Suspender Buzzer and Funneldun. He is the author of *Chalkstream Chronicles* and wrote the script for the TV fishing series, *The Take*.

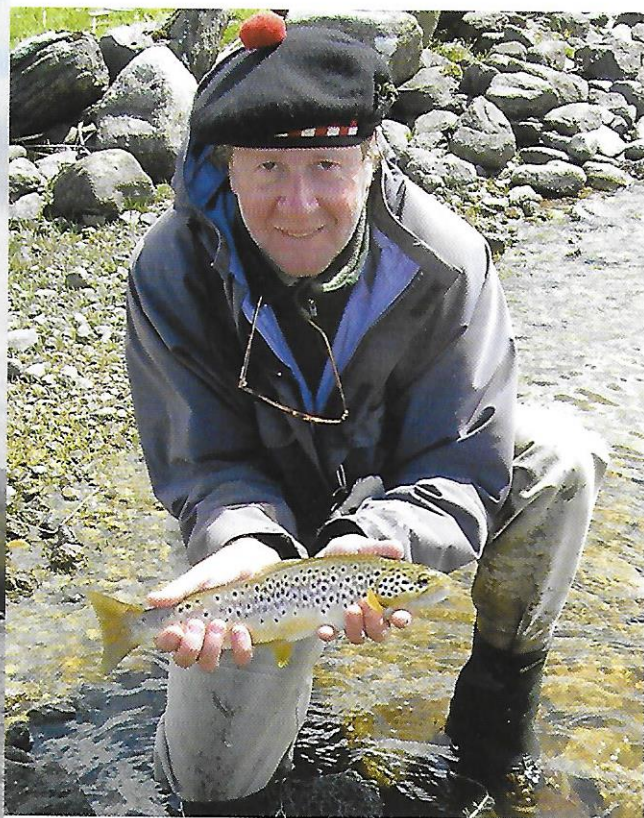


Big, wild and perfect. All the fish the author caught were returned.

Frank Sinatra left his heart in San Francisco. I left my nose in South Uist. This is the story of how this happened; amongst others.

Have you noticed? Flights aren't fun anymore. But then they never really were. I usually end up sitting next to someone with a child (usually one with an earache), which means either making silly faces for five hours or appearing to be a man who doesn't like children. I do like children. I was one. I just don't want to fly with them. But I devised a way of handling it.

Once, I didn't used to fly to the Highlands & Islands from London. No, I'd fly-tie there. I'd pull out my leather collar



The author weaves some magic with his wand. Machair fish are bright and white-bellied.

islander. He doesn't speak jockenese, but he speaks with great knowledge about the island's history, its people – but most importantly, its fishing. Although he's only been living there for four and a half years, his love of the island equals that of any old timer. On the way to his loch-side croft 20 minutes from the airport, where he has been running a bed & breakfast for over four years, we pass a roadside shrine of the Virgin Mary filled with empty 'tinnies'. He shakes his head. "I just love it here," he says.

Wegg may have only recently set up home on the island, but in between forays to Patagonia and Slovenia, and some very serious jobs in advertising media agencies, he'd spent most of his stray hours fishing the South Uist Estate lochs. These take some knowing – let alone fishing – as I was to find out.

Kinloch, the lodge at the 'head of the loch', sits off the road in a jungle of rosa rugosa, escallonias, phormiums, fuschias, cordylines, lupins, alders, firs and ring-neck doves that collect in a miniature cedar tree and coo-coo the day away. Wegg had to become a gardening expert to convince the lady selling the property that he should be the next owner. Him – and his free-range hens.

Lost in the Uists with Hecla and Beinn Mhòr in the background.

'He'd spent most of his stray hours fishing the South Uist Estate lochs'

box (my travel fly-tying kit), pull down the tray in front of me and clamp a wee vice onto the side and start whipping up. It kept kids amused for hours. Me being the kid.

Aisle seat tyings

To Glasgow, I'd get half a dozen half-decent Claret Bumbles dressed up, if I was in the aisle seat with multi-elbow room. Only two, if I was stuck in the middle. My record was 15 between Miami and Cancun, with my left shoulder to the window. Crazy Charlies, with milky coffee-coloured wings. There was turbulence. My lunch took flight.

These days my collar box looks like

a bomb-factory in my hand luggage, so it's back to silly faces.

There were just grown-up islanders, their friends and relatives from the mainland on the flight from Glasgow to Benbecula that Saturday morning at the end of June. The rest were stockbrokers on their way to Grimersta, wearing pinky, peachy, plummy coloured cords from First Floor Farlows. By the sound of it, the islanders were from the North Island. One in 60 Scots speaks the Gaelic – or *jockenese*, as one guide on the island refers to it – and on Uist more people speak it in the north than the south.

My host, Wegg Kimbell, is not an



Wegg Kimbell into a fish.



A toast to the flies of Uist.



The dapping alternative.

They say that if Wegg's not tracking down browns on the lochs, he's searching for brown eggs in his jungle. I told him his poultry needed taking in hand, but he's as good as married to his twelve chickens. "Ever heard of ruling the roost?" I said to him over scrambled eggs to die for.

It isn't the cock that gets me up my first morning at five. He is tucked up in bed. The sun is pouring through the bathroom Velux and I can see Loch Druidibeg through the jungle – and trout rising.

Sun and dry

This is sun and dryness I haven't seen for a while, it being the month where back in dampest, dankest southern England, towns are under water and more salmon are being run-over on the M25 than hooked on the Wye. The Islands have been free of rain for three weeks. The lochs are low and my first three brownies grab my tiny Silver Invicta hastily before the sun gets too high. The smell of smoky bacon rises out of the jungle stinging my nose that is starting to peel in the unexpected Mediterranean dryness.

Early settlers in the Outer Hebrides lived by the shore. They were fishermen, not farmers, choosing to settle on the west coast of South Uist. Unmistakably shaped like a foetus, there's a distinct split in this island. The East is hilly and peaty. On the West, sandy dunes protect a string of clear-waters lochs with very little peat in them. These are the 'machair' lochs. The most special of special lochs. Lochs haunted by brown trout over four pounds and a place where monster sea trout visit.

These shallow machair lochs are sunk into a landscape of crushed seashells. Rich in alkaline and health-giving things, this mini ecosystem promotes the prodigious growth of kingcups and orchids, corncrakes and crustaceans – and a population of speckle-backed, white-bellied trout with eyes that sit like pince-nez on the end of their noses. Trout that cannot resist the dancing fly. And few anglers I have

fished with know-how to waltz a fly across a curling wave with greater expertise than my two boat partners, Wegg and Ian Kennedy, the son of John Kennedy who, as keeper of the keys to the lochs, has taught his son well in the ways of wildness and the wonderful world of the machair.

"You're the only gay in the village," Wegg enlightens me as I help him wind chicken wire round some stakes, putting an end to his chickens' free-range days. "The only angler on the island fishing the machair lochs. Take your pick." He elaborates. From the top, the machair lochs on offer are Loch Bee, Grogarry, Stilligarry, Mid & West Ollay, Kildonan and finally Upper & Lower Bornish. The best of these lochs represent the 'Estate fishing' although the Angling Club can provide access to a select few of them.

I chose Stilligarry, because walking through a sea of buttercups and orchids on a June day to get to one's fishing is almost as pleasing as the fishing itself. Plus, with sporadic blasts from the Qinetiq missile range, there is no danger

of me dropping off and dreaming I was in paradise. I am in paradise.

There is a gentle breeze in our faces as we pull off the gravels. But even though the Gulf Stream washes this coast with a warm sea, making it unusual for it to be cold during the trout-fishing season, I'm layered with every possible layer of fleece and breathable fabric I can muster. My nose sticks out into the sun and salty breeze, through a gap.

Underwater map

Wegg takes the oars and whispers instructions to himself from a sub-surface map he has planted deep in his brain. I sit there in the hull watching my gillie finger every inch of the loch lying under the waves with his knowledge, like he's reading Braille. The exact position of every tiny pebble and mossy rock is relayed back. An oar dips here, or strokes there positioning the boat where a fly might just be able lift a fish out of a known lie, when the wind is in a certain direction. Today a bad wind swings



Mwah! Falling in love with South Uist.



Irish flies, like this Golden Olive Bumble, are becoming popular on the machair lochs.

from north to the north east. It had been doing this for ten days.

Ian rolls his fly out in front of the boat. It is hard to see what constitutes his team. But I can see they are not the flies I imagined we'd be using. They're tiny. Wegg asks if he can take a look at my fly-box and give advice. It explodes in his hand. The lid springs open on contact, bounced asunder by a mass of seriously overdressed, closely packed flies that are so bushy, so springy, you could sit back in my box and watch television.

Ian has a fish in seconds. It crashes through the waves at eye level, as a large wave rolls in front of the boat. One scoop of the net and a brownie of 2lb is returned. Now I get the chance to see Ian's flies. Minuscule, scantily dressed Olive and Claret Bumbles tied on 14's. Flies dressed with a delicacy that doesn't match the fingers of the tyer who passes me one to try.

Most of my early boat-drifting days were spent on Orkney lochs, flicking flies on the end of a cast as short as I was tall at that time – a way my grandfather had taught me. "Fishing is a relaxation," this eminent doctor from Montrose told his small grandson, giving me my first lessons in boat fishing and health education.

But it was sharing a boat with Stan Headley on the South Uist lochs that I learned to develop a retrieve that starts with a long cast, where you fish the attractor patterns on the middle dropper and point while this retrieve is on the move. But then, at the end of the retrieve, you fish the imitation pattern on the bob – an Olive Bumble or Claret Bumble – raising the rod sharply so it stands perpendicular, surfacing the bob fly and sweeping it over the wave to the boat until it touches the wood. Stan wrote about this 'lift and hang' technique in a recent article [October 2007 – Editor].

Stan's initial long cast was a revelation, mainly on account of the fact that its effectiveness was proven almost



Claret Bumbles in minuscule sizes for the machair.

immediately. The fly at the end of a cast that had delivered two thirds of my fly-line out into the loch had barely touched the water when it was grabbed by a ten-pound sea trout. Hugh Falkus calls this the 'crunch take'; when a fly lands on a fish's shoulder and it turns on it with an instinctive aggression. I believe this sea trout is still the largest taken from that loch on record.

Roll cast

But that was a sea trout on Loch Fada, late on in the season. Today Wegg and Ian are both employing a different drift style to spellbind the fat June browns of Loch Stilligarry. It is back to my grandfather's leisurely ways, for both roll-cast their flies out no further than three rod-lengths from the boat, lifting their rod tips up smartly the moment the tail-fly pierces the surface. The bob is only ever allowed to sip at the surface, not skinny-dip. From this moment on, the fly appears to have a life of its own – unconnected to angler and rod. The latter follows the fly, rather than leads it – as it waves hypnotically from left to right and back again. It's the wind doing the fishing.

"Why bother with the tail fly?" I ask Wegg. "All part of the magic?" he replies.

These secret machair lochs are becoming less of a secret. The number of visiting Irish fly fishermen, who no longer have the shallow loch sea trout fishing that they once had, has started to increase. Hardly surprising, for many of the favourite Hebridean loch patterns are of Irish descent.

Suddenly, while that flaky nose of mine was poking around in my cushion box searching for a change of fly, the surface erupts two feet from the boat and Wegg lifts into a brownie nearer 3lb than two.

In the spray and iridescent spume of the image of that moment that I hold in my memory, Tinkerbelle tings the tip on Wegg's rod with her wand, a rainbow arches over the island and I realise that no matter how well you attempt to



The author into a fish.

describe any technique, in the end, it's as good as useless – unless you can learn how to add a tad of magic to your fly.

It was time for me to bandage up my nose and fly home, to come back again next year for another lesson from the island's magicians.



Information

- Neil stayed and fished out of Kinloch, Grogarry, Isle of South Uist, Outer Hebrides, HS8 5RR. Contact Wegg Kimbell on 01870 620 316 for details (www.kinlochuist.com).
- Grogarry Lodge (www.sportinglets.co.uk/sorn.htm) is a classic Victorian sporting lodge with the original features and character provides a unique but comfortably refurbished accommodation for up to 14. Brown trout, sea trout and salmon fishing from boat. Bird shooting and stalking from September. For details contact: John Kennedy. Tel. 01878 710 366 or email: bornishfish@googlemail.com