SALMON SEEKERS

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THE TRAPPING PROGRAMME HERE AT CHESTER IS ONE OF ONLY FOUR IN THE COUNTRY, AND THE LONGEST RUNNING.

When you appreciate wildlife, every day has something to offer – even the wet ones. Yesterday's perfect blue skies have been smothered with moody clouds and the kind of rain that works its way through even waterproof jackets, but I'm smiling as I trudge over the Old Dee Bridge. My destination is a squat, flat-roofed building that largely goes unnoticed in the shadow of Salmon Leap, Handbridge's divisive modernist housing development.

You might think that since the flats had a makeover, from garish pink to their current stone hue, the salmon name is a bit redundant. Yet the River Dee has long had a reputation among anglers for its salmon, and they are still very much here. That is why I'm clad in damp nylon to meet photographer Sam Ryley and expert Ian Davidson at the unassuming little brick building known as the Chester Weir fish trap.

As we walk through the green gate, Sam and I joke about feeling like VIPs. The fish trap rarely hosts non-scientists outside of occasional outreach days to get the general public closer to what lives in the river. Inside the building lies an impressive console with flashing lights and buttons that allow Ian and his colleagues to control the flow of the water through the trap. Sam and I pull on some waders. Mine fit terribly and I feel like I should be throwing custard pies, but it is certainly better than getting wet feet. With my waterproof notebook in hand, and Sam armed with a go pro and camera, we set off in search of salmon.

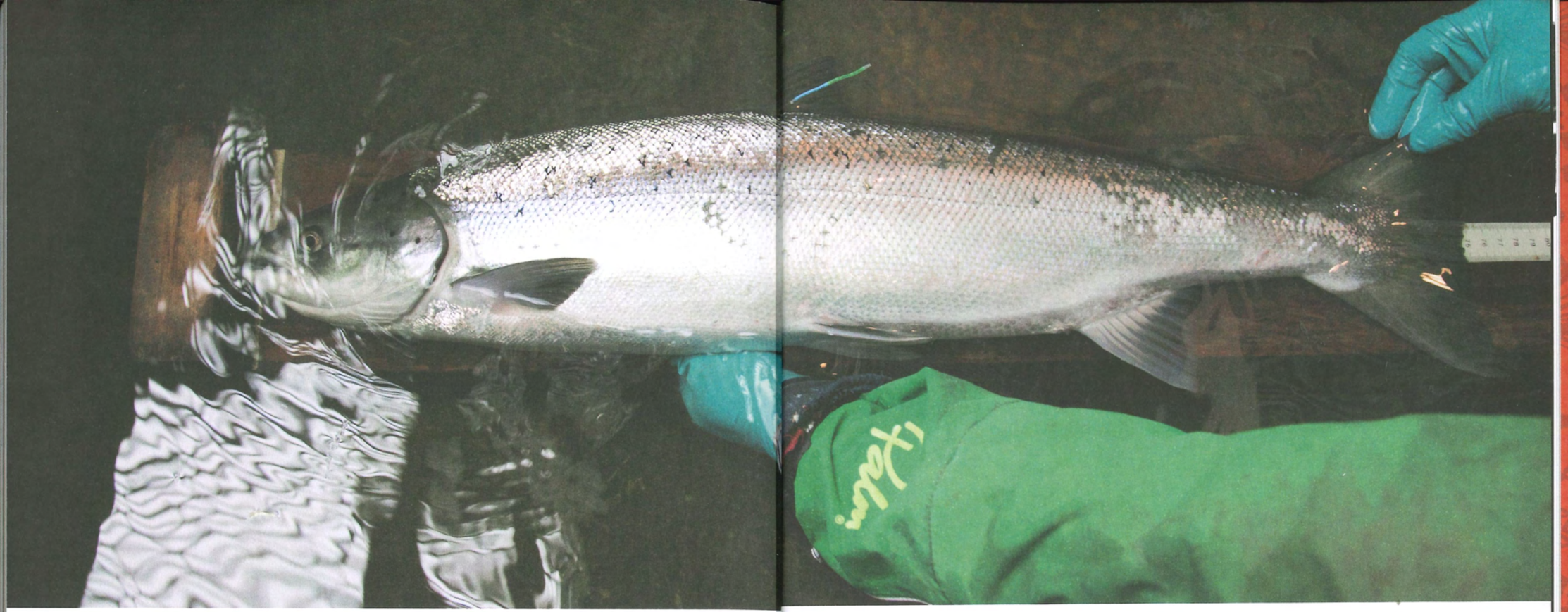
Ian leads us next door into a room with an open mesh floor through which you can see the river. He rotates a winch and part of the floor becomes a set of steps, descending into the water below. The Dee throws queasy reflections onto the walls and there is a constant hum and gurgle from the pump. Beneath the grid work, we can just about make out shadowy shapes slipping through the water. When we step down it is like walking into a flooded basement with the water lapping around our waders and up our calves. It is definitely a bit eerie down here and >>

for the uninitiated there is a distinct murky dungeon vibe to the place.

Beyond hosting a couple of wildlife nerds, Ian has a more serious task today. Part of his role as a Senior Technical Advisor involves tagging and measuring salmon for Natural Resources Wales and he has been doing it every year since the project began in 1991. Salmon have a famously fascinating life cycle. They hatch in rivers, make their way out to rich oceanic waters to bulk up and then return to their freshwater origins in prime condition in order to reproduce. The River Dee is a regular route for the fish and they begin to return in the summer, ready to breed in the autumn. The trapping programme here at Chester is one of only four in the country, and the longest running.

Ian explains to us how the trap works. The fish like an easy life, so rather than leaping over the weir, they channel through a grate into the basement of our building. This grate acts like a big funnel, so once the salmon are in they cannot go back the way they came. A second grate on the opposite wall pens the fish in and the pump safely reduces the water level, so they can be counted, tagged and measured. Once that work is complete, the fish are released into another chamber and the water level is restored so the salmon can continue their journey upstream.

After preparing his equipment, Ian confidently scoops up a salmon in a green vinyl stretcher. He loads the stretcher onto a couple of hooks on the side of a table and peels down a window on the side to check on the fish and then adds a sedative into the water. After a brief thrash >>



as the drugs take effect, the salmon becomes calm, and Ian quickly gets to work. Firstly, he carefully removes a scale or two, which will be sent to the lab to gain essential data on the age and health of the fish. Next, he attaches a coloured plastic tag just below the dorsal fin to help with a recording technique known as 'mark recapture'. Anglers are encouraged (with a £7 reward) to report any salmon they catch, helping to establish an estimate of how much of the year's run was tagged at the trap. For example, if 1,000 salmon were tagged at the trap, and 1 in 5 of the salmon caught by anglers upriver were tagged, then it is assumed that 1/5th of the run has been tagged, which gives a run estimate of 5,000 fish.

Ian's final task is to size up the salmon, which he does by placing it on a wooden board with a measure up the centre. This is when we get the best views of this beautiful fish. Even in the dreary light of the basement, its colours shine through. Under a greeny-grey wash there are tonnes of plum along the back, grading through cerise, orange and blue down the sides until you reach the brilliant white belly. Its topside is speckled with dark freckles and a silver gloss so it glitters all over. The fins are petite, but the body is a bulk of muscle, completed by a powerful, angular tail.

Ian tells us he tends to catch younger fish early in the season, but later in the summer they can weigh up to 20 lbs (9kg). That is about the weight of a Jack Russell! Today we only meet three salmon, but Ian has surveyed as many as 200 in one day at the height of the season.

Sadly though, it seems there's little likelihood of that happening this year. Numbers of salmon in our rivers are falling all over the country and in 2017, the Chester Weir fish trap estimated the lowest run to date at 3,043.

There are many factors that could be contributing to the declining population of Chester's salmon. We could be just experiencing a natural trough in the cyclical abundance of salmon, after all different environments, such as the chalk rivers of the South, are recording varying patterns and statistics. The effect of modern phenomena like global warming and pollution in the oceans however do cast uncertainty over these predictions. Ian and his colleagues recommend a precautionary response, monitoring and protecting our stocks now rather than relying on a natural recovery which may take a decade or more to be realised.

As the fish get their bearings in the recovery pool, we exit the trap and Ian pumps the water back in. It has been a mesmerising experience and one we are excited to share with Tortoise readers. It was well worth the soggy sock (thanks but no thanks waders!)

Ian tells us that 2019 will be the 'International Year of the Salmon' and conservation organisations are aiming to create awareness of the issues facing the salmon and their impact on the communities that benefit from the resource. That sounds like a tantalising invitation to celebrate Chester's connection to these remarkable fish? So if you would like to support a festival of fish, or perhaps organise a salmon run on dry land, do please get in touch.