



Wester Ross Fisheries Trust Newsletter, February 2026



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Chairperson's forward

2025 has been a busy year for the Wester Ross Fisheries Trust! Our Biologist Peter Cunningham's report highlights our activities and the high level of sea lice infestation on our migratory wild fish emphasises the need for continuous monitoring and is of grave concern.

We were successful in obtaining a large grant from the Scottish Marine Environment Enhancement Fund for a seagrass restoration project in Loch Ewe and have appointed Diorbhail Wentworth as our Seagrass project officer; her report in the newsletter illustrates the significant progress already made.

We rely heavily on our volunteers and helpers and I would like to thank them all; their support, enthusiasm (and tolerance of the midges!) during fieldwork is much appreciated.

My fellow trustees give generously of their time and give sound advice. Two of our long serving trustees Prof David Barclay (former Chairperson) and Mark Williams are stepping down and we thank them for their valuable contribution and wish them well.

We are a small charity and are always looking to expand our membership - a membership form is attached at the end of the newsletter - please come and join us!

Dr Michael Aitchison, January 2026

Cover pictures (clockwise from top right):

WRFT sea trout monitoring team by Gruinard Bay, 30th May 2025; sea trout of 430mm, condition factor 1.29, from sweep netting session Loch Ewe, 21st July 2025; Chloe Hall and other members of the Wester Ross Seagrass Project planting team by Inverasdale, 7th October 2025; salmon parr and salmon fry from WRFT juvenile survey, Summer 2025; sorting out a kick-sample of small aquatic invertebrates for the Salmon Stream Nutrient Restoration pilot project by Beinn Eighe NNR visitor centre, 9th April 2025; Nic Butler, Sean Robertson and Nicky Middleton-Jones processing a sample of juvenile fish from the Garbhaig River by Loch Maree on 26th August 2025.

Please note that all pictures of fish in this report are of fish which were lightly sedated for the purpose of being able to record length and other data prior to being returned to the water following recovery.

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Heavily sea lice infested sea trout recorded at three sites in Wester Ross

The parasitic sea louse, *Lepeophtheirus salmonis*, remains a major challenge for sea trout and wild salmon populations in Wester Ross as well as for the production of farm salmon.

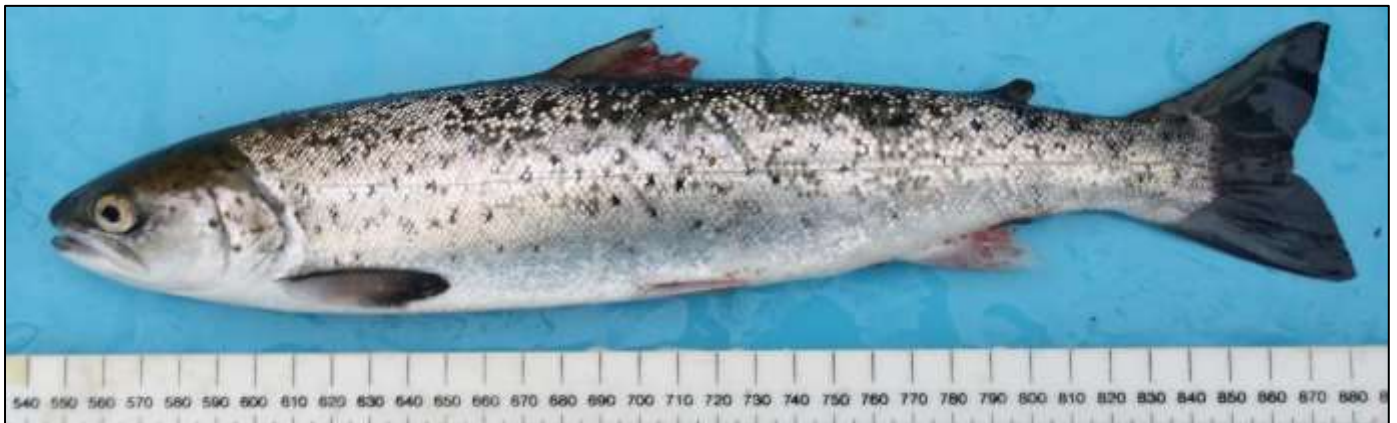
In 2025, WRFT sampled sea trout at six locations around Wester Ross between April and October using a seine net to find out about sea lice burdens and the condition of the trout. Sampling was carried out to inform the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board, SEPA and as part of wild fish monitoring contracts for nearby salmon farms.

(right) The WRFT sea trout sea lice monitoring team en route to a sampling site in July 2025.



Many of the sea trout sampled at [Flowerdale \(Loch Gairloch\) in April](#), the [Kanaird \(north of Ullapool\) in May](#), and [Applecross in June](#), carried high numbers of lice or had damaged dorsal fins indicative of heavy sea lice burdens.

Sea trout of 345mm, caught in the Flowerdale estuary, Gairloch, on 11th April 2025, carrying an estimated 296 sea lice, some of which can be seen in the pictures below. This fish had been lightly sedated and was returned to the sea after recovery.



Later in the summer and autumn, sea lice levels were lower on samples taken at all sites (see [Sea lice monitoring reports](#)). Many of the fish taken by Gairloch and in Gruinard Bay had damaged but healing dorsal fins associated with sea lice infestation earlier in the year. Some of the larger fish had recovered and had been feeding well at sea and had higher condition factor scores than in the spring.

Sea trout can recover from potentially lethal numbers of lice by returning to freshwater. Sea lice are unable to survive in freshwater for long, so they detach. However, to exacerbate sea lice problems in 2025, May '25 was warm and dry, with conditions approaching drought levels. Such weather conditions in the spring are not unusual and make problems with lice infestation worse as sea trout are less able to find freshwater.

Lightly sedated maturing female sea trout 380mm with damaged dorsal fin and caudal fin (tail), Gairloch, 25th August 2025. Most of the larger sea trout taken at Flowerdale in August 2025 had damaged, but healing dorsal fins.



As in previous years, samples of sea trout carrying high numbers of sea lice were recorded downstream (as coastal currents flow) from where the nearest salmon farms were in the second year of the two-year production cycle. Most of the salmon farms around the southern part of Wester Ross, upstream from sea trout sampling locations at Applecross and Gairloch now have biomass consents of 2000 tonnes or more; so, they can support upwards of 400,000 farmed fish per site. If each of these fish has just 0.5 adult female lice per fish, and especially if there are several farms stocked within an area, the emissions of larval sea lice into nearby waters from salmon farms may be two or more orders of magnitude higher than the natural background concentrations of larval sea lice.

For wild post-smolt salmon migrating through coastal waters, it is critical to keep sea lice infestation pressure low during the spring. Post-smolt salmon do not behave like sea trout and do not return to freshwater prematurely if they become infested with sea lice. If wild post-smolt salmon are infested by more than about ten sea lice as they are migrating through coastal waters, they do not survive to return to freshwater as adult fish.

To protect wild salmon populations, some salmon farms may need to complete harvests and fallow their sites prior to the salmon smolt migration window (April to June each year) unless able to achieve much lower on-farm adult sea lice populations than achieved in 2025.

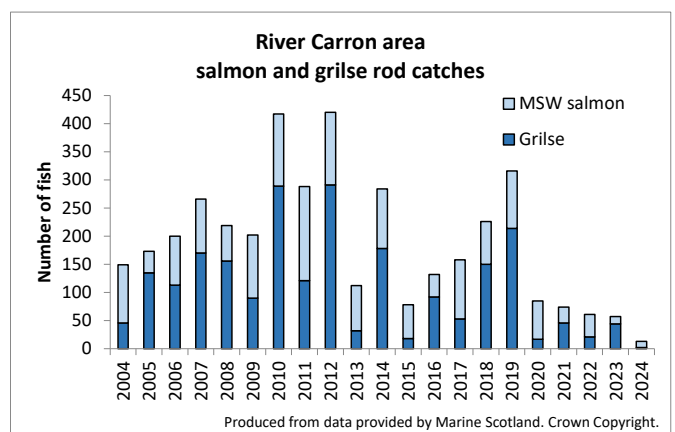
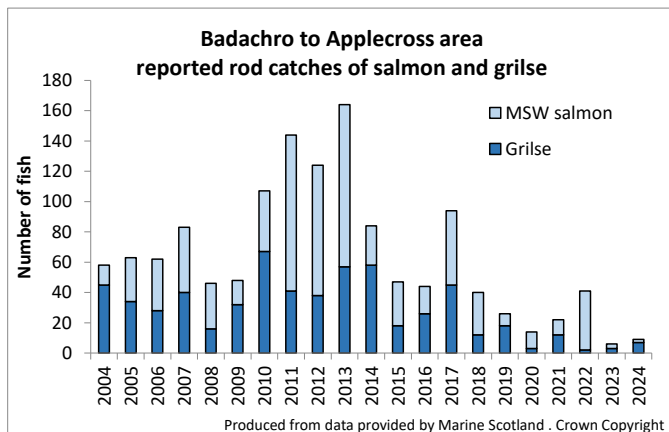
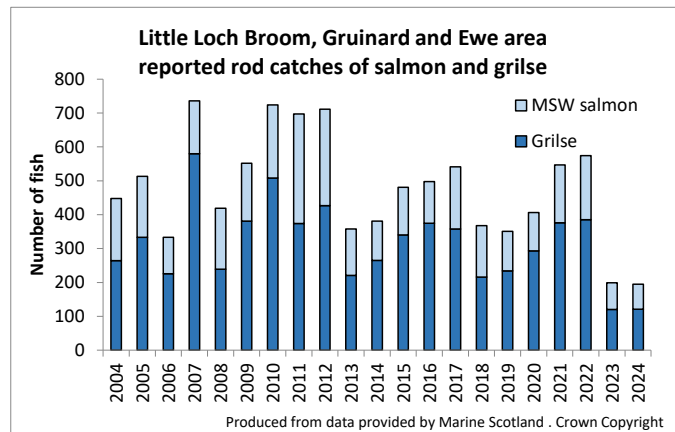
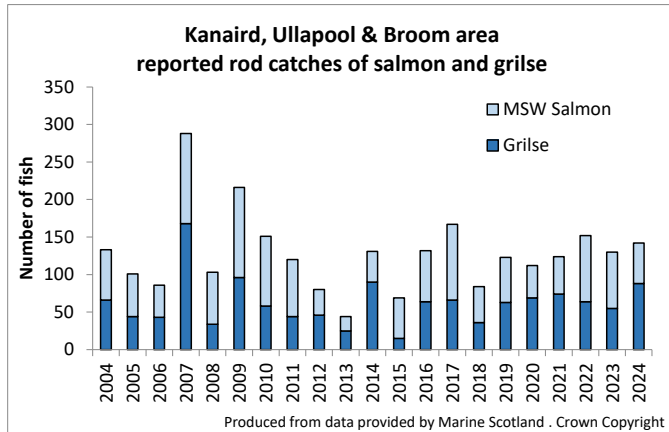
Sea lice monitoring in 2025 was carried out as part of wild fish monitoring for the Caol Mor (East of Skye) Environment Management Plan [EMP], Loch Torridon EMP, Ardmair salmon farm EMP and was funded by MOWI and Bakkafrøst to inform the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board and the Highland Council; and in Loch Ewe, as part of a new wild fish monitoring contract to inform SEPA's Sea Lice Regulatory Framework. Reports from each sampling day have been posted on the WRFT website and can be found [here](#) and [here](#).



Lightly sedated male and female sea trout sampled from a coastal monitoring site in autumn 2025.

2024 salmon catches amongst lowest on record

Figures for reported rod catches of wild salmon in Scotland in 2024 were published by the Scottish Government in May 2025. For the rivers of Wester Ross, 2024 was one of the poorest years on record. The graphs below have been produced from published data found [here](#).



The only major river to report a higher rod catch of salmon in 2024 than in 2023 (another poor year) was the River Kanaird. Elsewhere, low rod catch figures were reported for the Gruinard rivers and for all the rivers to the south of Loch Gairloch including the River Carron which recorded only two grilse for 2024 (down from 291 in 2012), and 11 multi-sea winter [MSW] salmon in 2024 (down from 167 MSW salmon in 2011).

Following observations of high levels of lice infestation of sea trout at Applecross in 2023, concern was expressed for the survival of the 2023 wild salmon post-smolt run (reported [here](#)). Reported rod catches of grilse for the River Carron in 2024 are consistent with the hypothesis that very few post-smolt salmon were able to survive their migration through coastal waters in Loch Carron and the Inner Sound (near Applecross) in spring 2023 where evidence from sea trout monitoring at Applecross indicated very high sea lice infestation pressure in coastal waters nearby.

In spring 2024, many of the salmon farms along this migration route were fallow or in the first year of their production cycle and reported much lower on-farm sea lice numbers. Early (unofficial) indications are that rod catches of grilse for 2025 were higher than in 2024 for the rivers in this area. This appears to demonstrate the value of co-ordinated fallowing of salmon farms in the late winter and early spring prior to post-smolt salmon migration.

[Gargan et al, 2025](#) also reported that salmon lice from aquaculture reduce the marine survival of Atlantic salmon. Their results provide further evidence of significantly reduced return rates for adult salmon linked to salmon lice infestation from marine salmon farms.

Their study infers that the effects of lice from local salmon farms on wild stocks are underestimated with significant loss of adult returns of wild salmon at high lice levels; a conclusion that matches our interpretation of rod catches in rivers in the south of Wester Ross in recent years in relation to results from sea trout sea lice monitoring nearby.

First cast of the 2025 salmon fishing season in Wester Ross River Balgy, 11th February 2025. Thank you to Maree Todd MSP, Richard and Claire Munday for providing soup and sandwiches, Jim Raffell and everyone else who came along!



Tournaig Trap project update

The little Tournaig system is one of the smallest in the area to have supported a wild salmon population. Numbers of salmon and sea trout smolts leaving the system and numbers of returning adult fish have been monitored at Tournaig since 1999. After peak catches from 2010 to 2012, numbers of (both smolts and adults) have fallen in recent years.

No adult salmon were recorded in the upstream trap at Tournaig in 2024. However, in October 2025 salmon fry were recorded at two sites in the spawning stream above Loch nan Dailthean demonstrating that at least one female adult salmon had bypassed the upstream trap in 2024. The waterfall in the Tournaig burn near the outflow may be passable to salmon and sea trout at very high flows which seem to be becoming more common. In contrast, water levels were so low in the outflow burn in early May 2025 that salmon smolts were unable to migrate to sea. Predators can take advantage of low water to catch migrating smolts; they include otter and heron; and harbour seals, many of which live in the sea nearby. Will the little Tournaig river system be able to sustain a wild salmon population in future years?

Lightly sedated grilse, 550mm, Tournaig, taken on 13th August 2025, just before release. Two adult salmon were recorded in the upstream fish monitoring trap in the fish ladder at Tournaig in 2025.



Thank you to NTS and Tournaig Estate for permissions and to MOWI and the Wild Fisheries Fund for supporting the Tournaig project and contributing towards the cost of trap repairs. Thank you to the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate for provision of parts for the trap. Thank you to Ben Rushbrooke of Tournaig Garden Nursery for operating the traps over many years.

Salmon fry missing from several nursery streams accessible to adult salmon

Between July and November 2025, the WRFT fish survey team surveyed over 100 sites in 15 river systems within Wester Ross primarily to learn about the distribution and relative abundance of juvenile salmon. As in previous years, surveys were carried out using electro-fishing equipment specially designed for fish surveys.

Healthy numbers of juvenile salmon were recorded at some sites in all the major rivers flowing into the Wester Ross Marine Protected Area [WR MPA] including the rivers Kanaird (Canaird), Ullapool, Broom, Dundonnell, Gruinard and Ewe. This area remains a stronghold for wild Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*). Healthy numbers of juvenile salmon were also recorded in the Badachro River which flows into Loch Gairloch. No sites were surveyed in the Little Gruinard River or in the River Kerry in 2025.

However, to the south of Loch Gairloch (rivers Torridon, Balgy and Applecross) gaps were found in the distribution of juvenile salmon in some streams where in previous years juvenile salmon were recorded.

In 2024, no juvenile salmon were recorded in the Cuaig River (near Applecross), formerly an important river for wild salmon and associated fauna of conservation concern. In 2025, salmon fry (young of the year) were not recorded in the upper River Kanaird above the Langwell falls; in the Allt na Coille (Tournai) above the lower falls, in the River Bruachaig above the lower falls; in large parts of the River Balgy headwaters; nor in the Sand River (near Gairloch).

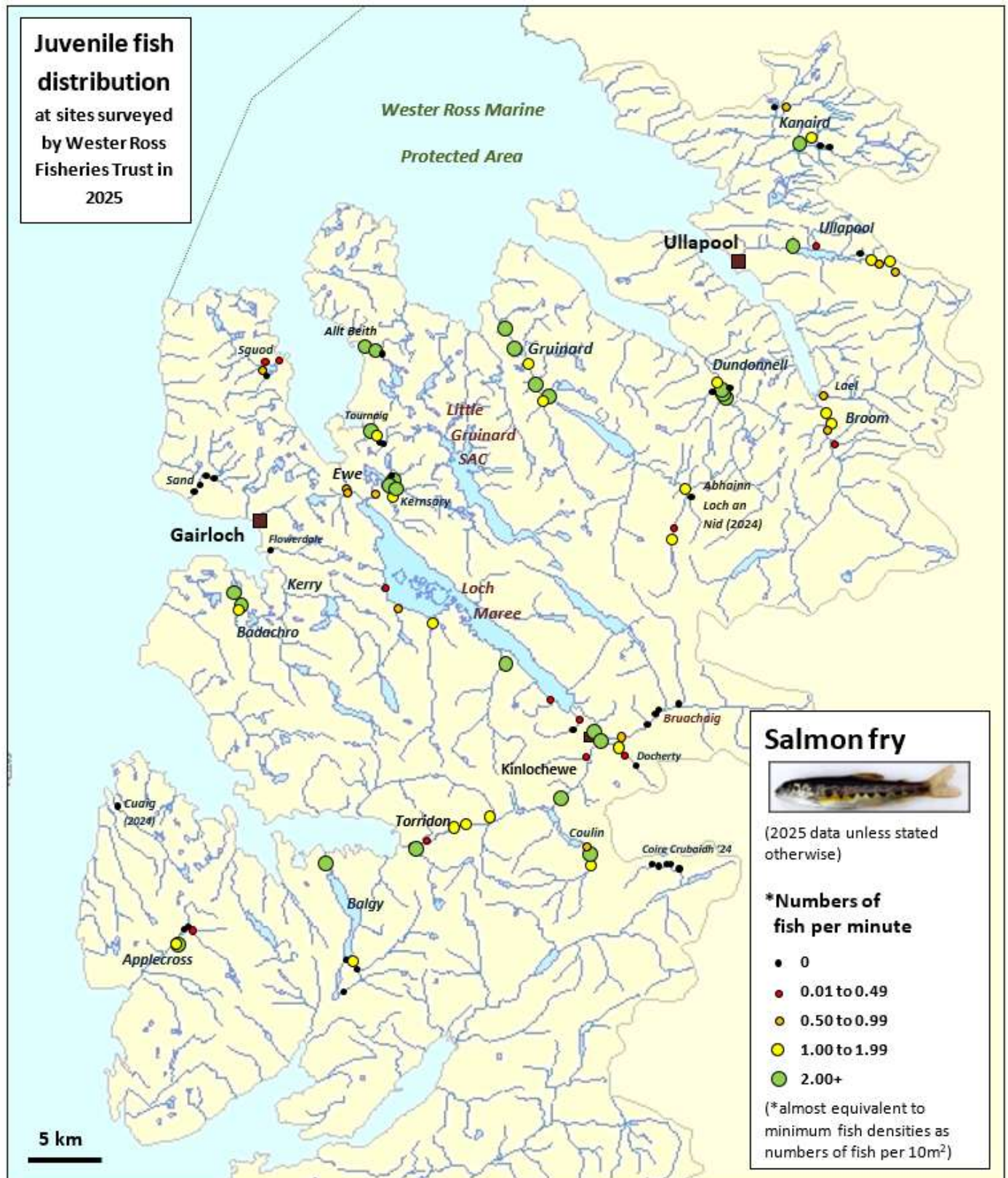
The absence of salmon fry in some areas in 2025 follows the lowest reported rod catch of salmon in the Wester Ross area on record in 2024.

But not all bad news! In November 2024, salmon fry were found in the headwaters of the Abhainn Loch an Nid at the top of the Gruinard River system; adult salmon were seen nearby.

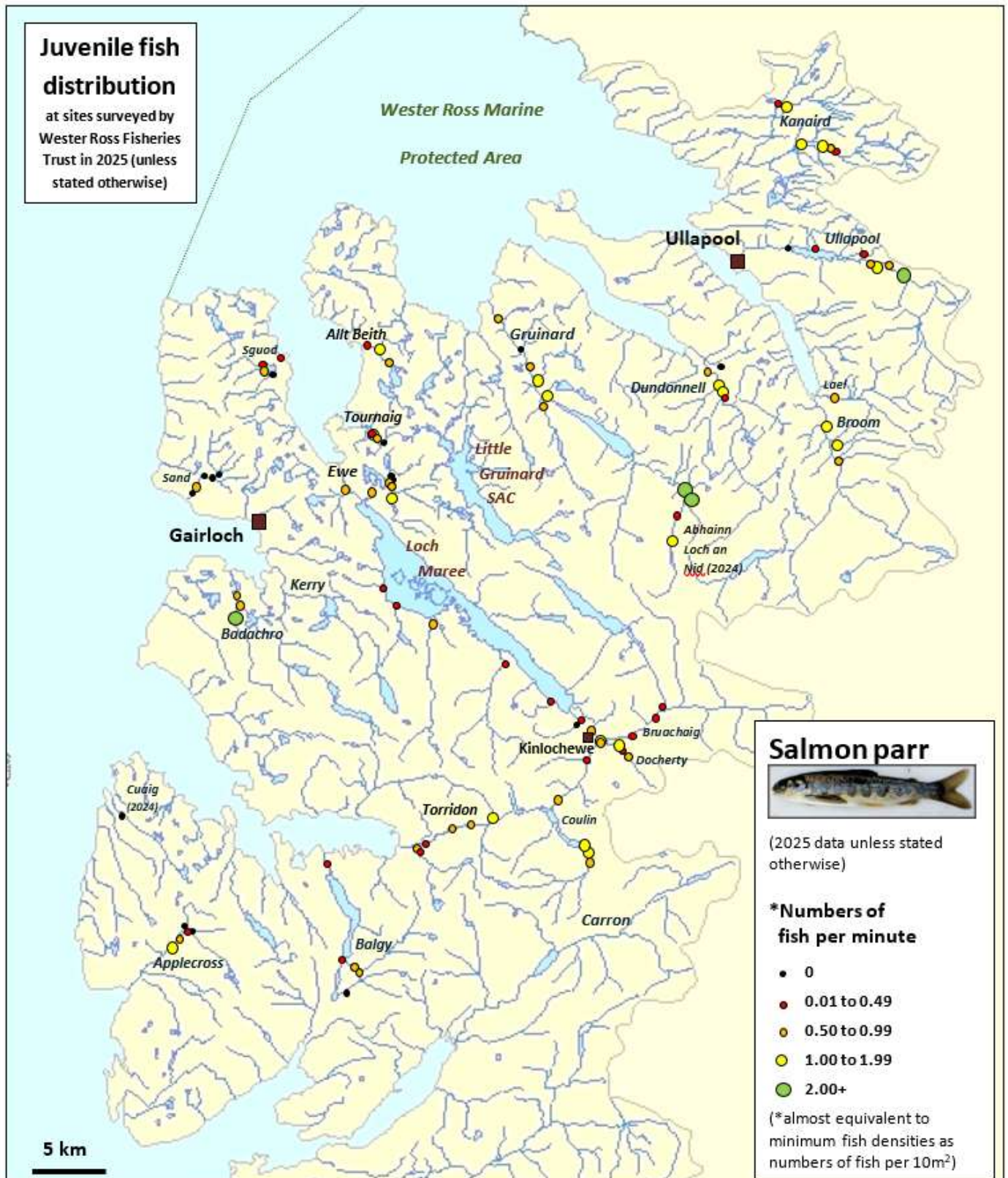
Juvenile salmon at this site in the River Balgy were bigger for their age than at any other site we surveyed in 2025. This is thought to be due to nutrient enrichment associated with salmon smolt rearing at two farms in Loch Damh, and perhaps also partly due to genetic introgression with escaped farm salmon in previous years?



Recorded distribution and relative abundance of salmon fry at sites surveyed within the Wester Ross area in 2025 (and 2024 for Gruinard River headwaters and Cuaig River).



Recorded distribution and relative abundance of salmon parr at sites surveyed within the Wester Ross area in 2025 (and 2024 for Gruinard River headwaters and Cuaig River).



The upper Bruachaig River (River Ewe headwaters) remains the largest area of freshwater habitat within the Wester Ross area where juvenile salmon production could be much higher than it has been in recent years. Other river systems where actions to support wild salmon populations are needed include parts of the rivers Kanaird, Torridon, Balgy and Applecross.

Bruachaig River by Heights of Kinlochewe, 19th August 2025. Salmon fry were found at this site in 2023 and 2024, but not in 2005. The salmon parr that were found here in 2025 (below right) were in good condition, growing quickly – demonstrating the potential of this section of river to produce many wild salmon smolts.

Our juvenile fish survey results generally concur with the Scottish Government's proposed conservation gradings (based on reported rod catches) of salmon rivers for 2026 (see link at bottom of page).

They also support the contention that wild salmon populations, especially those in the south of the area associated with post-smolt migration routes that pass-through Loch Torridon and the Inner Sound between Raasay and the Scottish mainland, are particularly vulnerable to high cumulative emissions of larval sea lice from nearby salmon farms. The nearest salmon farms to this migration route are in the east of Skye, Loch Kishorn, Loch Carron and Loch Torridon where sea lice need to be more tightly controlled. It is in these areas that wild salmon populations are at greatest threat of being damaged further or being lost in terms of retaining any river-specific genetic adaptations.

The production of wild salmon smolts from some rivers could be higher with greater attention to the protection and restoration of riparian habitat (e.g. alder and other riverside trees), catchment area vegetation revival including restoration of fertility (e.g. addressing phosphorus deficit) at whole-catchment ecosystem scale. Actions have recently been taken by landowners to restore or enhance riparian woodlands along parts of two river systems (Torridon and Balgy); and there are plans for riparian woodland restoration along several other major stream systems, to provide shade and restore habitat and nutrition for juvenile salmon.

Electro-fishing surveys were carried out under contract for hydropower schemes, to inform Environment Management Plans [EMPs] for local salmon farms, as part of the Salmon Stream Nutrient Restoration pilot project (funded by HIEF), or supported by the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board [WRASFB].

Thank you to all funders and to many estates and other helpers for their support in 2024 and 2025.

Link to proposed river gradings for 2026 season

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/salmon-fishing-proposed-river-gradings-for-2026-season/pages/overview/> .



Salmon stream nutrient restoration pilot project

Numbers of wild salmon and sea trout returning to rivers in Wester Ross have fallen in recent years (especially pre-2000). A decline in the number of adult salmon and sea trout returning to freshwater to spawn leads to a reduction in the amount of available food for juvenile salmon, further depressing wild salmon populations. This is primarily because of a reduction in the amount of decomposing adult salmon carcasses which provide marine-derived nutrients [MDN] that support growth of periphyton and the production of aquatic insects upon which juvenile salmon feed.

To address this issue, this pilot project aimed to explore the practicalities of using salmon carcass analogue pellets (organic high fishmeal content farm salmon feed) to nourish salmon nursery streams within Wester Ross, using methods developed over 15+ years of research in nearby streams within the River Conon system.

Objectives were as follows:

1. to investigate the use of an alternative source of marine nutrients as an 'analogue' for the missing salmon carcasses and salmon eggs,
2. to explore methods of application,
3. to record outcomes for aquatic invertebrates and juvenile fish.

Salmon carcass analogue pellets (organic high fishmeal content farm salmon feed) [SCAP] were kindly provided by Hendrix-Genetics Inverkerry Hatchery. These were applied to two treatment sites in each of: the Torridon River, the Coulin River (River Ewe headwaters) and Docherty Burn in December 2024 and February 2025 (right), following baseline surveys of invertebrates and juvenile fish.



Subsequent monitoring indicated that the nutrients from the decomposing SCAP dispersed in different ways. At some sites, large spate events swept much of the material away; at other sites spates buried it more deeply under newly deposited sediment.

Responses to nutrient application from biota were recorded at treatment sites in the Docherty Burn, including increased production of green periphyton on the streambed and higher numbers of mayfly larvae post-treatment.



At one site in each of the Docherty Burn and Coulin River, there was some indication that salmon fry and parr had grown more quickly post-treatment, consistent with expectations based on previous work elsewhere.

However, 'Storm Floris' (in early August 2025) and 'Storm Amy' (October 2025), both prior to follow-up juvenile fish monitoring surveys, caused much movement of streambed sediment and made it impossible to fully understand outcomes for fish.

Future work should focus on developing methods of salmon carcass analogue application which are less vulnerable to being swept away in big spates.

Several options to help renourish stream ecosystems and thereby support juvenile salmon production are proposed, including more focus on nourishing riparian habitats and streamside ecosystems rather than applying salmon carcass analogues directly into the water.

This project was supported by the Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation and Wester Ross Area Salmon Fisheries Board. Thank you to all the estates that provided permissions for this project, Nature Scot, several volunteers. The project report can be found by clicking [here](#).



Pre-spawning herring shoals attract whales and other wildlife to coastal waters

Herrings provide food for salmon and sea trout and many other animals. Between February and early April 2005, marine wildlife associated with shoals of maturing herring was recorded in coastal waters near Gairloch, Wester Ross.



Spawning of herring was subsequently verified by the discovery of herring eggs on the seabed nearby.

Marine mammal sightings within 2km of the shore included up to 40 dolphins (assumed to be mostly common), 60 porpoises, 50 grey seals, 3 minke whales (perhaps 5 in the area) and one or perhaps two humpback whales. Up to 120 gannets were seen in the main feeding area and 300+ gulls (several spp.). Observations possibly amounted (in kg) to one of Scotland's biggest springtime coastal wildlife events.

On 20th March 2025, a drop-down video survey of the seabed to the northwest of Loch Gairloch failed to identify and record herring eggs in the area where much sea mammal activity was observed on 9th March 2025 and where herring eggs were recorded in March 2024. However, on 3rd April 2025, herring eggs were found on maerl gravel and sugar kelp fronds on the seabed about 800m west of the shore at Opinan (southwest of Gairloch) in water depths of 10m to 15m. High densities of recently hatched herring larvae were taken with a plankton net in the water column on the same day demonstrating successful spawning by herring. Eggs collected from this location on 4th April 2025 were eyed.

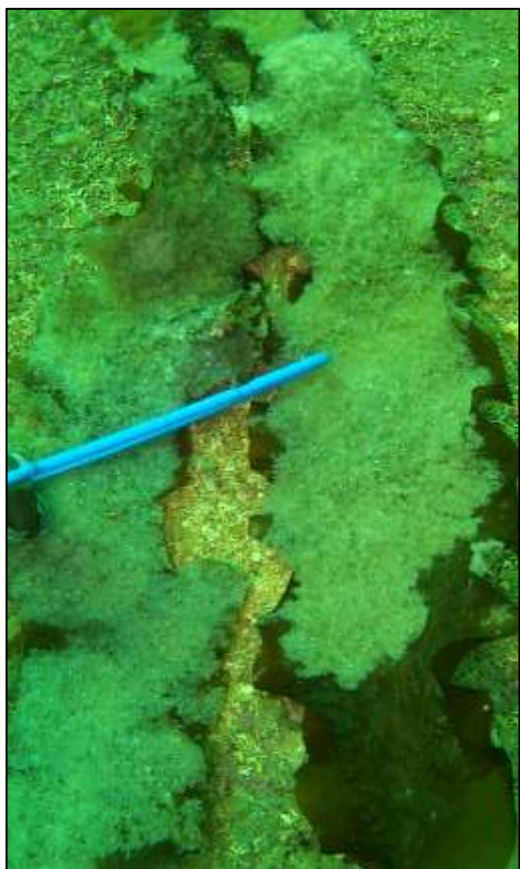


Observations and seabed surveys demonstrate successful spawning of herring to the southwest of Gairloch in 2025, with a herring spawning event around 20th March to 23rd March. With additional support in future years, associated marine wildlife and spawning grounds could be monitored and mapped in more detail.

Thank you to the West of Scotland Herring Hunt project, Seabed and Seashore Loch Ewe, Little Loch Broom Marine Life, Blue Hope Alliance, Dry Island Shellfish Safaris, Nature Scot and many people within the local community for support with finding herring spawn and recoding associated wildlife in 2025.

The full report can be found by clicking [here](https://www.wrft.org.uk/files/Wester%20Ross%20spring%20spawning%20herring%20report_8may25.pdf).

(left) GoPro video still from WRFT drop down camera showing carpet of herring eggs sticking to fronds of sugar kelp and in patches on maerl gravel, west of Opinan, 3rd April 2025. We also collected samples of recently hatched herring larvae using a plankton net (below).



https://www.wrft.org.uk/files/Wester%20Ross%20spring%20spawning%20herring%20report_8may25.pdf

Wester Ross Seagrass meadows restoration project

Healthy beds of seagrass (*Zostera marina*) can provide valuable nursery and feeding habitat for many fishes, including sea trout. In previous years, the WRFT sea trout monitoring team sampled sea trout close to seagrass beds in Gruinard Bay. Seagrass is also internationally recognised for marine biodiversity, carbon capture and many other ecosystem services and in Scotland, seagrass is a Priority Marine Feature (PMF).

WRFT is one of several organisations across Scotland that has received funding from the Scottish Marine Environmental Enhancement Fund (SMEEF) as part of the seagrass 'Seagrass Meadows Scotland' project. The aim of this project is to restore 14 hectares of seagrass across several locations. WRFT has the goal of restoring 1.5 hectares in Loch Ewe where seagrass beds were present within living memory.

We were very excited about this and welcomed Diorbhail Wentworth (*right, with Nic Butler*) to the WRFT team in June 2025 as part-time Seagrass Project Officer. Diorbhail was brought up in a crofting community on the south side of Gairloch, sometimes works for BBC ALBA, and earlier this year sailed across the Atlantic after submitting her PhD thesis about the opportunities of and barriers to recovering phosphorus [P] from human excreta in India.

This proposed method of restoration is focussed on using seagrass fragments that have washed up during storms as planting material for the restoration site.



These fragments will be kept in specially constructed nursery ponds following collection until the weather, tides, and sea temperature are suitable for planting. In 2025, many fragments were collected after Storm Amy and Storm Floris and the team were excited to get these planted out at the restoration site in Loch Ewe in the first week of October. The project has also allowed the trust to provide snorkel and kayak training for volunteers.

Plans are underway to develop and expand the seagrass nursery, expand the baseline survey area of the proposed seagrass restoration site in Loch Ewe, and to improve our knowledge of existing seagrass beds through drone surveys, drop down camera surveys, and snorkel surveys. We hope that this will result in some beds being located that are suitable to act as donor sites so that we can utilise direct shoot transplants as a restoration method alongside the use of storm wash-up.

If you find seagrass cuttings washed up on the shore after big storms, please let us know! In December 2024 and summer 2025, many hundreds of seagrass cuttings were collected from strandlines around Loch Gairloch. Finding these fragments will be crucial to the success of the project!



If you are interested in supporting this exciting new project, please get in touch with Diorbhail.

Thank you to Duncan and Kate Donald, Katherine Knight of SMEEF, and local Citizen Science groups, Seabed and Seashore Loch Ewe and Little Loch Broom Marine Life for support.

Thank you!

The work that the Trust can do is dependent upon many supporters and helpers including volunteers. For help with field work and project things in 2025: thank you to Nic B, Chloe H, Ant H, Nicky MJ, Nicky L, Eilidh M, Sue W, Roger W, Dr Michael A, Prof Cathy PJ, Veronica M, Ginevra H, Katie G, Stephen M, Alison H, James C, Iain S, Archie M, Chris W, Sandy P, Louise G, Paul B, Charlie H, Mark W and family, Rob M (x2), Gregor W, Iain M, Rachel H, Prof John H, Sue P, Rowan P, Donna H, Meg P, Tara C, Marian M, Doug B, Gary J, Jeremy F, John and VP, Sean R, Dr Steve K, Dr Andy V, Dr Toby L, Ian M, Christian G, Fee M, Mia H, Sara N, Alasdair M, Russell R, Dr James C, Alex G, Prof Dave B, Peter J, Sandy B, Prof Eric M, Donald M, Franki K, Alastair P, Neil M, Keiran M, Jamie B, Jonathan F, Ben R, Duncan and Kate D, Cameron G, Janaka S, Alan W and FMS, Sean R and SFCC, Kevin G and WRASFB . . .

. . . Gairloch Estate, Keanchulish Estate, Langwell Estate, Coulin Estate, Kinlochewe Estate, Applecross Trust, and all the estates where field work has been carried out. Thank you to Katherine K and Sarah B at SMEEF, and Sally K and Louis M at HIEF.

For supporting our projects, thank you to Wester Ross Area Salmon Fisheries Board, Sea Change, Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation, Wild Fisheries Fund and Scottish Marine Environment Enhancement Fund, NTS.

In 2026 we anticipate a range of field work including monitoring spawning herring, sea trout sampling, juvenile fish surveys, wild trout sampling, seagrass surveys, collection and planting, and opportunities for other projects.

If you would like to find out more about helping with our work, membership or anything else, please contact Sue Ward at admin@wrft.org.uk , Peter Cunningham at info@wrft.org.uk or Diorbhail Wentworth seagrass@wrft.org.uk

Rob MacRae returning a sea trout to the Applecross River, 13th June 2025



WESTER ROSS FISHERIES TRUST: MEMBERSHIP FORM

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Life membership (single person)	£150
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