

News from the Monnow Catchment – 2020 Season

The year in brief

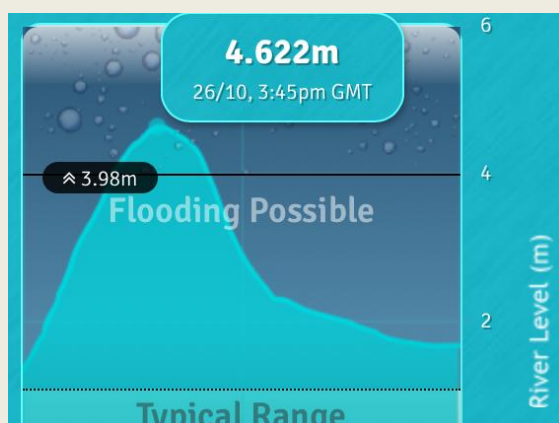
Three full passes of the entire catchment were made in search of Himalayan balsam. We treated the known outbreaks of Giant hogweed on the Dore. Two mink were caught and despatched below Skenfrith. We now have 24 volunteers monitoring rafts across the catchment. Despite the spates and the other ills besetting our trout and regardless of the late start dictated by the dreaded virus, many anglers enjoyed a really good season and similar numbers of trout were caught compared to a normal season. Our auction went OK but the keenly anticipated Social had to remain a distant memory, which badly affected our income. We suffered some algal blooms, although nothing like the Wye, which produced an unwanted and unusually unhelpful colour to the water in our prime fishing months and had a serious effect on our ranunculus growth.



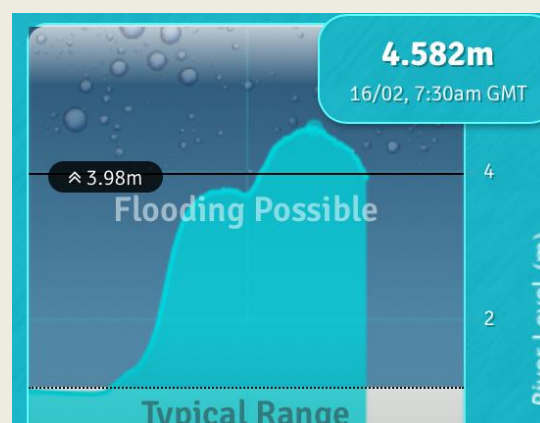
A nice new raft on the Olchon Brook

Balsam in 2020 – a year of extremes and extremities

Following the two “20 year spates” that we experienced in October 2019 and February of this year, we feared that seed from remaining HB plants would be spread far and wide across the catchment.



October 2019



February 2020

While our fears were not exactly groundless there had been an effect – there were plants higher up the banks than usual – but the more serious causes of additional plants were for reasons of bad luck and lack of access.

On our regular scans of the catchment we were noticing rather more plants than expected, especially below the Dore confluence. A day walking the Dore confirmed a problem that we had been aware of but had not been able to address for several years.

The Army Training Camp at Pontrilas, through which the Dore flows, was leaking seeds and re-infecting the river. Many emails and phone calls later we were finally granted access for the first time in about 5 years. Funnily enough it was not as bad as we might have imagined but still bad enough and too late to treat this year – so thousands of seeds will potentially be washed down this winter ensuring we still have lots of extra work to do for the next few years.

The other area we were alerted to a possible problem was the Upper Monnow above Allt Yr Ynys. We saw one plant a few hundred yards higher than it should be. Maybe sheep carrying seed? We couldn't risk it and needed to investigate farther up the catchment. The only historically infected site was 5 miles up the Escley Brook, declared clean some 7 years ago.



A keen, young balsam hunter
(it's behind you!)

This site and the next 2 miles of the brook downstream were indeed balsam-free but as we were about to drive back down the valley we spotted a few plants in a roadside ditch. Following this up we discovered more plants until we found the source – a garden, a few hundred yards from the river that must have had seed brought in with topsoil or compost. That meant 3 miles of the Escley and a further 2 miles of the Upper Monnow would now need to be added to our list. We were in time to treat most plants in this latest outbreak but it just shows that we can never be complacent – constant vigilance must still be the watchword if we are to achieve eradication.

We have spent another 400 man hours trying to control the balsam this year. Our problems have been further exacerbated by the weather – wet start, dry middle and clement end – meaning the growth of plants was some three weeks advanced, making it tricky to cover three full passes in the time and leaving an uncomfortable period from the third pass to the first frost. In 2021 we intend, now we have discovered the Escley infection and gained access to the Dore, to concentrate on the upper catchment, visiting every mile of riverbank strictly every three weeks. I'm already feeling weary at the thought of it!

Otter Watching

One of our volunteers, hosting a mink raft on the Upper Monnow, has a camera installed to assist them in monitoring any activity. Otters are fairly regular visitors. To share their joyful sightings click the link [Otter Watcher videos](#)

A Good Weed Spoiled?

Welcome back to this series on the enigmatic river weed *Ranunculus fluitans* (RF) which ended last autumn on a high but with the caveat that it does not like big spates. I spoke too soon! Last winter we had two record breaking floods that devastated our valley and her residents and property. As a result, it feels more than a little churlish to complain about the great loss caused to a number of RF stronghold areas caused by the periods of sustained high water. A lot has been washed out. Some areas fared better than others and some were wiped out by other, much more disappointing causes.



Two significant areas of RF were bulldozed out by landowners eager to change the course of the river through their ground, apparently to protect banks and reduce flooding. These actions are hugely damaging, creating overly wide sterile rivers that destroy the assemblages of insects and other weeds that fish rely on.

There are though still some good areas of RF left and hopefully Nature can restart the process of natural spread with a little help from us, as and when Covid and time allow us to spend more time working on the river.

Another significant problem for RF is Phosphates, getting into the river from agricultural runoff and sewerage outflows. There are guarded causes for optimism that this problem may be beginning to be addressed in the Wye catchment and further afield, following a highly effective media campaign led by the Wye and Usk Foundation, which highlighted the causes of the terrible algal blooms in the Wye as being mainly due to agriculture and specifically intensive poultry units. There are encouraging signs that Government and Council departments are going to take positive action and the Monnow valley may also benefit from these actions to reduce Phosphate pollution.

Wider agricultural policy and environmental grant schemes are also encouraging better soil and water management, which will greatly reduce water run-off and siltation of our rivers.

Let us hope for sufficient rain to recharge our aquifers this winter and not the damaging deluges of last winter so that the Ranunculus can maintain and expand its foothold in our catchment.

White Claws

Over the last three years we have worked with the Environment Agency and NRW to establish an ark site on an upper Honddu tributary for the native White Claw crayfish.

Additional stockings have been delayed due to the detailed paperwork required (the same as if we were trying to release wolves!) and, along with Covid, this has meant that we have a 2 year backlog of 2- and 3-year-old White Claws to further seed the stream with. Probably next autumn, fingers crossed, approximately 1800 natives will be stocked.

If we can keep just a small part of our catchment as a stronghold for this important native species the hard work and delays will have been worth it.

Migratory Fish

NRW report: “Unfortunately we have no data for the 2020 period at Osbaston fish pass. Due to Covid 19 restrictions we have been unable to maintain the Vaki fish counter to a sufficient level where we would be confident in any count produced.”

Electrofishing results

The Wye and Usk Foundation undertook some electro-fishing surveys again this autumn. The surveys were not quantitative being just 10 minute sampling at each site.

Over the whole Wye catchment there was a 12% drop in 1+ trout and a 54% drop in 0+ trout compared to 2019. On the Monnow not enough sites were fished for a meaningful comparison, but those that were indicated a near absence of 0+ trout, not encouraging optimism for future seasons. However, one site on the Olchon produced normal numbers. Who knows?

Juvenile Decline: trouble with the yoof of today

I compile catch return records for the two main fishing clubs on the Monnow – analysis of their results, especially this season, can be very revealing.

Both club waters this year produced markedly higher numbers of large fish (3 times what we usually catch), for the purposes of analysis usually defined as >14”, and equally remarkably low numbers of trout <11”. The combined total of trout under 11” reported this season constituted only 35% of the wild fish – whereas we might usually expect over 60%.

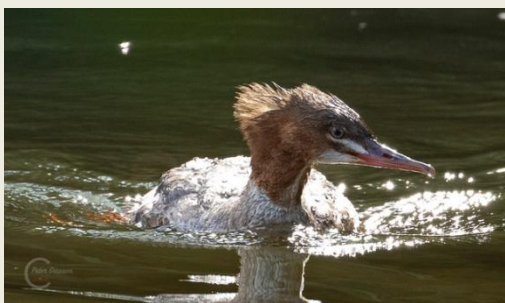
Although I’m sure many anglers rather enjoyed the extra large trout it’s the low percentages of trout under 11” that are especially worrying and we can only speculate as to the causes of this decline.



Against all the odds

I can think of four possible reasons for the decline in numbers of juvenile fish:

1. The extra numbers of Fish-Eating Birds, especially goosanders, which we are currently 'enjoying', cannot be helping trout numbers.



Female Goosander

We are assisting in a survey of their numbers and, if the figures warrant it, intend to apply for a licence to control them.

Goosanders usually produce broods of 8 to 12 young and, when grown, these birds can each consume about 300gms (10oz) of fish, mainly juvenile trout and grayling, every single day. The presence of any significant numbers of these voracious eaters is obviously unsustainable. The numbers of cormorants seen in the winter are also increasing and these larger birds are capable of taking much larger fish, especially those weakened or exposed by spawning.

2. The possibility exists that a pollution incident might have severely damaged a major percentage of a whole year class of trout. Thinking back to 2017 there was a serious slurry spillage on a brook flowing into the Honddu. Foreign material was visible in the water all the way down to Tregate Bridge. No dead fish were reported at the time but the spillage occurred when that year's juveniles would have been very young and perhaps easy to miss. I still cannot believe the line that 125,000 litres of slurry entering our river apparently caused no appreciable damage.



The 450,000 litre slurry lagoon that failed in 2017

3. We had two very large (record) spates last winter. I guess there is a possibility that they caused some damage to the smaller fish, less able to tolerate the high flows – I consider this theory the least likely.
4. The last candidate however is perhaps the most likely. In 2016 there was a juvenile salmonid 'recruitment crash'. Although not conclusive, findings from a GWCT analysis of results from 7 Welsh rivers suggests that over-winter temperatures were too high for egg laying and the spring flooding was too much for the few eggs that were spawned and hatched. A warm winter may also result in early hatching at a time when invertebrate life is at its lowest causing malnutrition and/or death of the fry. If few trout were recruited to the Monnow's population 4 years ago it would certainly explain a decline in <11" fish this season. Climate changes threaten to bring similar or worse winter conditions for salmonids more frequently in the future – it's not something we can easily battle.

We will continue to monitor the trout population dynamics and I would like to express my gratitude to the high percentage of members that are now regularly submitting annual catch returns. They can indeed be very revealing and may well form the basis of future planning to manage our fisheries for the benefit of wild trout.



A Local Fishing Club Meeting

The Monnow Social

The other major impact on the Association this year was the cancellation of The Monnow Social due to Covid precautions.



The Social was set this year to have had a record-breaking attendance, so enforced cancellation meant that we lost quite a bit of much needed funding. If you want your catchment to be balsam free one day and continue to be mink free, please consider making a donation. We bank at Lloyd's with a sort code of 30-00-03 and our account number is 02433069.

Thank you for your continued support.

Opening the Dore

In an EA funded project, WUF have removed 2 of the concrete weirs on the Dore at Peterchurch and notched the next 2 weirs downstream. This will allow for unimpeded fish passage for migration and natural movement. Equally importantly as the river begins to run dry, as it has done in recent summers, it will allow for the greater mobility of local fish populations to seek refuge in deeper pools. The natural hydromorphology and sediment transport for the river here will also be restored allowing for a greater diversity of inchannel habitats benefiting a wider range of aquatic species.



Weir A before



Weir A after



Weir C before



Weir C after Preparatory Notching

The MRA Annual Auction

We are always glad to receive offers of lots to sell in our spring fund-raising auction. It's amazing what sells and the funds raised are really vital in enabling us to continue to keep the catchment free of mink and invasive weeds, so use your imagination and think of something you (& your friends!) could donate to our cause.

Please get in touch at monnow@monnow.org

MONNOW RIVERS ASSOCIATION ACCOUNTS

for the year: 1 July 2019 - 30 June 2020

INCOME & EXPENDITURE ACCOUNT

	2019/20		
	£	£	
INCOME			
Subscriptions		680	
Sponsorship		120	
Owner Donations		2,000	(2)
"Unrestricted" Grants/Donations		0	
Fundraising	Social 2020	0.00	cancelled
	Auction 2020	2,828.00	
	<i>total fundraising</i>	<u>2,828</u>	
Total "unrestricted income"		<u>5,628</u>	
Grants restricted to specific projects		<u>-</u>	
TOTAL INCOME		<u><u>5,628</u></u>	
LESS: EXPENSES			
Admin	0.00		
Marketing & Comms	0.00		
Event Costs (inc Social)	0.00		
Materials & Equip't	0.00		
Membership & Licenses (insurance)	0.00		
Website	60.00		
Bank Charges	0.00		
		<u>60</u>	
Independent Project Works			
<i>Going Native (to date £168,633)</i>		<u>9,188</u>	
Net surplus for the year		<u><u>-3,620</u></u>	

BALANCE SHEET

at 30 June 2020

	2019/20		
	£	£	
Current assets			
Bank deposit accounts	5		
Bank current accounts	11,563		
Net current assets		<u><u>11,568</u></u>	
Represented by:			
General Fund			
At 1st July 2019	15,188		
Surplus for year	-3,620		
At 30 June 2020		<u><u>11,568</u></u>	

Note: Since our year end and the HB season don't match a slightly misleading picture is produced. From the closing of these accounts to the date of this newsletter a further £7,287 was spent on **Going Native** (Balsam & Mink) leaving us with dangerously low reserves going forward.