

2.1 The River Spey



Southward over the Spey from the Earth Pillars in 1983: contrast page 36

The Way is dominated by one of the most interesting and unpolluted rivers in Britain. Its fast-flowing, pure water has made it famous for salmon fishing and whisky. It is also the hub of a network of habitats, supporting a wide range of species including three that are rare or endangered elsewhere in Europe (see below). On these grounds, the whole river has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (the European equivalent).

The Spey is 98 miles long, the second longest river in Scotland. Its source is Loch Spey, altitude 1143 ft, from where it drops gently, mainly northeast towards Grantown. Here the Spey meanders through a broad strath (valley) and the whole area from Newtonmore to Grantown is known as *Strathspey*.

Most rivers slow down near their mouths, but not the Spey. In its last 35 miles from Grantown to the sea, it falls some 650 feet, making it Scotland's fastest-flowing major river. Its momentum brings large amounts of gravel and shingle downstream. Compare the vegetated island, now joined to the bank, in the photograph on page 36 with the same stretch of river 23 years earlier, when the island was starting to form: see page 14.

The Spey's first recorded commercial use was in 1630, to float timber downriver to Speymouth (page 23). Nowadays, its main economic importance comes from its famous salmon fishing, and the malt whisky industry: distilleries rely on the springs which feed the Spey system by way of such famous tributaries as the Livet and Fiddich.

Atlantic salmon, declining everywhere in Europe, find conditions ideal for spawning both in the Spey and its tributaries. Mature fish return every year from the sea to spawn upriver, having to combat strong currents and hazards such as anglers. To try to safeguard stocks, all net fishing along the coast and river mouth has been stopped.

Angler casting in the Tarric Mor pool, River Spey





Otter on the seaweed of the Moray Firth

The Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) is a shy mammal which fishes in the Moray Firth and lives near the banks of the Spey. Otters adopt a stretch of undisturbed river bank with plenty of undergrowth, and mark their territory with spraint (droppings). After mating, they build a den or holt where later the cubs are born. They enjoy fish, especially salmon, trout and eel, and also eat frogs and toads.

Freshwater mussels have become endangered by over-fishing and pollution in many places. The Spey's clean, oxygen-rich waters give them ideal conditions for breeding. Female mussels produce up to one million eggs each, and can live for up to 100 years. Small pearls occasionally form inside their shells, and pearl fishing, now illegal, was once a regular summer activity.

Sea lampreys flourish in the Spey, which is host to their most northerly population in Britain. The sea lamprey is a boneless eel-like fish with a skeleton of cartilage. It feeds by biting a hole in its prey (eg haddock or salmon) before sucking out its blood. However, adults use the river for spawning, not feeding. The larvae burrow into the riverbed and feed there for up to five years.

Mixed Bird's-foot trefoil (Lotus corniculatus) and Heartsease pansies (Viola tricolor) are typical of the rich gravels

