

2·1 The River Spey

The Way is dominated by one of the most interesting and least polluted 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 at least three that are rare or endangered elsewhere in Europe: see page 17. 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 (158 km) long, the second longest river in Scotland. Its source is Loch Spey, altitude 348 m (1140 ft), from where it drops gently, mainly north-east 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 (56 km) from Grantown it drops over 200 m (650 ft), making it Scotland's fastest-flowing major river. Its momentum brings large amounts of gravel and shingle downstream. Compare the photo on page 35 with the one below taken from the same viewpoint, the Earth Pillars. Below, the island was just starting to form, whilst less than 40 years later it is densely vegetated and firmly joined to the bank.

The Spey's first recorded commercial use was in 1630, to float timber downriver to Speymouth: see pages 18-19. 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 tributaries such as the Livet and Fiddich.

Atlantic salmon, declining everywhere in Europe, find ideal conditions for spawning 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.

South over the Spey from the Earth Pillars in 1983





Otter on the seaweed of the Moray Firth

The Eurasian otter 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 cubs will be 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 fast-flowing, oxygen-rich waters and clean gravels give them ideal conditions for breeding, and it is a global stronghold for this endangered species. Female mussels produce up to one million eggs each, and can live for up to 280 years. Small pearls occasionally form inside their shells, and pearl fishing, now illegal, was once a regular summer activity.

All three species of sea lamprey flourish in the Spey, which hosts their most northerly population in Britain. The sea lamprey is a primitive eel-like fish with a skeleton of cartilage and no jaws. It feeds by biting a hole in its prey (e.g. haddock or salmon) before sucking out its blood. However, adults use the river for spawning, not for feeding. The larvae burrow into the riverbed and feed there for up to five years.

Angler casting in the Tarric Mor pool, River Spey

