

## PLAYING AND LANDING SALMON

This article was posted by ABK on the SalmonFishingForum

The whole object of playing a fish should be such that the fight can be brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible. The fish should be played, and not played with. It is extremely bad practice to play a fish for longer than is necessary. This bad habit merely turns the taking of a fish into a game for our own personal pleasure. Salmon fishing is not a game it is a field sport. The salmon I catch and which I intend to keep are killed quickly and as humanely as possible and end up on someone's table, they become part of the food chain.

For some reason many novices when they hook their first salmon are over cautious, and do not put enough pressure on the fish, perhaps they feel that if they do "bend into" it they will be more likely to loose it. Very often it is quite the reverse, by not applying pressure the chances of the hooks coming out will be greatly increased. The length of time that a fished is played will generally be determined by the condition of the fish, the water temperature, and the pace of the current in which the fish is being played. It might be assumed that a fresh run fish will give a better account of itself than a stale one that has been in a pool for some time. It is sometimes often not the case. If the water is at such a level to allow fish to run, the chances are that any fresh fish taken at this time will be tired, by having to come up through rough water, or by having to ascend a number of obstacles. These fish however when rested up in a pool for a short time will be a very different proposition. Stale, or resident fish at the back-end which have left the lower holding pools, and having run farther upstream will also be tired, if not more so. They will have lost much of their reserves of fat - energy over the weeks or months subsequent to ascending further. The first salmon that my wife ever hooked was one of these tired stale fellows, and did not give a good account of itself. It merely wallowed about, and went belly up after a short time. It was very much an anticlimax, because she had read books praising the great fighting prowess that these fish have, and watched salmon fishing videos displaying fish ripping yards of line from the reel. This was not to mention listening to my own tales of epic battles ! Her next fish thankfully was a different kettle of fish, but that's another story.

The water temperature also affects the way that a fish fights, much because the fish is a cold blooded creature, and also due to the amount of dissolved oxygen available at the given time. Fish taken when the water temperature is high put up much less resistance, than a fish hooked in cold water. This is evident in the way that spring, or autumn fish fight when the water temperature is either just starting to warm up, or cool down later in the season. During periods of low warm water any fish that do get caught

do not usually fight to their full potential, and can generally be landed relatively quickly compared to a similar sized fish caught at a time when the water temperature would be that little bit cooler. This is of course assuming that both fish came from the same pool, at the same height of water, and had rested before being hooked.

The pace of current in a pool will also determine the playing time. If a fish is made to fight both current, and rod, it will tire quickly, but if there is no current to speak of the only thing that the fish has to fight is the energy stored in the flexing of the rod. These fish needless to say take more time to tire. This means that the chances of losing it will increase in relation to the time that it is being played. The playing of a fish begins the instant that the rod is raised, and bent against it. No two fish are exactly the same when they come to being played, and because of this there is no way that a fish should be treated as just another fish. Some authorities who have put pen to paper have given playing times to the pound weight of fish, e.g. a minute to the lb. This statement is absolute nonsense. The playing time of a fish does not depend on its size as some might think, but on a whole lot of unique circumstances that affect both the fish, and the angler. These include many things, like the examples given earlier.

Before an angler even wets his or her line, they should be looking for a suitable place from which they can play, and land their fish. As soon as the rod bends under the weight of the fish it is a good idea for the angler to start making their way to the place that they previously decided to play it from. By adopting this approach of preparing and clearing likely looking landing spots I have been able to successfully land fish that would have been very difficult, or impossible to land if I had'n't done so. I remember one particular occurrence when I cleared away a lot of long grass from a small sandy bay before fishing down a pool. I was asked at the time by my wife what I was doing. I replied, "this is where I am going to land my fish". Well needless to say I got "the look", but within the hour I had beached my fish. So often I have seen anglers get themselves in a right pickle. All of which could easily have been avoided, if only a little thought had gone into selecting and clearing a suitable place to make their stand, prior to fishing down the pool.

Having hooked a fish, and got to the spot, from where we have decided to play it from, the next thing that happens generally depends on how the fish reacts. One author of a book that I started to read said, that if fish run downstream on their first run, the likelihood is that it will not be a fresh one. I had never read such rubbish. Needless to say I have still to finish the book. Most of the fresh fish that I have hooked, or seen anyone else hooking, has nearly all, apart from a few exceptions run downstream. Is this not the natural response from a fish that has just come from a "safe" pool and fighting for its very life, as an unseen force pulls against it. This

downstream run is no more than a response for self preservation, and nothing to do with the freshness of the fish. Resident fish that have been in a pool for some time when hooked do not generally try to leave the pool in which they are hooked. Possibly this is because they are very familiar with the underwater geography, and know all the places of safety within the pool. If fish are hooked near the tail of the pool they will, more often than not, try to leave it and get into the fast streamy water below. There are two main ways of dealing with this situation, one is to hold the fish very hard, and try to stop it. The other, usually the more successful, is to simply ease up on the pressure. Easing up on the pressure may not seem the logical thing to do, but if we analyse it more closely, then in fact it makes more sense than "giving the fish the butt". As I explained earlier it is the pulling of the line that causes the fish to panic, and not the hook. By "easing up" the fish generally perform an about turn, and head back into the main body of the pool. On occasions to the very lie from which they came. I have tried both methods, and by far the more successful is "easing up".

Many anglers seem to think that in order to exert maximum pressure the rod should be raised to or beyond the vertical, and bent until the rod creaks. This is in fact a common misconception, since the maximum pressure is in fact exerted when the rod is at a much lower angle. The following experiment was carried out using my Bruce & Walker 15 ft Norway Speycaster and a spring balance. The spring balance was anchored to a suitable point, and the rod butt held at various angles to the horizontal. The rod was then bent until no more pressure could be exerted. Maximum pressure of 8 lb was registered when the butt of the rod was at an angle of 30 degrees to the horizontal, while minimum pressure was measured when the butt of the rod was at an angle of 120 degrees to the horizontal, 2 lb. The best angle of the rod is therefore about 60 degrees from the horizontal. This position will allow the rod to act as a cushion, and absorb the lunges of the fish. While at the same time exerting enough force to work against the fish.



Once we get the fish back into the main body of the pool, we must try to get below or opposite the fish. This is so that we can keep the fish on the move by continually trying to pull it off balance. If we do not do this it will just sit in the current expending very little effort. By continually upsetting its equilibrium it must fight in order to stay out in the current, and by so doing will be contending against both rod and flow. Do not let a fish get its head down and sulk, always try and keep its head up. The whole object of playing a fish is to let it run when it likes, and then working it back in again. By doing this the fish will very soon tire, and start to wallow about on the surface. Usually the first sign of a fish becoming tired is the tail appearing out of the water as the fish performs a slow semi submerged underwater cartwheel. Once this occurs it will not be long before it starts to show its belly. Shortly after this it will go belly up, and lie motionless on the surface, the time has now come to land our prize.

When choosing a net make sure that it is of a reputable make. As manufactured by Sharpes of Aberdeen. The best landing net is the type with a fixed head, however the Gye type where the head slides down the shaft comes a close second. My own preference when it comes to landing fish is to hand tail them whenever possible. When hand tailing a fish there are two commonly practised methods. The first of these is to grip the fish around its tail wrist with the index finger and thumb positioned towards the tail end. The other, and the one that I prefer is to place the index finger and thumb so that they are positioned on the torso side of the wrist. I feel that this technique gives a more secure hold. This is because clasping a fish in this way means you have a little "extra" fish to grip, if it starts to object and struggling. With the thumb and index positioned towards the torso it will not be so easy for it to slip out of your grasp. If on the other hand you place your forefinger and thumb at the tail end of the wrist, and the fish starts to slip, you do not have very much wrist left to re-establish your grip. It will therefore not be long before your fingers start sliding up along the outer edge the tail. When this occurs it is impossible to maintain your grasp. In order to tail our fish it must be completely played out, and lying quite motionless, for if it is not as soon as it feels your touch it will react by thrashing violently. If it does so do not panic, simply let the fish calm down before attempting it again.

Another technique used where there is a shallow shelving bank is beaching. This like tailing must only be attempted when the fish is completely played out. To beach a fish we start by drawing it slowly towards bank. As the fish approaches it should be kept on the move until its head is brought out and onto the bank. At this stage it is a simple matter of quietly walking up behind the fish and lifting it out. The fish can then either be lifted out by hand tailing, or in the case of a large one, by pushing it up the bank and then lifting. When beaching a fish it is best to place oneself downstream of it, and get into the water, so that the fish's head can be pulled up onto the

bank, by bringing the rod round in towards the bank on which the fish is being landed. By approaching the fish in this fashion the pressure from the rod will continue to keep the fish' head ashore. If it our intention to return the fish it is best to try and keep it in the water. More often than not if the fish is turned onto its back in shaloo water it will lie quite still. The hooks can then be easily removed and the fish righted into the flow.

In places where tailing or beaching is not possible a net can be used to great effect. However it should only be used by someone experienced. I have seen many fish lost by anglers who where in too big a hurry to get their fish ashore, or by trying to get their fish into the net from the wrong position. When netting a fish it should be played out, and belly up. Something many anglers seem to forget. A net seems to encourage anglers to try and net out fish that are still full of fight and a long way from being beaten. To net a fish successfully it is best to get downstream of it, and submerge the head of the net before making any attempt at bringing the fish over it. The fish if played out can then be drifted over the rim of the waiting net by gently easing back on the pressure, and letting the current do the work. When the fish is over the rim of the net it should be lifted in one positive movement. Once it is in the net do not try to lift it ashore by letting the handle take the strain. Slide your hand down the shaft, and lift the fish ashore in the mesh of the net by transferring your grip to the rim. This will save you bending the shaft of your net, and stop the shaft from revolving. If this occurs the net head will spin, and as a result could possibly dump the fish back into the river. Netting a fish takes skill and only comes with practice. I can recall the first time that my wife acted as ghillie. We where sharing a rod on a middle productive beat of the Stinchar in Ayrshire when I got into a fish in a difficult place. We where fishing a pool called the Dangart. This pool sits on a right hand bend and has a good long heavy stream at its head. The tail which is very deep with many boils and swirls on the surface indicating the boulders and nasties that lie beneath. It then turns slowly along the left bank creating a fast glide at its tail. A lot of the pool is unfishable from the left bank due to the bank erosion of some previous winter spate. As well as this it also goes vertical, straight down into deep swirling water. The section of the pool that we were interested in was where the head stream started to slow as it flows into the main body where it runs down the right hand bank around the bend. In order to fish this part of the pool properly it is essential to wade, and wade deep. This is difficult because there is a gravel bed down the centre with the bottom falling away on both sides into deep water. Deep wading is necessary here if you are to present your flies properly to fish lying on the inside bend under the opposite bank. As I got into position, fish were showing along the run on the far side. After about a dozen casts my line went tight. What a situation, deep water to the sides and front. Slowly edging back upstream I gingerly made my way out and back along the bank in order to get opposite the fish. During my manoeuvring however it had other ideas and headed

for the tail of the pool. Since I could not follow it all I could do was stand my ground. After some crafty manoeuvring I managed to make it about turn. As it did so it headed for the far side, where it exhibited itself in a flurry of spray. After a further few non eventful minutes it went belly up and ready for the net. It was a dreadful place to land a fish, no shelving banking or back eddy, only deep swirling water. Hand tailing was totally out of the question. "Okay" I said to my wife "you net it". The first attempt at netting it was more like a forearm return that Martina Navratilova would have been proud of. The fish having none of this objected violently, by splashing and thrashing the surface. After it had calmed down I said "right place the net in the water, and then when the fish is brought over the rim lift". This time it was tossed in the air like a pancake on Shrove Tuesday . Oh dear I thought ! "Right lets forget the net" I said, "see that small clearing among the grass, when I get its head into that you pick it up". "Okay" she said. In came the fish, up slid its head, so down went my wife to tail it. "Have you got it " I asked, "yes" she replied. On hearing this I about turned and started to make my way up the banking. On reaching the top I turned around to see how she was getting on, only to discover that she had not tailed the fish, but had instead picked it up the only way a mother knows how, by cuddling it in both arms. The fish however was not falling for any of her charms as it kicked and jumped its way out of her grasp back into the water. Only this time it was not attached to the hook. This is a true and accurate account of a pantomime that generally occurs when someone lacks the necessary experience. Today she is better at landing fish than some ghillies I know.

Since many rivers now have their main runs of fish entering them during the autumn it stands to reason that many will be hooked that are long past their best. Even many new silver bright fish bearing sea-lice running into the rivers at this time will be heavy with milt or roe.

If we intend returning any fish we catch then we must use a safe method of landing. Any fish that is to be returned should never be beached on rough gravel or stones as these will cause skin damage and allow infection into any open wounds that may have been inflicted. I only beach fish that I am intending to return on soft mud. Where and when possible though I always try and keep it in the water. The next best alternative is to gently hand tail and then lift the fish on to a soft grassy patch. Do not lift the fish so its tail wrist takes its full weight. Place the rod down and use both hands to support its weight. Lifting a fish by its tail will stretch its spine, which could cause serious injury. A salmon's tail wrist is designed for pushing, not for being pulled, as what happens when its weight is supported by its tail. Stretching the spine by lifting can cause damage to their kidneys. This is the long brown membrane which lies along their spine.

Be particularly careful when handling salmon, don't squeeze them, if you do, you will hear a squeal coming from a burst air bladder. If this occurs the fish will die. I would just like to say that the grunting from a dead fish is caused by expanding gases and not a burst air bladder, the two should not be confused. When returning fish **never** "throw them back", they must be held in the recovery position, with their heads facing into the flow and supported upright by placing one hand under the pectoral fins and the other around the wrist of their tail. Keep them in this position until they regain their strength. When their energy returns they will give a strong kick and swim off. The recovery time needed seems to vary from fish to fish, but the one thing that I have noticed is, if they are not "ready" they will not swim away.