

Salmon Lies, Fact and Fantasy

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The Atlantic salmon can be caught on a multitudinous variety of lures and flies, not to mention baits such as shrimps, prawn and worms, and the angler who successfully hooks and lands a fish will tell you that it took his (or her) offering due to aggression, curiosity or any other of the reasons commonly given for the taking of a fish. Each angler has their own beliefs on this subject and will defend it fervently. Regardless of each individuals reason why a salmon takes a lure or bait, one thing which cannot be argued, is that, if it was not a running fish, it was taken from a lie. Whether it was a known lie or not, the fact remains that it was a spot where the salmon had decided to rest during its upstream migration to the spawning grounds. These lies can be divided into three main types, short stay, medium stay and long stay.

The short stay ones are frequented only by running fish having a short breather before pushing on upstream., The medium stay, the lie I believe which is of most interest to anglers, are tenanted by fish in between rises in water height. In some cases this might be as short as a few hours, or in times of drought several weeks. Long stay lies are occupied only by resident fish, which for some reason have decided to stay put in one pool, and will only move on later in the year when their sexual urge becomes too great. Some of these fish tenanted a lie for many months. In some of the larger rivers such as the classic east rivers of Scotland it is difficult to tell which type of a lie a fish came from, but since most rivers are of a somewhat lesser stature the identification of a particular lie type is somewhat easier. Running fish will generally tuck themselves in behind stones and boulders, in fast rough water, or just above the lip of a weir, at times, with no more than a few inches of water covering their backs. By contrast the resident fish in a pool will take up a lie in the quieter deeper water out of the main flow. Fish that are steadily moving upstream and spending only a short period of time in each lie are of most interest to the angler, because these fish will take up medium stay lies, while awaiting an increase in water height to continue their journey. These fish will generally choose a lie in water 4 to 6 feet deep, taking up position either upstream or downstream from some underwater obstruction to the flow, so as to allow them to maintain their position with the minimum effort.

Having almost 50 years salmon angling experience I am convinced that the majority of fish which get caught on any river system is from these medium stay lies. The lies tenanted by these fish will also depend on the time of year, water height and temperature as well as the level of diffused oxygen available at any one time, however, the fish will still take up one of the three types of lies outlined previously.

What makes a good lie ? The answer to this question is quite simple, no one really knows, but if any of the readers were salmon in a previous life, and if they can remember the experience I am only too willing to listen. As far as the angler is concerned there is only two types of lie that is of any interest to him, the productive lie, and the lie that produces nothing. The lie which is unproductive is only of interest so as not to waste time fishing over water which is unlikely to give sport. Productive lies however are very different, because the angler will now be fishing over water knowing that he is in with a chance of a fish. It may be a spot where he has taken a fish before, or has seen someone else take a fish, but he will be fishing with confidence knowing that he will be covering water that has produced fish in the past. I appreciate as conditions change due to the time of the year or water height etc., the taking lies will change depending on the prevailing conditions at the time. However the fact remains that any fish which are caught will come from a taking lie. Why a particular salmon lie produces fish time and time again under similar conditions is not fully known, but I am certain that it is the lie itself and not the salmon which accounts for this. How often have you heard or read of an angler taking salmon one after the other from the same spot within a few hours or over a period of days, while other anglers fishing only yards away are catching nothing. The reason for this as far as I am concerned must be something to do with the comfort factor associated with that particular lie under a particular set of conditions. A good taking lie will keep the salmon restless, and on the fin, i.e. it cannot get its head down and switch of to its surroundings. I consider that these lies are the

equivalent to sitting on a hard wooden bench. You cannot get comfortable, and keep moving from one cheek to the other trying to find the most favourable position. Whereas the lies which are less productive must be the equivalent of a good comfortable armchair beside a roaring fire. Just the right place for a nap. If the lie is a comfortable one then it stands to reason that the fish will have its head down and switched off. Only the pitter patter of the rain clock reawakening them, telling that it is once again time to continue their journey upstream. It is for this reason that I have no doubt that the majority of salmon which are caught come from an uncomfortable medium stay lie, while the lies that produce the least fish are tenanted by very comfortable resident fish. The short stay lies are occupied by fish actually engaged in running upstream at that time, and therefore unlikely to be looking for a place to get their heads down. Anyway these short stay lies used by running fish are not usually ideally situated for a long term stay, i.e. in fast rough water with little depth at the head or tail of a pool. An unlikely place for a fish to have a nap. This is why a running fish in a short stay lie can be caught, the fish is permanently restless and wants to be pushing on, and for this reason it is fully alert and conscious of what is going on around it. The fish are therefore more likely to be aware of a lure, bait or fly passing in front of them.

A short term lie must therefore have a very low comfort factor as far as the fish is concerned. It is for this reason that most of the fish which I or anyone else has caught must have come from a lie where the fish have been unable to become comfortable. This is what I believe and until someone comes up a more plausible reason why fish are taken from specific lies it shall be the one I continue to develop. I suppose that some will argue that the fish took my offering out of irritation, but what about the fish that took the first time it was covered! They may be partially correct, because if it was irritation that caused the fish to take my offering then surely it must have been irritation brought about by the lie itself and not by the angler presenting the fish with a lure, bait or fly of their choice. The lure more than likely could have been the final straw. This is because I believe that the fish was already irritated by the lack of comfort in its chosen lie.

"Just as the fly had almost completed its swing through the small area of calm water on the nearside edge of the central channel I had that unmistakable pull at end of the line telling me a fish had taken hold of my fly". The initial assumption made by many salmon anglers reading this is that the salmon which took the fly must have been taking up a lie close to "the nearside edge of the central channel". This may indeed have been the case, but unless one knows the water intimately this is a most unfavourable premise, as far as any future sport from the same pool is concerned, especially when the same stretch of water is being fished with the same prevailing conditions. In order to show a salmon our fly we must know precisely where within the pool we should be presenting it. This I have to say is a problem which does not occur when we know the water intimately, however when visiting a stretch of river we have not fished before, or a particular pool where winter floods have changed the characteristics of the river bed the exact location of the occupational lies for the prevailing conditions cannot be located simply by looking at the flow of the water. Although it maybe possible on occasions through collectively gained previous experiences to determine some of the lies, by viewing the contours of the flow etc. it is an extremely inaccurate and imprecise practise. Much as previous experience may well enable us to identify likely looking lie areas, there is no way we can tell for absolute certain, if any of them would effect a lie to a salmon at the time of viewing. If a fish happens to show itself by jumping or rolling through the surface this is fine, as we can use the sighting to mark the spot and use it to good advantage. This is all very well provided fish show themselves, but there are numerous occasions when there are prolonged periods of complete inactivity. What must also be understood though is that not all fish show in their chosen lies. Salmon will invariably from time to time go for a swim around the pool and as such show anywhere along their chosen course. When an angler is "new" to a stretch of water there is no way he can positively identify the exact location of existing "bona fide" lies, or recently created winter flood lies. These new lies cannot be identified without the knowledge of the beats ghillie. An alternative, if there is no beat ghillie is to ask someone who has spent an extensive amount of post flood time fishing the beat. In some cases where a drastic change of the river bed has taken place throughout the close season the ghillie, or local doyen come the start of the season may be totally ignorant of the location of the new lies. Even after a full season their knowledge of the whereabouts of the majority of the new lies within the effectuated stretch will still be somewhat patchy.

It is not my intention to talk further about the factors which determine whether or not a lie will be tenanted by fish, or even what makes a particular lie attractive to a salmon, it is now time to talk about fishing productive lies which are occupied. All occupied salmon lies can be divided into two categories, productive and non productive, regardless of the height of the water, and as such for the angler to maximise his or her chances of catching fish the fecundity of each lie for the prevailing conditions must be known. Lies can be productive at one height of water, yet be totally unproductive at another. For this very reason it pays to have intimate knowledge of a beat. I recollect the following incident which will hopefully bring my point across. On the occasion in question, although I had fished the river before, I had not fished this particular section for some time. Since I had some knowledge of the river I ascertained the likely looking areas for the conditions. Although I had seen fish, come lunch time I had advanced no interest. While having lunch the ghillie arrived to see how things were going. While having lunch we watched another angler fish down the pool downstream of the hut. "That looks a nice section of water". To this the ghillie replied "It might look nice, but all he's doing is wasting his time". On hearing this I asked "why doesn't it hold fish more". "Och aye it holds plenty fish all right, but since that bloody big flood we had a few years back there are now only two lies in it which produce fish at this height." Not to look a gift horse in the mouth as well as not being backward at coming forward I asked where they were. After the other angler had fished down the pool the ghillie walked me down to the waters edge and pointed them out. After the ghillie left I resumed my fishing. Although I started in at the head of the pool in the normal way, I must say I did not delay fishing it down as I wanted to try out my new found knowledge. To cut the story short the information the ghillie provided proved to be absolutely correct, with each of the two lies giving me a fish. I have to say the lies did not produce their fish quickly. Although the first lie produced its fish relatively fast the second lie had to be laid siege to and covered a number of times, in fact the second fish only coming after about sixty minutes of hard continuous effort, after the other rods had moved down river and I had been left the pool to myself.

Much as it is absolutely crucial that we present our fly, or lure as close to the lie as possible I must stress that the actual place the fish takes our fly may well be all in all totally different to where the lie is actually located. It is perfectly possible for a fish on seeing a fly moving towards it from upstream advance forward from its lie and take it. Likewise salmon will frequently move sideways out their lie to take a fly. The distance moved usually depends on the water temperature, but even when the water temperature is warm enough to provide the fish with some wasteful birr, the distance moved from the initial sighting of the fly and the point of actual interception can be anything from few feet to many yards, i.e. the full width of a pool. On many occasions, especially during the summer and autumn salmon will do the latter, i.e. follow a fly round and at take it right at the end of its travel, on the dangle. It goes without saying that if the fly is presented downstream of the lie, or at a location which does not permit the fish to see it then all we will be doing is wasting our time. Although salmon have excellent eyesight and can see the smallest of flies in the roughest of water, the fly must be presented within the salmons viewing radius. Very often when an angler hooks a fish in a particular place, he assumes the place where he experienced the offer is the same locus of the lie. When this happens the angler when commencing fishing the same stretch of water, as a rule concentrates most of his effort towards the said taking section. His efforts, regardless of his persistence usually ends with no further success. This is because the cast which brought him the fish in the first instance generally has not been repeated. If the water is running at normal height and no fish migration is taking place then all efforts from the angler will be lost, as the lie will almost certainly remain vacant until the next rise in water occurs, when very likely another fish, may on entering the pool decide to use it. If the water is of such a height which permits fish to run, the lie in question may be the only taking lie in the pool at that particular height. If this is the case the angler will go home with a fish, but he may well, if he knows the water have had the opportunity of taking more fish, by concentrating his efforts in covering the taking lie and not the taking area. A scenario similar to the previous once happened to myself. I had taken a fish from a stretch of water I did not at the time know very well. I had assumed the fish had taken the fly close to its lie, and since the water was of an excellent migrational height I further fished what I thought was going to be the productive section of water. As it happened I wasted a lot of valuable fishing time, as the taking lie from which the fish come from happened to be a good distance away. In fact it was a very short distance out from the opposite

bank. It was not until I stood aside and let another angler fish the pool that I realised my mistake. While watching the other angler fish the pool I noticed a small, but quite distinct bow wave appear behind his fly. The bow wave appeared almost as soon as the fly landed near the opposite bank and as such I could quite clearly track its progress across the pool. As the fly came close to where I had hooked my own fish, i.e. about two-thirds of the way across the pool from the opposite bank, a depression appeared on the surface as the following fish took and turned away with his fly. If his fish had left no surface indication of its course of interception I would have sworn both fish came from a lie in the taking area. Further sharing of the pool resulted in another fish for the other angler and myself. Now when fishing the pool in question with the same flow characteristics I purposely concentrate my efforts, not in the fish taking section, but on the lie under the far bank.

In relation to water clarity affecting a salmon's lie . There may be instances where it could affect a particular lie, but I cannot really think why water clarity would make a lie uncomfortable and keep a fish restless...The only suggestion I can think of is that perhaps if there happens to be strong light shining or flashing on the lie from a particular angle. I am open to suggestions. It is true salmon from some lies are more susceptible to a fly, while others are best spun or baited. I tend to think that in these cases the dynamics of the water through the lies tend not to favour a fly, but instead will deliver a particular lure or bait better. Why I cannot say, but perhaps the fly in these cases just cannot create the right stimulus for the fish in residence at the time. Water height I believe plays the greatest single aspect of whether a lie is going to allow a fish to settle into a lie. The increase in height has an increase in water pressure over and around the bottom terrain and as such the hydrodynamics of the lie will be different for various flow conditions. As such this is why we get different lies in different locations of a pool for varying heights of water. Where there are too many fish for the number of lies available in a pool I have always found the fishing difficult. The fish which have a tenancy seem reluctant to move to take anything, while the roamers are too busy trying to dislodge, or shuffle fish out of their lies. During the backend I have no doubt that the majority of salmon that take or lures or flies is due to increasing sexual aggression, but at this time of the year salmon migration is very much at a maximum. Fish are becoming more and more restless to get on with nature's business and as a result will be taking up more lies over a shorter period of time than they did previous in the year.