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Dreams come True in Uists and Benbecula

Arriving for the first time to fish North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist is like an angling dream come true. Driving west from Lochmaddy, you are confronted by a seemingly unending vista of lochs, some of which, like Loch Scadavay, are scattered with islands and tangled promontories, each of which are festooned with their own small lochs. Scadavay extends to the south of the A867 Lochmaddy to Clachan road and even this smaller southern section can provide several days sport.

The famous, lime-rich machair lochs that line the west coast are generally easily accessible from the main roads, but reaching many of the more remote east coast lochs requires a fair degree of fitness; as well as determination and the ability to use a compass and map. Also, be prepared for sudden, less than pleasant changes in the weather. In these parts a sunny day can turn into a nightmare quicker than you can mutter Grouse & Claret.

My wife, Ann, and I have fished in this wonderland for many years and never tire of going back for more. Each time we do, we discover new delights and new waters to explore. Many visitors make straight for the well-known lochs, such as East Loch Bee, Grogarry, Stilligarry, Bornish and West Loch Ollay on South Uist, justly famed for the quality of their wild brown trout. But, over the years, we have tramped ever further into the wilderness in search of the utter peace – and some really outstanding fishing – that only these places can provide.

South Uist is graced by three fine mountains, north to south, Hecla (606m), Ben Corodale (527m) and, the highest, graceful Beinn Mhor (620m). They dominate the eastern horizon and guard the approaches to three of the most remote lochs on the island, Spotal, Corodale and little loch Hellisdale. Find them on OS Map 22, Benbecula, Scale 1:50,000 at, respectively, grid references 834367, 831331, and 828310.

Hellisdale is best approached from the far end of the minor road at Arinambane (Gd ref: 792285) via Bealach Crosgard and Glen Liadale and it is reputed to hold some good trout. Head off for Corodale from the A865 at Grid ref: 768341. Aim for the bealach between Hecla and Ben Corodale then descend down Glen Usinish to reach the loch. As you do so, think of the fugitive Bonnie Prince Charlie; he tramped this way in 1746 when he hid from his pursuers and held 'court' in a cliff-top cave nearby.

My favourite, however, is Spotal, one of the loveliest lochs that I have ever fished. The last time I visited, I did so as part of an adventure hike from Loch Sgiopoint (Gd ref: 829385) at the end of the B890. I tramped out past Loch Bein (Gd ref: 843373) to gain the north edge of the Ben Hecla horseshoe, then followed the ridge round over Beinn na h-Aire and Ben Scalavat to reach the summit of Hecla. I descend via Coir Rudale by tiny Loch a'Choire to fish Spotal.

Not so many years ago, sea-trout used to run to the loch from Loch Sgiopoint and Caolas Mór, however, the advent of fish farming has brought an end to that. But Spotal still retains its magical grace and the brown trout, although not large, are big enough for me. As I turned to leave the loch, I noticed an otter watching me curiously from the far shore, and, overhead, the Hecla golden eagles marked my progress home across the moor.

Useless on South Uist

Being a Scot means that at an early age you are invariably introduced to the joys of rugby, golf and trout fishing. Well, to be precise, boys are, rather than girls, although my wife, Ann, has played golf and is also an angler. But as a boy, I was never particularly joyful with the rugby bit; lying under a muddy heap of vandals on a freezing Saturday morning did not seem to me to be the best way to spend precious school-free weekends.

Golf appealed for a while until my father, pushed beyond endurance, roared: 'Get out of my sight until you can watch where your damn ball goes!' This was understandable. Not only did it cost him a half a dozen balls to get me round, but it also took five hours and endless embarrassments with

other players. I used to 'tack' up the course like a yacht in distress and only rarely on the fairway that I was meant to be playing.

That left trout fishing and none of my family fished. This seemed to be reason enough for becoming involved. At least I would be left to my own devices. No more twisted ankles and demonic sports masters. Goodbye to dissident fairways and scrabbling under gorse bushes searching for seriously slashed grey orbs of gutta-percha.

Fishing promised freedom, and even the worst duffer in the world has a chance of catching fish. In spite of what angling gurus might preach, believe me, if a fish is there, spots your fly and wants it, you will catch it. I have seen, all too often, so-called 'experts' ending the day red-faced and



East Loch Bee, looking southwest from near the boat station.

fishless whilst the duffer comes home with at least something for breakfast if not one for the glass case.

I persisted in this belief for years until the day I came eyeball to eyeball with the trout loch from hell: East Loch Bee on the Island of South Uist. I have thrashed bloody Bee to foam more times than I care to remember but have yet to take a decent fish from its shallow, brackish waters. Yes, I have caught trout, but fish so small that I hardly noticed them even although I was looking all the time.

A causeway divides the two sections of Loch Bee, east and west, and the whole system almost cuts the north end of South Uist in half, stopped from doing so only by floodgates at the east, Loch Sgiopoint, end. Some South

Uist anglers claim that West Loch Bee is the more exciting fishery. It may well be but I can't really comment: the last time I fished West Bee if I had caught two more trout I would have had a brace.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that East Loch Bee is a first-class trout loch. My son, Blair, was Secretary of the South Uist Angling Club for a number of years and never missed an opportunity of sending regular details of fish that he and his friends took there, including gripping action shots of said fish being caught.

I have seen fish of over 4lb taken from East Loch Bee and, in spite of repeated failure, I keep going back; in the sure and certain knowledge that the longer I remain fishless, then the sooner it is that I will break my duck; or, in this case swan, because the loch is home to more than 100 of these graceful creatures. But *tempus fugit* and if I'm not careful I could find myself under these wretched gorse bushes again, hunting for lost golf balls.

The Right Place at the Right Time

Confidence is the name of the game. Being certain that you are in the right place at the right time. A state of affairs I seldom achieve. Invariably, upon arrival at my chosen location, eyes glinting, fingers twitching, I am greeted by the dreaded words:

'You should have been here last week. Still, have a bash. You never know your luck.'

I do. From years of bitter experience. Hopelessly lashing the water without seeing so much as a snout. Having to cope with telephone calls from so-called friends who follow me to the same fishing venue: 'What a week we have had! Just after you left the conditions were perfect. Never seen so many fish. They were almost giving themselves up.'

Not to me they don't. After more years fishing than I care to remember I confess I have yet to find any place in the world where they 'give themselves up'. I try to pretend that were they to do so much of the joy of fishing would vanish, but in all honesty, wouldn't it be nice, just for once, to be in the right place at the right time?

As the years of my fishing life lengthen I have come to accept the fact that catching fish is largely a question of luck. That it has very little to do with fine technique or vast knowledge, and even less to do with choice of flies. As long as your flies are in the water, then your chance of hooking your fair share is as good as anyone's.

I have discovered that changing flies doesn't really help. Consequently, I tend to rely on a few patterns and generally fish with them all day, indeed, all season. My favourites are the Black Pennell, Soldier Palmer, Ke-He, Woodcock & Hare-lug, Greenwell's Glory and Silver Butcher. And the Charlie Maclean, a unique Hebridean pattern that has brought me many fine fish. A 4lb 8oz wild brown trout from Loch Heilen in Caithness. A 9lb salmon from East Loch Ollay on South Uist, and many more. Well, a few.

I discovered this superb fly whilst researching my book *The Sporting Gentleman's Gentleman* and it has stood by me ever since. Charlie Maclean, now fishing that great trout loch in the sky, was a ghillie for South Uist Estate; a charming, gentle man who had a wonderful way with words, and a wonderful way with fish. The fly was devised by one of his guests as a mark of affection for Charlie's ability and unfailing courtesy.

The late Iain Christie, a solicitor in Portree on the Island of Skye, devised the fly. I contacted Iain to confirm a story Charlie told me about catching trout to music, which I found hard to believe. Charlie was fishing with Iain at the time on Loch Stilligarry, one of the famous South Uist machair lochs.

Stilligarry is a very special place; shallow, weedy, full of fishy corners and delightful little bays and islands. The quality of Stilligarry trout is quite outstanding. They are perfectly shaped with deep bodies and neat, small heads and they fight furiously. Persuading them to rise is the only problem. Stilligarry can be a dour, unforgiving place.

On this day, however, Charlie said that fish rose and were caught every time the song *O-ho-ro Mo Chailinn*, sung in Gaelic by Calum Kennedy, was playing on Iain's portable tape recorder, which they had with them in the boat. Iain Christie confirmed that every word of the unlikely tale was true.

When Charlie died Iain sent me a few copies of the fly he was using at the time, and had named in honour of Charlie, and a full account of the incident:

'I was fishing with Charlie, again on Loch Stilligarry, one bright June afternoon in the early 1970's, in a north east wind. The fish were not moving to the usual flies in any of the usual places and Charlie rowed me across to the west side of the loch to a small bay, fringed with reeds, about one hundred yards south of the north-west corner of the loch.

'I put on the prototype of this fly and within an hour had caught three good fish on it, one of 3lb 8oz, the second 2lb 8oz, and the third being just under 2lb, all caught in and around that small bay. Charlie was very gratified that I named the fly after him, and you may be sure that it was suitably christened at the time.

'Since then I have had considerable success with the fly on many other waters, including the Storr Lochs here in Skye, and it does seem to bring up the bigger fish, although of course, it is not infallible. I usually fish it as my bob fly. If it catches a fish or two for you, I am sure it will have Charlie's silent approbation!'

I always fish the Charlie Maclean on the bob, with great confidence. It is a beautiful fly; lovely to look at and much appreciated by our fine friends below the waves. I hope that it brings you as much success and pleasure as it has brought me.

Bruce's Favourite Uist Fly

CHARLIE MACLEAN

Tail A short tuft of orange-red fluorescent wool

Tag In front of the tail, a couple of turns of flat silver tinsel

Rear hackle A few turns of white cock hackle tied in to slope backwards **Ribbing** Oval silver tinsel closely wound so as to

leave just enough space between the turns to provide room

for the stalk of the body hackle **Body Hackle** Furnace cock

hackle, folded double. **Front Hackle** Two or three turns

of white cock hackle, again tied in to slope backwards.

The singing lessons you will have to arrange for yourself and best wishes when you reach for that first high F sharp. But get the glass case ready – after all, you never know your luck.