

Catch & Release

Our choices make all the difference for fish survival



By taking a ‘hands-off’ approach, we give our precious wild Atlantic salmon the best chance of survival.”

Paul Young



UK anglers are leaders in conservation.

In Scotland, anglers have set an example with an **impressive release rate exceeding 95% for wild Atlantic salmon**. Our salmon and sea trout angling practices stand out as some of the most responsible globally.

This success is not just a win for conservation—it helps rivers to have sustainable populations of wild fish to sustain angling and in turn supports the rural communities that rely on fishing tourism, contributing over **£79 million to Scotland’s economy each year**.

Wild fish face unprecedented threats from climate change, pollution, and habitat disruption, with populations declining steadily over the past three decades. There’s new evidence about the impacts of air exposure and river temperature on fish health and survival.

By adopting small changes to catch and release practices, **we can achieve almost 100% survival rate of our caught fish** and continue to play our part to protect populations for generations to come.

If we all follow catch and release guidance, a 100% survival rate of caught fish can be achieved.



Keep It Cool

Salmon struggle in warmer water; fish on cooler days or early mornings to reduce stress.



Keep Hands Off

Wherever possible, avoid handling fish directly to prevent infection. With the right tools, in most cases it’s easy to unhook without touching the fish.



Keep It Under

Fish have a better chance of survival when they stay submerged throughout the release.



Keep It Clean

Always check, clean, and dry your gear to prevent spreading disease, parasites, and invasive species.

Scan to watch the ‘Contactless’ film



Before you fish Plan Your Pool



"Some mornings, I'll skip fishing if the conditions aren't right. It's about what's best for the fish."

**-Alison Baker,
Angling Scotland**

Assess the conditions

Salmon are more vulnerable when water temperatures rise. When water reaches 18°C or higher, salmon become stressed. Avoid fishing above 20°C. Consider carrying a water thermometer.

Select a Spot

Think ahead about where you might hook a fish, play it and how you will release it. If you select an accessible spot, for example stable banks or areas with low embankments, you may find it easier to land and release fish gently.



After you fish Keep It Clean

How can I avoid accidental spreading?

CHECK

Check your equipment, boat, and clothing after leaving the water for mud, aquatic animals or plant material. Remove anything you find and leave it at the site.

CLEAN

Clean everything thoroughly as soon as you can, paying attention to areas that are damp or hard to access. Use hot water if possible.

DRY

Dry everything for as long as you can before using elsewhere as some invasive plants and animals can survive for over two weeks in damp conditions.

While you're on the river, you can play a crucial role in safeguarding fish from the threats of **diseases**, **parasites**, and **invasive species**. Once these threats take hold, they become very difficult to eliminate.

What should I do if I spot something?

Report any signs of disease, parasites, or invasive species using our app.



Scan the QR Code to learn more.

Tackle Tips for Quick, Safe Release

Check that you have these in your tackle bag before setting out.

Where possible, use Barbless, Single Hooks

Why? Double and treble hooks can cause more injuries to fish. Opt instead for one barbless, single hook which is easier to remove for a quick release, minimising injury.

Best Choice: Use size 8 or smaller.

Pro Tip: If you don't have barbless hooks, flatten barbs with forceps.



Soft, Knotless Nets

Why? Preserves the fish's protective slime layer, scales, fins, and eyes from damage.

Best Choice: A rubber or mesh net with a shallow, wide bottom lets fish lie flat and stay protected.

Pro Tip: It's easy to re-purpose an older style net with a modern, fish friendly mesh.

Strong Leaders or Lines

Why? Shortens the fight, reducing fish stress.

Best Choice: As strong a leader or line as possible to land fish quickly and safely.

Pro Tip: Modern fluorocarbon line means you have greater strength to diameter. Consider using this material to achieve stronger breaking strain without sacrificing presentation.



Long-Nosed Forceps and Line Cutter

Why? Having these tools ready at hand ensures quick, safe unhooking.

Best Choice: A scissor clamp is an all-in-one solution for anglers, combining the functions of long-nosed forceps and line cutting scissors.

Pro Tip: Try using a mobile phone neck lanyard to quickly snap a picture while the fish is still in the net.

Avoid Felt Soles

Why? Felt soles are difficult to clean and dry, making them a high-risk factor for spreading invasive species and pathogens between rivers.

Best Choice: Rubber or interchangeable soles are easier to dry and disinfect.

Pro Tip: Fish multiple locations? Ensure your wading boots are cleaned and sanitised to achieve good biosecurity between different rivers.



Water Thermometer

Why? Monitoring water temperature helps you decide when it's safe to fish, as higher temperatures can stress fish and reduce survival after release.

Best Choice: A pocket-sized digital thermometer is easy to carry and gives quick, accurate readings.

Pro Tip: Check the water temperature regularly—if it's above 18°C (64°F), consider stopping fishing to protect fish welfare.



Air Exposure

Why does it matter?

When we expose fish to air, even for just a few seconds, we risk their survival.

Though they may swim away, new evidence has shown that these unseen challenges can impact their ability to thrive and breed. Following best practices ensures wild salmon and sea trout have the best possible chance of survival.

"I always think about it from the fish's perspective. Imagine running a mile, then trying to hold your breath. That's similar to what a fish goes through when it's taken out of the water."

- TweedStart Ambassador

Perform a hands-off release from the shore

Step 1: Play the fish quickly

Step 2: Unhook the fish in the water without handling or keep fish submerged in a rubber mesh net if possible

Step 3: Use tools like forceps to unhook, ideally without touching the fish.

Step 4: Release and watch the fish swim away safely!

The best releases are quick and hands-off, thanks to simple planning and preparation.

Perform a hands-off release from a boat

Step 1: Go to the shore to land the fish.

Step 2: Wear waders in the boat so the fish can be netted outside the boat in the shallows. This is especially the case in low water conditions

Step 3: Unhook the fish in the water with a minimum of handling.

Step 4: If pictures are being taken, keep the fish in the water.

Step 5: Release and watch the fish swim away safely!

Not only are these best practice guidelines for fish welfare but releasing a fish at the side of the river in shallow water also gives the best possible client experience.



What do I do if a fish is hooked deeply?

Sacrifice the fly, not the fish.

If the fish is hooked deep in the throat or gut, research shows that it is best to cut the leader at the hook and leave the hook in the fish. Fish are capable of rejecting or expelling hooks on their own! Prolonged attempts to remove the hook often do more harm than good.

What do I do if a fish is belly up?

Hold the fish gently underwater, facing upstream until it regains strength.

DO NOT lift the fish, especially by the tail

NEVER drag the fish over stones, gravel, or onto the bank.



Recording Your Catch

Photography Tips

Taking photos can be a memorable part of the experience, but fish are best left in the water. If alone, take a photo of the submerged fish whilst holding the line, or in the net. With a companion, have them ready to snap a photo before you unhook.

Avoid Weighing

Measuring length is a safer way to record your catch and this can be used to provide a weight estimate. Use a tape measure or your rod's handle and refer to the weight estimation chart provided. This minimises handling and supports fish recovery. Several length-to-weight conversion guides exist, and length-to-weight can vary, depending on the condition and shape of the fish. Below is a sample guide.

Length (inches)	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
Weight (lbs)	6	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5	11.5	13	14	15.5	17	18.5	20	22	23.5	25.5
Length (inches)	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55
Weight (lbs)	27.5	29.5	32	34	36.5	39	42	44.5	47.5	50.5	53.5	57	60	64	68	72



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This leaflet has been compiled with advice and guidance from the following organisations and individuals:



Special thanks to: Steven Mackenzie, Anne Woodcock (Tweed Foundation), Bob White, Paul Young & Craig Somerville.

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