

## The Story of The Angler's Retreat

*Matthew Crampton*

Fishermen deserve good places to stay. Having shed vast sums on tackle, swallowed humiliating deals to protect their trip from family and office, and cajoled their fishing chums to do likewise, having appeased the logistical demon that puts prime fishing beyond easy reach and, finally, having staked all this effort on the lottery of good weather, surely fishermen deserve just one thing – their place of lodging – to be entirely dependable.

The Angler's Retreat is such a place. Its proprietors, Billy and Marion Felton, have created what many regard as the ideal guesthouse for fishermen. That's why the same names appear time and again in the Visitor's Book. That's why it's hard, even a year in advance, to reserve space during prime weeks in May and September. And that's why we've put together this book.

But what lies behind their success? What draws the fickle breed of fishermen to this pebble-dashed bungalow in the Western Isles? (Physically, The Angler's Retreat is a short, sturdy and dependable structure, just like Billy.) The answer is simple – you can depend on The Angler's Retreat. Billy and Marion have taken a lot of time to think about what anglers need, and don't need, then fashioned their hospitality accordingly. Anglers being largely creatures of habit, these needs revolve around straightforward things, like fishing, food and conviviality.

### Fishing

When it comes to fishing, The Angler's Retreat is well placed at the top end of South Uist, handy for both this island and neighbouring Benbecula. A short drive brings you to some of Britain's finest trout lochs. And such is their variety, and proximity, that when fishing falters on one loch, you can easily move to another. Should the wind turn northeast after lunch, rendering your current location barren, you can shift to another spot which fishes better in such wind. Or when a gale has stirred your machair loch into

porridge, you may find fish more amenable in a sheltered lochan nearby.

The trick, of course, is knowing where to go at what time. Billy's skill as a proprietor is not just to know the local fishing, but to steer his guests appropriately. After breakfast each day you'll find him poring over maps with a small knot of anglers – advising where's best for today's wind, how to fish each loch, where to drift and where to wade safely – patiently giving suggestions and alternatives until everyone is happy with their itinerary.

Crucially, he fashions his advice around his reading of each person or group. There are times when he will judge someone needs just to catch something, of any size, rather than labour long after something big. So he'll send them where smaller fish abound. Some groups refuse to wade, so he'll advise a loch with plenty of drifts. Other groups like variety – or might turn homicidal if spending all day in a boat together – so he'll suggest a location



*The Angler's Retreat.*

where they can wade, bankfish or drift as they wish. If anglers choose to pursue salmon or sea trout, Billy will also help them book lochs through the Estate. When time allows, Billy will come along as well, usually doing far more than his share on the oars and, as many of these tales testify, providing both valuable insight and fitting commentary upon the fishing skills on

display.

Other than advice, there's fine fishing facility at The Angler's Retreat: plenty of space to store your rods and stuff; a drying room; appropriate flies to be bought at ridiculously low prices. Though only the foolish or ignorant would arrive in the Outer Hebrides without full kit and spares, should you become overdosed with misfortune – breaking both rods, perhaps, or holing both sets of waders – Billy will find some way to keep you fishing.

Yes, there's a danger his hospitality can be abused. This happens seldom, but it happens. Several regulars were present recently as two gentlemen of decidedly posh English demeanour displayed arrogance – and deceit – when returning broken an engine which Billy had lent them. But such lapses are thankfully rare. South Uist is the sort of place you don't need to lock your house or car. Most visitors embrace this trusting spirit.

Billy's garage is the epicentre of fishing activity in the guesthouse. It's where you store your rod, hang your waders and freeze your catch. Around you are the paraphernalia of sport: decoys for shooting geese, stumpy sea-fishing rods, empty ammunition belts, spare engines and inflatables, nets and seat cushions, creels and bass bags. You'll often find wild geese hanging on the back of the door, spoil from Billy's latest shooting expedition. The garage starts each season in neat order but by September, after months of ceaseless use, it becomes more 'Hebridean', as Billy would say, and stuff takes just a little longer to locate. But at all times it is a working space, with no frills, dedicated ruthlessly to helping sportsmen conduct their sport. As such, it provides anglers with what most fancy fishing hotels could never supply – the practical facilities you enjoy at home.