

Steven Walker

Falkirk

Three Go Mad in Uist

After a reasonable affair with Orkney, Sutherland and Caithness, my friends and I decided to take a trip to the Western Isles of Uist to meet Billy and Marion Felton at The Angler's Retreat. Having read about these famous machair lochs, we needed to get in them ourselves. The decision was a wise one and five years on we still make the annual pilgrimage. I've never missed a year. Shame I couldn't say the same about the fish – I've missed hundreds of them.

Billy is a mine of information to us all and is always there to point you in the right direction. A couple of phone calls before we arrive and he makes sure everything is in order. Whether it's fuel for the engine, packed lunches, directions to the lochs, you name it and he does it. At first we were a little cautious around Billy as he can be a tough old get, but give him a bit of respect and you will get quality fishing tips and the same respect back two times over. Maybe it's the army life still installed in him that makes him a hardy bit of tin. You'd better be there for breakfast in perfect time, always shut the gate so the cows don't eat the plants and NEVER EVER forget to return the packed lunch boxes! I'm not sure what would happen if you forgot but would never want to risk it.

The excitement starts as you head for the garage/rod room in the morning. Everyone is there getting their equipment ready, full of high hopes and filling the engines up for the day. The dog usually follows you around (knew I shouldn't have given her those midget gems five years ago) and, whatever the weather, Billy can pretty much forecast your day. He has a canny knack of telling you how it will pan out before you even leave the cottage. This is a good thing if the fishing has a chance of being good, but at the end of the day you have always got to stay positive in the Uists. Even the worst weather can bring some benefit.

Any small tips I got from Billy are remembered and honed very precisely. These small hints may have sounded vague at the time, but I've analysed them over and over in my head and, by using a bit of savvy, they might lead to the fish of a lifetime – not just for me but for the people around me too. I still remember most of them down to a T: that little set of skerries on West Ollay or fishing off the little dun on Cille Bhanain, the good drifts to hold on Grogarry, or when or where to wade on the big fish waters if the going gets tough.

The guy in the chip shop down at Daliburgh once asked me where I was staying. I started to say Billy Felton's and hadn't even got the second name out my mouth before the owner shouted, 'with Billy THE FISH?' That says it all really. Billy doesn't need to catch that four pounder from Grogarry or the bigger ones from West Ollay. He doesn't need to go out on Altabrug to catch 30 tiddlers to save his week like us guys. He's been doing it all his life. He's caught all the fish he needs. Who knows, maybe one day I will move there and try and attempt something the same as he's done.

Irish Bob. We have met Bob twice now at The Angler's Retreat. The first time he was with his wife and the pair were like a comedy act. Bob would tell a story and his wife would repeat the last half of each sentence. That king salmon Bob took in Alaska or the story of how Bob hated the baby doll, she knew them all. I'm not sure how many times she'd heard those stories before, but I'm guessing it was a lot. Bob was actually visiting Uist for two months this year. Two months! As he told me, 'What else do I have to do at this time in my life?' Sometimes I wish I could fast forward to a time when it's possible for me to fish in



Steven with one of the bigger ones from West Ollay.

Uist for two months. Bob is a mean fly tier too. If you ever buy the bushy Kate's or dabblers from that wee box in Billy's lounge, then they came from Bob's vice. I remember he pulled a fly box from his boot one day not long ago and passed me some flies. The rows of beautifully tied flies in that box were a sight to behold and having some handed to me was a joy. I still have them and hope to take a fish on them before this book is finished.

The Retreat has led me to meet some characters. Good people and good craic. Mind you, I have also shared breakfast there with some strange ones. Like the two bird watchers from the North East who looked like something from the *League of Gentlemen* TV series. I even had some Irish gypsies trying to sell me a power washer one year. Totally legitimate, they assured me.

One year there was a mix up over the caravan. Billy lined us up with another one and saved the day. But we hadn't been in this other one for fifteen minutes when the caravan door burst open. In staggered South Uist's answer to Ollie Reed – or was it Dracula. His face looked like it had just been sucking blood from a victim. I'm not sure if it was dark rum or red wine that had dried onto his face, but it had managed to form a kind of moustache and a set of fangs at the side of his mouth. He gave us a rendition of some song I can't remember and proceeded to tell some crazy but rather funny stories. Then he vanished, never to be seen again. The location and names we will leave out for obvious reasons.

The lochs tell their own story and some are famous for more than just fish. One day on Altabrug we had beached the boat as the fishing was slightly heavy going and we fancied a bit of lunch. Just after we had eaten we saw two bodies approaching with bobbly hats and red faces. Remember Tom Weir from *Weir's Way*? Well he wasn't one of them. But close enough. 'Hello', I said, 'How's it going?' They smiled and laughed. 'Yes we are fine, we are from Belgium and came to see the dun.' I said 'You came all the way from Belgium just to see the dun?' 'Yes,' they said. 'Can we have our pictures taken with you fishermen?' Of course, we replied. All that way to have their picture taken with a couple of grizzly fisherman? To be honest I hadn't paid much attention to the Dun. I was too busy looking for fish to be admiring ancient stones. They were just another fish holding area for me.

I suppose we all travel to the islands for different reasons. There is something magical about the place. Something that draws you back time and time again.

One day while trying to enjoy a wee 40 winks at the side of Bornish, we got captured by a young burly Heilan girl with a big red shiny face. She'd managed to get a Vauxhall Astra lodged in a machair cowfield. The funny thing was it had BBC Radio Gaelic stamped on the side. The girl looked like she could eat a wee bit so I offered her a strawberry tart to try and calm her down, but she was that upset she declined. So we helped her dislodge her car from the field. (I hope her boss isn't reading this book or she might get her jotters.)

One Monday morning we arrived at the church on Bornish to find both boats were full. Were we double booked or was it the wrong loch? We were sure Billy had written down Bornish Monday on a piece of paper but I had mislaid it somewhere. We cursed him a bit for getting it wrong, but Billy was somewhere on Bee with Irish Bob and his phone was off. So we tracked down Captain John Kennedy to try and fix the mess. He had a wee blether with us from the pickup truck he drives and managed to sort it out. Turned out we were actually on Grogarry that day. Cackling away at Billy's expense, we made our way to the loch and managed to extract one well over three pounds and one well over four pounds, plus several two pounders. One of the best days we ever had on the loch. Billy said it was our fault and that we got all wrong, while our crew blamed Billy. Four days later we found the piece of paper and it read Grogarry Monday, Bornish Wednesday. Billy had been right all along. Thinking back now, the gods must have been with us – if the Bornish boats hadn't been full that day we might never have got those fish. We would have happily fished away on Bornish without even knowing the Grogarry fish were lining up to impale themselves on our hooks.

One wild day on Loch West Ollay – when the morning hailstorm was so hard it hurt but by 2.00pm I was sunburnt – I had tried Blobs, Cats Whiskers and every other concoction in my box. At 4.00pm I went back to basics, a Butcher and a Zulu, and by 4.15pm I had caught a four and a half pounder. I've never hit the five pounder, yet, but it doesn't matter as that

West Ollay fish was the best fish I've ever seen with my own two eyes. It will live with me for a long time – a fit cock fish whose tail, back and fins were pure buttery gold. I could never kill a fish like that. I managed to get a full camping kit and tent with my Hebrides Fish of the Month prize money and I also got a trophy to prove it. I was more than chuffed.

My friends have also had some very good fish from the lochs. Derek and Stew have had a good lot of two pounders and the odd three pounder between them and Dominic has probably had the largest fish but maybe fewer fish in total. Last year I ribbed him for months before we visited telling him how he was past it and that his trout catching days were a distant memory. I wish I had kept my mouth well and truly shut. Over two days he managed to extract some of the finest looking fish I ever saw – a cracking fish of around four pounds just off the island on Grogarry and an even bigger one from the small narrow channel just out from the noust. That bigger fish was as long as your arm and quite slender. If it had been fully fit and filled out I hate to think how big it could have been. That's not to mention the two pounders he's had or one about four pounds from a wee set of hill lochs Billy sent us to about five years ago.

Talking of Billy and hill lochs, never ever tell him you fancy a stretch of the legs or somewhere off the main roads to fish for the day. I sweated so much on one of those expeditions that I had to empty my waders of perspiration at the loch side. One loch was so rocky on the bottom I managed to gently slip and totally submerge my whole body. I went under for a few seconds. The funniest part must have been for Dominic forty



Dominic's 'slender' monster from Grogarry.

yards downshore from me. Moments before he had shouted at me to ask what flies I had on. When he looked back up I had completely disappeared, 25 yards out from the shore. He panicked for a second, only to see the water erupt as a human torpedo shot into the air. What a dunking I got. I ended up

completely naked at the side of some hill loch trying to dry my clothes in the sun with a fly rod in my hand.

Marion Felton? The woman is a Living Legend! Myself and my friends always stay in the caravan when we visit, which is usually self-catering. But we managed to get Billy to sweet talk Marion into making breakfast for us in the house. It's a cosy arrangement. We arrive at eight before the guests come down and Marion potters away on the large Aga hob while we read the weather and chat away. We perch high on the breakfast bar in the kitchen while Marion serves us bacon and eggs and the whole works. 'Boys, you're part of the family now, sitting on my breakfast bar with me making your breakfasts,' she would say. I think Marion likes having us in there for a chat as we would always give her the banter – and she takes as good as she gets. Must be the Essex girl in her. Always up for a giggle and never burns the toast. How we enjoy sitting there on those high stools looking out the window, while fattening ourselves for the day ahead and having all the laughs with Marion. One of the nicest down to earth folk you will ever meet.

Nothing is ever a hassle for Billy and Marion. We will sadly miss going to The Angler's Retreat when they retire.

Steven's Favourite Uist Flies

GOLDEN OLIVE BUMBLE

Hook 10 or 12 **Thread** Black

Body Frankie McPhillips Golden Bumble Olive Dubbing

Rib Fine gold wire **Palmered Hackle** Golden olive cock

Head Hackle Red game cock or picric hen

Tail Hot orange tippet (non-standard tying)

GREEN PETER MUDDLER

Hook 10 or 12 **Thread** Black

Body Frankie McPhillips Olive seal's fur **Rib** Fine gold wire

Palmered Hackle Red game cock **Wing** Hen pheasant

Head Dark brown or olive deer hair