

Bruce Sandison

Sutherland

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 Chaillinn*, 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.