



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WYE AND USK FOUNDATION

IN WALES, SALMON RIVERS,  
SONG AND RUGBY FLOW SIDE  
BY SIDE.

# When Worlds Collide



MARTIN SILVERSTONE

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Famous for its rugby—above the women's national team defends against Brianna Miller of the Barbarians—Wales is home to over 30 salmon rivers such as the Wye (top) where this bright, spring salmon is being released.

**“If the greatest writer of the written word would have written that story, no one would have believed it.”** That is how play-by-play announcer Cliff Morgan described a score in a 1973 match between an all-star team and New Zealand’s famous All-Blacks. Any fan of rugby, young or old, from any country knows the moment simply as “that try.”

The game took place in Cardiff Arms Park, Wales’s National Stadium, and the score was by Welshman Gareth Edwards, arguably the best rugby player ever. In December 2019, on my last trip before the Covid lockdowns, I was headed back to the site of that try. Brianna Miller, from my home club in Ste-Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, had been invited to play for that same “best of the world” selection known as the Barbarians.

I love “Bri” and rugby, but I had an ulterior motive for accompanying her fiancé Bryce to watch her play. Unbeknownst to even the keenest salmon anglers, Wales is a region streaked with dozens of accessible rivers that are home to runs of *Salmo salar*. As a result, Cymru (Welsh for Wales, pronounced *come-ree*) has a rich fly-fishing culture and extensive river restoration know-how.

Two of Wales’ 30 salmon rivers, the Wye and the Usk, were only a slight detour on our drive from London to Cardiff and as an added bonus we could intersect the former at a World Heritage site, the Tintern Abbey. With its gothic architecture I knew it would interest Bryce, who as an engineer was less intrigued by fly-fishing for salmon than flying buttresses and pointed arches.

There is no fish fence or other counting facility on the Wye. Like the majority of Welsh rivers, estimates are based on rod catch. Simon Evans, the executive director of the Wye and Usk Foundation, says such guesstimates can be unreliable. As an example, he pointed to this past season’s rod catches on the Wye, which at around 600 were lower due to difficult angling conditions and the covid restrictions. “It was bad for anglers, but good for fish,” he says. “The run was stronger than expected with many adult salmon making it to the spawning grounds.” He estimates the Wye’s salmon population at around 9,000 adults last year.





Historically, salmon in the Wye numbered well over 50,000. Stories of workers' contracts in the early 1800s that stipulated salmon could only be served two times a week support the notion of plentiful historic populations of *Salmo salar*.

We rounded a sharp curve, and there it was looming ahead in the mist and rain, Tintern Abbey. Bryce wandered off among the impressive ruins, completely immersed in the gothic architecture. Each to his own however, and while he visited the Abbey, I bolted down to the river. A little too much bolting and not enough braking had me sliding out of control almost into the Wye, ending my trip right there.

The near accident drove home one of the latest serious threats to the survival of Wye salmon—polluted runoff from farmland. These fish have survived decades of overfishing on the high seas and in the river, and intensifying human land use for agriculture, forestry and urbanization. Now, Wye salmon face a new hazard—dangerously high phosphate levels from the raising of free-range chickens.

As elsewhere in the world, the romantic image of a small family homestead with chickens pecking happily in the farmyard has become irresistible to the general public. “Eleven million birds produce a lot of phosphates,” Evans says. “And the result is the algae blooms that are increasingly severe in the summer.”

The problems with phosphates notwithstanding, the river's natural splendour continues to draw visitors as it has for centuries. A display in the Abbey visitor centre claimed the site as the cradle of modern tourism. William Gilpin, an artist and early travel writer, wrote in the late 1700s, “If you have never navigated the Wye, you have seen nothing.” Bryce seemed to be falling under its spell and had temporarily forgotten the rugby match, suggesting we linger in Tintern and eat lunch at the Anchor Inn.

The inn was empty except for us Canucks. Bryce was entranced by a large mural of an angler and a life-size leaping salmon. The impressive painting confirmed the value of this fish to the region's economy and culture, which Evans estimates at around 2.5 million pounds annually.

After lunch we drove along the Wye to Monmouth, where we joined the River Usk. Almost every Welsh salmon river runs through an urbanized area, and at some point it has been heavily polluted.

By 1850, there were more people employed in industry in Wales than in agriculture, making it the world's first industrial nation. Welsh coal was shipped around the world, giving it an economic clout similar to that of oil today. Quarried Welsh slate covered new homes and factories in expanding industrial communities throughout the British Isles and the Empire. Ironworks throughout Wales struck rails that connected the east and west coasts of the USA and tied together far-flung outposts of Tsarist Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

All that industrial activity had a dark side. By the 1860s, rivers in South Wales were the most polluted in Britain. It was an absolute miracle there were any Atlantic salmon left at all.



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All through Wales there are signs of the fight to restore salmon rivers like this Larinier-type fish ladder on the Lugg River, a tributary of the Wye (right). A fish ladder, opened by rugby legend Gareth Edwards, helps salmon and other species get past the dam at Blackweir Bridge on the Taff (above), just upstream from the National Rugby stadium in Cardiff.



Darkness was already seeping through the streets of Usk when we arrived, looking for the Three Salmons Hotel. It seemed a likely place to find out more about the history of this river and indeed it was filled with photos and salmon angling artifacts. More than a few showed the same angler posing with various very big salmon.

It didn't take long for word to get around that we were interested in the Usk's salmon heritage. A group of ladies enjoying a post work drink invited us to sit down with them. We quaffed our beers as one of the ladies related a remarkable story about the man in the photos, Lionel Sweet.

A few years ago, the tower clock in the town square was being renovated. When the clock face was removed, two engraved plaques were found. One read simply: “L. Sweet, 1932.” A second said, “Repainted by L.T. Sweet, Usk - June 1964. Now 62, I don't suppose I shall do this next time, but I hope there are still salmon in the river.”

The storyteller had worked for Sweet and to further substantiate her story, the ladies directed us to Sweet's Tackle Shop, looking much like it must have almost a hundred years ago when it first opened. Peering in through a window, I could almost imagine seeing Sweet seated at his workbench, oiling one of his reels that would help the renowned Usk fisherman win several casting championships.

As he had hoped, there are still salmon in the river, but would Usk's most famous fisherman be happy with today's





state of the salmon population? The Usk and Wye have the best runs of any Welsh river, mainly because they were less affected by coal and iron ore operations than other rivers. And no small credit must be given to the Wye and Usk Foundation, which uses cutting edge restoration techniques, including the same liming methods employed in Nova Scotia on the West River Sheet Harbour and St. Mary's to control acidic water.

"The results have been stunning," Evans says. The Foundation has also overseen the removal of 24 barriers and improved passage around and over 124 other small dams and bridges in the headwaters of the two rivers.

In the dark, we left Usk and headed toward Cardiff leaving the salmon tour behind to become immersed completely in the world of rugby. Or so I thought.

When we arrived at the stadium the next morning to watch our friend participate in a pre-game tradition known as the Captain's Run, a sympathetic gate supervisor was friendly but unmoving—no admittance. We chatted with him about our visit to the Wye and Usk and it turned out he was quite interested in salmon and eagerly told us about the Taff River which runs through Cardiff right by the stadium.

It wasn't a pretty tale. The Taff had suffered more than most from the period of heavy industrialization. "It ran black from the coal dust and tar and oils," he recounted. Considerable effort had been put into cleaning up the Taff and now there was even a small run of salmon, with anglers catching 28 in 2019. Taking into account the history of the Taff, this is without argument a great success.

The supervisor encouraged us to visit a weir upstream from the stadium, where fish passage had been installed. Then, in a wonderful act of kindness which seemed to come more from the salmon connection than rugby, he instructed a security guard to take us down to the field to watch a bit of the Captain's Run. My rugby and salmon worlds seemed to be drawing closer together.

The Welsh are known for being wonderful singers. The same mass movement of labourers from the countryside to the cities to work in coal mines and factories also helped in the

A salmon leaps a set of falls on the Usk River (above). In Usk, Sweet's tackle shop still dispenses equipment, advice and fishing stories (right). The picturesque Wye River where it flows through the Brecon Beacons (above, right).



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founding of choirs, rugby clubs and other social activities. In the stadium the next day, the crowd sang the Welsh national anthem, a moment so touching it could send a chill up anyone's spine. Roughly translated the song speaks of "Love of my country, enchanting voices will be / Her streams and rivers to me."

Those rivers like the Taff, which once ran black from coal, are now clean enough to harbour Atlantic salmon. The Taff flowed only meters from where we sat. That was my last thought before the ball was kicked off and we got swept away by the excitement and roar of the crowd. Bri performed brilliantly, the Barbarians won, and later over drinks in the City Arms Pub, we all enjoyed that special Welsh camaraderie, and more singing of course. Other than actually hooking a salmon, or scoring a try myself, it was the perfect ending to our trip.

Next morning, on our way to pick up our rugby heroine before returning to London for the flight home, Bryce and I walked to the Blackweir Bridge where the stadium supervisor had said a state of the art fishway was installed a decade ago. A sign explained the fish pass was opened by, "rugby legend and keen angler Gareth Edwards." Edwards was a scrum-half, the same position Bri played.





► On the bridge over the weir, we could see hundreds of Welsh children playing rugby on the vast grassy area of Pontcanna Fields. In the cool air, the shouts and laughter of players passing and tackling mingled with the gentle swish of the water flowing over the weir.

It was the sound of my parallel worlds of rugby and salmon colliding. Gareth Edwards, as it turns out, is more than a keen fly-fisher. He is an ambassador for the Atlantic Salmon Trust (AST), which like ASF, invests heavily in research and other conservation initiatives. It has been reported that he once said, “I would rather catch a salmon than score a try in Cardiff Arms Park.”

I called Edwards after we returned to Canada and the great scrum-half laughed when I asked him about that quote. Yes, he said it, but at the time, he was the 20-year old captain of the Welsh team and had scored many tries, but he hadn't caught many salmon.

Now, after years of being involved with conservation efforts with the AST and his local Carmarthenshire Fishermen's Association, salmon and the rivers of Wales are still as important as rugby to him. And who can blame him? If restoration efforts continue to show results in rivers like the Taff, the youngsters running on the Pontcanna Fields won't have to choose between a salmon and a try.

The thought got my imagination fired up. Next time Bri plays in Cardiff, I'll bring a fly rod and purchase a few flies at Sweet's Tackle Shop. Then, on the morning of the match, perhaps we could cast a line over the cold, clean waters of the Taff. Perhaps she'll hook and release a salmon fresh from the sea, and then run out to the roar of the crowd and score a magical try.

With apologies to Cliff Morgan; now *that* would be a story no one would believe. 🐟

**Martin Silverstone** is editor of the *Journal*. He travelled to Cardiff in December 2019.

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# SALAR ONLINE



## THIS MONTH ON ASF.CA.

### CANADA

This year the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada will decide whether to list some populations of wild Atlantic salmon under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). It sounds positive, but evidence and experience indicate otherwise. To learn more about ASF's #peopleforsalmon campaign and to add your voice, visit [asf.ca](http://asf.ca).

### USA

Maine's Department of Marine Resources (DMR) recommends removing two of the four aged dams between Waterville and Skowhegan that block migratory fish from reaching vast amounts of headwater spawning and rearing areas. ASF is pushing for the removal of all four dams. See how you can help: [www.asf.ca/news-and-magazine/news-releases/action-alert-kennebec-dams](http://www.asf.ca/news-and-magazine/news-releases/action-alert-kennebec-dams)

### OVERSEAS

Jean Béliveau, Bobby Orr, Jack Nicklaus, Chris Evert are just some of the sporting figures that have helped ASF promote Atlantic salmon conservation on this side of the Atlantic in the past. In Wales, one sport is king—rugby. And fortunately the best player in the world is also an Atlantic salmon angler. On [asf.ca](http://asf.ca) this month, an article on Wales' former scrum-half Gareth Edwards, the Atlantic Salmon Trust's conservation ambassador.



# SALAR EN LIGNE

## CE MOIS-CI SUR ASF.CA.

### CANADA

Cette année, la ministre des Pêches et des Océans décidera si certaines populations de saumons sauvages de l'Atlantique devraient être inscrites à la liste en vertu de la *Loi sur les espèces en péril* (LEP). Cela peut sembler positif, mais les données et l'expérience indiquent le contraire. Pour en apprendre davantage sur la campagne #peopleforsalmon de la FSA et pour avoir voix au chapitre, visitez [asf.ca](http://asf.ca).

### ÉTATS-UNIS

Le Department of Marine Resources (DMR) du Maine recommande le démantèlement de deux des quatre anciens barrages situés entre Waterville et Skowhegan qui empêchent les poissons migrateurs d'atteindre de vastes zones d'habitat de frai et d'alevinage dans les eaux d'amont. La FSA réclame le démantèlement des quatre barrages. Pour apprendre comment vous pouvez faire votre part, allez au [www.asf.ca/news-and-magazine/news-releases/action-alert-kennebec-dams](http://www.asf.ca/news-and-magazine/news-releases/action-alert-kennebec-dams).

### À L'ÉTRANGER

Jean Béliveau, Bobby Orr, Jack Nicklaus et Chris Evert ne sont qu'une poignée de grands sportifs qui ont aidé la FSA à promouvoir la conservation du saumon de l'Atlantique de ce côté de l'Atlantique. Au pays de Galles, un sport est roi — le rugby. Et heureusement pour nous, le meilleur joueur au monde est également un pêcheur au saumon. Ce mois-ci, sur [asf.ca](http://asf.ca), vous aurez l'occasion de lire un article sur l'ancien demi de mêlée Gareth Edwards, l'ambassadeur de la conservation du Atlantic Salmon Trust.

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