

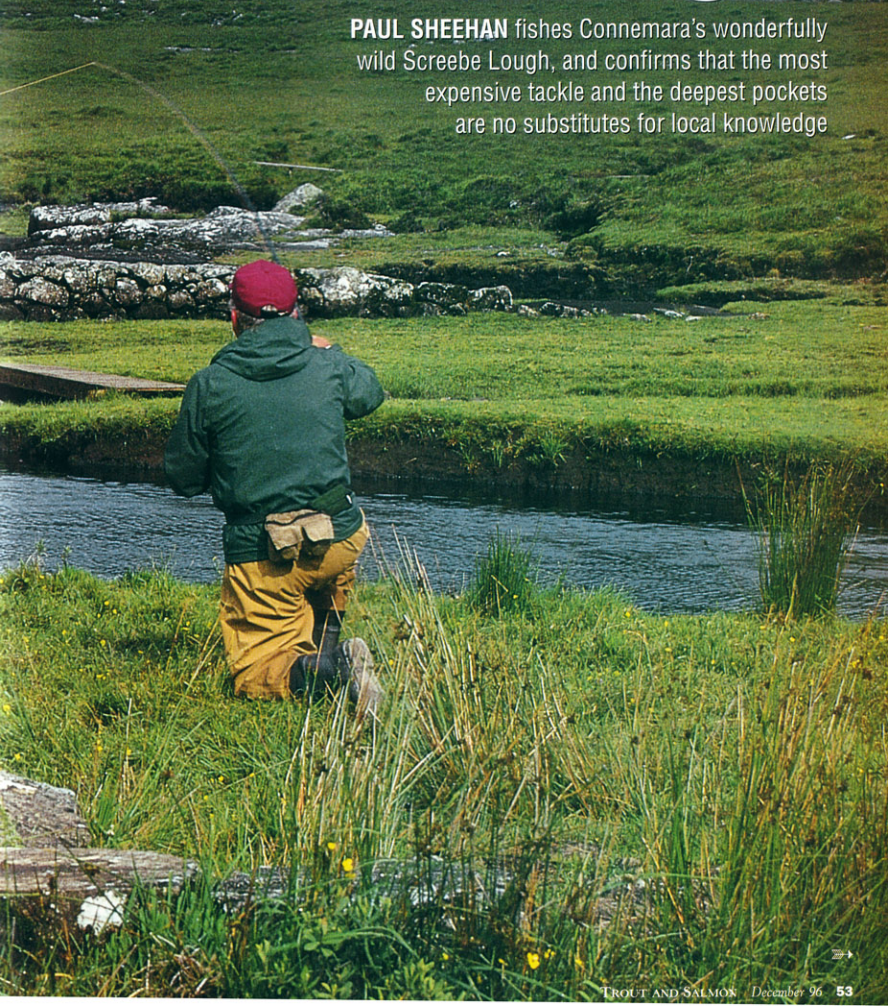
Fishing the Salmon  
Pool, Screebe Lough.





# Love at first sight

**PAUL SHEEHAN** fishes Connemara's wonderfully wild Screebe Lough, and confirms that the most expensive tackle and the deepest pockets are no substitutes for local knowledge





# Love at first sight

continued



Preparing for a day afloat on Screebe.

**T**HE SALMON POOL on Screebe Lough is one of the great pools of Connemara — indeed of Irish — salmon fishing.

A small river runs in at the head, into a bay between the Butts, two arms of cut-stone piers. They are handsome 19th century structures, weathered to a permanence as impressive as that of the bare rock outcrops on the enfolding hills.

I went down to Screebe Lough with Bob Hutchinson on a close July morning. Low cloud hung static overhead and only a faint breeze came in from the sea to the south. We stored our gear in the little white-washed lunch hut, the most comforting of its kind I have ever been in, and now after a century of existence a part of this unique landscape. The two lough boats were pulled up outside and would hardly be used on this calm day.

I asked Bob to go ahead; I have fished long enough to know that in salmon fishing the statement that 90 per cent of angling knowledge is local knowledge is particularly apt.

No amount of tackle, of reading, of money will provide what a keen mind will store from long experience of a particular water; this is what a friend of mine calls "The Knowledge", and it's much more subtle than even the learning of a London cab-driver.

Bob now gillies for anglers on Screebe, but he has fished here for many years and when he was a paying guest he would get up to 30 salmon a year from the water. His opinions

are worthy of attention. He went first to the nearest pier. A good fishing wind, from points west, blows on to the left shoulder here, although it was light enough that morning. Bob fished each bit of water, from beside the pier to as far as he could cast, carefully but at a good pace, so that he

---

**"...the line suddenly pulled away and a fish thrashed on top"**

---

moved steadily along and soon turned its corner, where it heads north towards the mouth of the river.

He retrieved his flies in draws of a foot at a time, at a much faster lick than I have seen elsewhere, but it has worked for him and it soon worked for me, too. He fished two flies of his own devising, one of them the Lady Ethna, a very successful fly for fresh fish at Screebe. Both were dressed on the size 12 and 14 trebles he favours for this water, and it is a fact that Screebe fish are generally caught on small flies. He used a 10 ft rod and an AFTM 7 intermediate line — the standard outfit for Screebe. He also used clear nylon; he believes that he gets more takes on unobtrusive nylon, and, as he fishes

on most days of the season, his opinions are better grounded than most. He favours 15 lb Orvis Superstrong nylon. I've had my doubts about the resin-reinforced leader materials, but whereas the normal nylon I had been using abraded easily, I landed a fish on the Orvis nylon after it had got round rocks twice. I would highly recommend it, or similarly robust nylons, for places like Screebe where the leader can suffer some rough treatment.

Some choice fishing ground is addressed from this corner; it forms the mouth of the bay, and salmon that lie here, sometimes in their hundreds, waiting to run the little river show their backs and tail fins in those easy rolls indicative of resting fish.

Bob has seen them lie still, with the mere points of their tails set like little sails in still water. I had seen a few fish show as I watched Bob. I followed him out, casting a lengthening line, retrieving in short strokes, and had come within five yards of the corner of the pier when the line suddenly pulled away and a fish thrashed on top. This one was always ahead of the game. It ran out then in, and I had to hand-line quickly to catch up with it. Then it surged out again and all the loose line whipped off the rock at my feet after it. It jumped at the extremity of its run, tore to the left, and ran in to my feet again.

I had just caught up with the line cutting into the water five yards out from me when I

saw the fish swim in circles 3 ft down almost beside the pier. There was a slight catch, that terrible slackening in the line and in the nerves, and I felt hollow. It had been a good salmon — 10 lb or more. When I inspected the loose leader, only a few inches of abraded nylon remained below the dropper. The fish had gone under a rock, and my 10 lb nylon had chafed away in a moment.

Bob is a phlegmatic man, and when he offered me some of his 15 lb test material in a disinterested gesture I willingly took it, and later it got me the fish I might otherwise have lost.

The two arms of the piers on the Salmon Pool are only 30 yards apart at their widest, and the bay narrows to about five yards where the little river runs in. I saw Bob fishing this with particular care. I didn't think he had much of a chance, because the breeze didn't penetrate far into the bay, and a hot sun was coming out. But Bob knew what he was about and shouted to me as he hooked a fish despite the apparent deadly stillness of the water. Actually, there is a little thread of current below the bridge and a lie there where often two or three fish are at rest. Bob had raised one of these fish.

It was a very unusual capture, because the fish had taken the little hook deeply, and it penetrated a blood vessel in the gills causing it to bleed badly. The salmon was almost dead when landed, but it was a lovely fish of over 7 lb, silver and sea-liced despite the fact that there had been no significant water in southern Connemara for weeks. That was it for the day; a hot sun burnt off the cloud

and I admired the scenery in the afternoon.

I loved Screebe at first sight, in September 1984, despite my day beginning with a cow eating the chrome trim from one side of my car, and ending with two of us coming away from the lough, beaten, after seeing lots of fish showing but not taking. It is a wild place with the unique southern Connemara harmony of low hills and rock. There is an intimacy in the landscape but it was a terrible country in which to eke a livelihood during the last century. Nowadays, ironically, it gives a special nourishment to minds distracted by the pressures of metropolitan life. It has an incomparable, austere beauty.

## “Only oars may be used, and long may it remain so”

The great virtue of Screebe is that much of the system, right up to the Salmon Pool, is tidal. So the fish move in and out even in dry spells, when other rivers and loughs are low and empty.

The morning I have described followed a week of heatwave; I had driven down to Galway the previous afternoon in a car which was hot even with the air rushing in through open windows. The sky curved blue out into Galway Bay and the meadows were parched brown. But the following morning Bob

caught that fresh silver fish despite not a drop of rain having fallen overnight. It was true “tidy”, as fresh salmon used to be called in parts of Ireland long ago — a fish which had been in the system only a few days.

The Screebe system is big and intricate. It discharges into Camus Bay, through a narrow run which is very brackish. Tidal influences are very strong here and the levels rise and fall considerably with the ebb and flood.

Salmon fishing in this saltwater can be very good at the late stages of the ebb, a fact noted in Grimble (*The Salmon Rivers of Ireland*, 1913). There were three recognised stands in those days, and they have been restored and supplemented. They consist of piers which extend over the greasy rocks and bladderwrack, and have to be maintained by hard work each year.

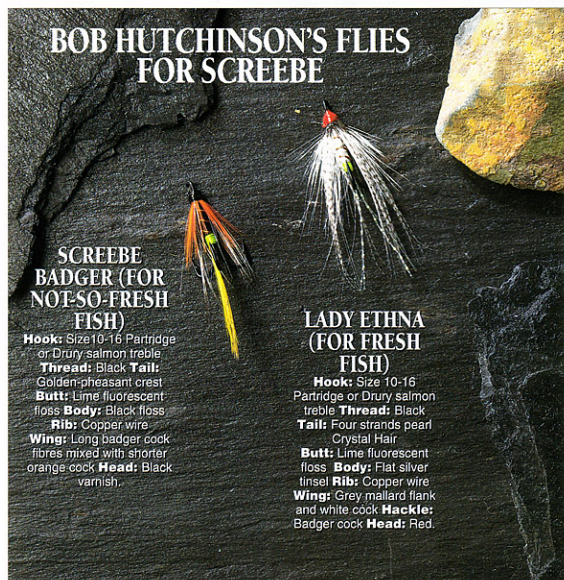
At the latter part of the ebb these command casting positions over fast streams of transparent water, where salmon show regularly; at least they did on the afternoon I fished there with Bob. But even though salmon in the sea won't always take in the hot, bright weather we suffered that afternoon, it was an experience to fish for them with fly in a marine environment.

These stands are now known by the collective name of the Road Pools and they are some of the most productive parts of the Screebe system. Above these are Glencoh and Derryvoniff, both shallow loughs dotted with rocky islets. Neither is fished regularly as it's thought that fish don't lie in them, but this could change. Certainly salmon do lie at the top of Derryvoniff, where the incoming river flows alongside the Butts; this is an excellent stand for fish. The stream which links Derryvoniff with Screebe Lough can also be good, especially with a wave on it; it is reached by boat, usually from Screebe Lough.

Screebe Lough is the centrepiece of the fishery. The lower lough, below the island, was good for sea-trout (I saw a fair number of these fish, and caught several, during my three-day stay). The salmon fishing was concentrated mainly on the upper lough, and unusually the drifts did not need to follow closely the shorelines or promontories, as is often the case in stillwater salmon fishing. Fish seem to lie everywhere in this shallow lough, although this year Padraig, one of the boatmen on Screebe Lough, told me that he met most of his fish near the shorelines.

There are two boats on Screebe Lough, allowing each a princely amount of space on a water which I would guess covers more than 100 acres. Only oars may be used, and long may it remain so. But one may also fish from the bank, and there are a good number of fine stone piers on the northern and southern sides which offer excellent bank-fishing — indeed the best bank-fishing for lough salmon I have ever seen in Ireland. The fishing on this lough is great value, at £40 for two rods (in a boat with oars) per day.

The Salmon Pool is a separate beat, distinguished from the Screebe Lough beat by a group of three stones, inside which a boat



### BOB HUTCHINSON'S FLIES FOR SCREEBE

#### SCREEBE BADGER (FOR NOT-SO-FRESH FISH)

**Hook:** Size 10-16 Partridge or Drury salmon treble  
**Thread:** Black **Tail:** Golden-pheasant crest  
**Butt:** Lime fluorescent floss **Body:** Black floss  
**Rib:** Copper wire  
**Wing:** Long badger cock fibres mixed with shorter orange cock **Head:** Black varnish

#### LADY ETHNA (FOR FRESH FISH)

**Hook:** Size 10-16 Partridge or Drury salmon treble **Thread:** Black  
**Tail:** Four strands pearl Crystal Hair  
**Butt:** Lime fluorescent floss **Body:** Flat silver tinsel **Rib:** Copper wire  
**Wing:** Grey mallard flank and white cock **Hackle:** Badger cock **Head:** Red



# Love at first sight

continued

cannot drift; it is exclusively bank-fishing. Anglers fishing the Salmon Pool have the two great arms of piers as platforms, plus an extensive bank and a smaller pier on the northern shore. They also have the little stretch of river below the footbridge, at the neck of the Salmon Pool, in which fish always seem to lie.

The river winds from the hatchery down to the Salmon Pool and forms another beat. It is extremely good in a high flood, but poor in low water. It has been widened a little, and lies have been created within its narrow banks in recent times, but it's still possibly the smallest genuine salmon river in Ireland.

Only the little Fane in County Louth can compare with it for size. There is a complex network of loughs and streams in the plateau above, containing as much water as the system below the hatchery, but it is less fished. A lot of water is needed to bring salmon up, but when stocked these are also splendid loughs.

The hatchery at Screebe is worth a visit. It is the second oldest hatchery in Ireland, after Oughterard, and has been enhancing the system's salmon stocks for over 100 years. I went through the old fishing register (with entries going back to 1860) when I was last there and an entry in 1909, by the then lessee, Howard St George, notes that the hatchery work was suspended in 1907-1908 to test whether natural recruitment was sufficient to maintain salmon stocks. Obviously it was thought not to be because the hatchery work soon resumed, and has continued ever since.

The hatchery is now under the management of Ethna O'Brien, a woman of keen eye and sardonic wit, to whom you bring your salmon after capture, and who feelingly tells you if it was one of her hatchery babies. I brought her a 6 lb fish which indeed was one of her proteges and for a time — a very short time — I felt slightly guilty.

But soon I was happy again, because after losing a good fish, and not meeting another for a day, to get one on my last day was a relief in a season during which I had lost more salmon than I had landed.

There is good reason for asserting that the entire sporting health of the Screebe estate depends on Ethna's work at the hatchery. The efforts, and the rewards experienced at Burrishoole, Costello and Delphi confirm that salmon stock enhancement and ranching is necessary work for many Galway and Mayo fisheries.

The Screebe fishing register is one of the most interesting of Irish sporting records. And it's of more general note because it contains not only the details of Howard St George's tenancy of the fishery, from 1896 to

1913, but also the records of his subsequent fishing on the best salmon waters of the time. Seasonal totals from Screebe varied between about 50 fish in poor years to over 150 in good years, such as 1903, to approximately three rods.

It was in this year, on June 30, that St George took 18 fish in a day, eight of them before noon. The fact is recorded with cheerful inaccuracy in George Cornwallis-West's *Edwardians Go Fishing* (1932), which



Into a grisle in the Salmon Pool.

## "Bob and his son took seven salmon in a day"

includes some pages of description of Screebe; he has it that St George got 18 before lunch, but that was making too much of a good thing. There is a very interesting photograph in the book of an angler playing a salmon from a boat in saltwater. This is thought to be in the area of what are now called the Road Pools.

The register gives details of incredible fishing experienced by St George after he left Screebe in 1913. In 1914, between June 13 and July 4, he took 175 salmon averaging 20.27 lb from the Moisie River in Canada. His party had 265 fish from the Ballingham beat of the Wye in 1916, averaging 16.87 lb. St George fished Delfur on the Spey, and Upper Floors and Sprouton on the Tweed in 1917; on November 17, he landed Tweed fish of 33 lb, 23 lb, 23 lb, 20 lb and 12 lb.

On February 16, 1921, he had seven Tweed fish: six between 71/2 lb and 91/2 lb, and one weighing 51 lb. The big fish was

landed at dusk, and although the register is not entirely clear, it seems to have taken a fly dressed on a 2/0 hook fished on a 14 ft rod.

Nowadays, anglers are travelling in the opposite direction, and Screebe sees many Continental parties fishing in the summer. A former world casting champion and world record-holder in the single-handed fly event, Hans-Ruedi Hebeisen from Zurich, brings parties of Swiss and German anglers to the fishery — and many of them go home with their first salmon.

Some of these are very inexperienced salmon-fishers, getting their first taste of lough fishing. But during the week before I arrived in mid-July, when fishing conditions were good, all rods took at least one fish each. However, there is certainly room for more fishing effort, and the current annual average of between 100 and 200 fish does not reflect the potential of the system. During my stay, Bob Hutchinson and I both hooked fish on my first morning, before we were becalmed under hot sunshine.

The next day a boat raised and missed two fish, and one was taken from one of the piers on Screebe Lough. The following morning, I had a fish before breakfast, Hans-Ruedi took another just after breakfast, and a Swiss angler lost a good fish after a long fight. I had to leave at lunchtime, so I didn't see what happened in the afternoon, but I would

have been surprised if at least a couple of salmon were not added to the bag.

I saw fish, in numbers, through the system. A couple of weeks later, Bob and his son took seven salmon in a day. These were all fish of good average size, and fish to almost 20 lb are taken every year.

Much of the June and July fishing is pre-booked, but there are good chances of fish, at reduced charges, if the runs arrive, in May, and excellent opportunities in August and September, when the system is usually full of salmon. Special fishing and accommodation packages are available which include residence in Screebe House, a beautiful Georgian house with views over Camus Bay and a uniquely relaxed atmosphere, more a country house than a hotel.

### FACTFILE

The Road Pools and the river cost £30 each a day.

The Salmon Pool costs £80 a day.

A boat on Screebe Lough costs £40 a day

— ie £20 each for two anglers.

B&B in Screebe House is £35. Special

accommodation/fishing packages are

also available. These include free fishing

on brown trout loughs in the system.

Contact Screebe House, Camus,

Connemara, Co Galway. Tel: 00353 915

74110. Fax: 00353 91 574179.