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LICE,



by Jim McBeth

IN the gloaming of a winter's evening, the lady laird has patrolled the river's edge watching for a rare flash of quicksilver – a signal that the salmon have come home, driven by a genetic imperative to make the epic voyage from the Atlantic to the place of their birth.

Jenny Scobie can remember when the flowing, crystalline water of the Ullapool River, teemed with leaping fish. Nowadays, sadly, she lives in hope rather than the certainty of witnessing one of the most iconic images of wild Scotland.

Over the last 30 years, the numbers have dwindled to a hardy few. Those that do not survive have, she says, been destroyed on their spring migration, engulfed by billions of sea lice surrounding the underwater cages of fish farms which lie on their route from the river to the sea.

The laird of Rhidoroch – a 20,000-acre estate in Wester Ross, 60 miles from Inverness – could be forgiven for feeling a kinship with the salmon.

She is herself the rarest of creatures. Not only is she a woman, but an environmentalist and a Scot – an even greater rarity when so many estates have been colonised by wealthy magnates with the shallowest of roots in Highland soil.

The recently widowed farmer is also a person of passion and she has made it her mission to see a return to the glory days of the wild salmon.

To achieve that, the Scottish Government must be forced to make the Ullapool River a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), a designation which could curtail the activities of the fish farms in the region.

Almost the entire length of the river, which has a salmon gene pool established over hundreds of years, runs through her land close to three of the 250 fish farms on the West Coast.

So far, she has been 'stonewalled' by the farmers – and their political apologists in government – who, it is alleged, continue to ignore the 'overwhelming' evidence that the second largest industry of its kind in the world is having a detrimental effect on the fringe of one of Europe's last wildernesses.

It is a fight she will take to Europe, asking EU commissioners to order the government to end what one eminent campaigner describes as 'an act of environmental vandalism – unwarranted, unnecessary and disgraceful'.

The Perthshire-born landowner, who fell in love with a laird after he 'chased me halfway across New Zealand', is determined all fish farm cages will be relocated to land or, if underwater, at least 15 miles from the mouths of rivers with a wild salmon population.

Our politicians are not interested in our heritage,' says 53-year-old Mrs Scobie, adding: 'The salmon are one of our wonders and I will not rest until they are restored.'

It is a fight she is waging in spite of great personal loss.

Her husband Ewen died just four weeks ago at the age of 60 after a long illness. She had been married to the laird, who was also a third generation Army officer, serving with the Queen's Own Highlanders, for 27 years.

'Ewen was no less passionate than I,' says the mother of three grown-up daughters who, as a younger woman travelled extensively in Australasia.

The lady laird, born Jenny Constable in Bridge of Cally, near Blairgowrie, adds: 'I returned with Ewen in 1982 and I have been here ever since.'

The couple lived in a 100-year-old mansion and created one of the finest mixed sporting estates in Scotland, offering shooting, fishing and holiday accommodation.

'It has been fraught over the last few weeks,' she admits, adding: 'I'm sure I'll get back to normal soon, but looking after the estate and preparing the case hasn't left me much spare time.'

Her case is contained in an 80-page dossier. Compiled by environmental lawyer Guy Linley-Adams, it presents arguments for a ban on fish farms within the 15-mile exclusion zone.

It is an argument that has won the support of conservationists, who claim politicians have been too quick to accept the salmon producers' 'bland reassurances' that the problem of sea lice is not as bad as suggested.

However, some experts believe the problem is 'out of control' and they accuse the Scottish Government of turning a blind eye, fearful of upsetting an industry which accounts for 40 per cent of Scotland's food exports, sustains 6,000 jobs and generates £500million a year.

They claim politicians will be less likely to police the industry since First Minister Alex Salmond signed an accord with the Chinese to export thousands of tons of farmed fish – a deal that has been castigated.

Andrew Flintoff, editor of Trout and Salmon magazine, says: 'Mr Salmond crows that the Scottish fish farming industry may need to double production to satisfy Chinese demand.'

The implications of increasing, let alone doubling, farmed salmon production are terrifying. It is recklessly irresponsible without rectifying the dire existing problems, particularly the spread of sea lice.

'Wild fish, which migrate from rivers to the sea, are not designed to cope with more than the odd louse. As fragile smolts run the gauntlet on their migration routes, they are "ambushed".'

'The attachment of more than ten lice is almost invariably fatal. There is no such thing as "sustainable" farmed salmon and evidence is growing that farms are losing the battle against lice.'

It is a claim refuted by the industry and the Scottish Government.

Scott Landsburgh, chief executive of the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation (SSPO), said: 'There is no basis for the claim by the landowner (Mrs Scobie).'

'Wild fish numbers were in decline before the advent of salmon farming.'

'SSPO members have invested more than £84million over three years and the Highlands and Islands continue to be the significant beneficiaries.'

'Salmon exports have increased by over 500 per cent in the last 20 years.'

But Mrs Scobie and her supporters claim their case is reinforced by Norway, the world's largest producer, where the government's Directorate of Nature Management has called for a 50 per cent cut in production because the number of lice on each caged fish exceeded official limits.

Mrs Scobie, who has already spent £10,000 on the legal battle, says: 'Farmed fish have little more room to swim in than a bathtub of water each. There is no way to rid them of the problem of sea lice.'

It is galling, she adds, that the Scottish Government continues to trot out the 'mantra' that fish farming does no 'proven' damage to wild fish.

Figures from the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency indicate that, over the past five years, farmers have used an increasing amount of chemicals to kill lice on farmed fish.

Mrs Scobie believes her plea to EU Commissioners offers the hope that fish farming could be subjected to more stringent controls to eradicate sea lice and reverse the weakening of salmon gene pools through cross-breeding with fish farm 'escapees'.

The gene pool in her Ullapool River

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