

CHASING AN ICEL

With our cost-price trip salmon fishing on the river Eagle in Labrador cancelled because of Covid, we were pretty downhearted. But there was a glimmer of hope. Iceland remained green on prime minister Boris Johnson's traffic-light criteria.

I phoned Arni Baldursson, the CEO of Laxa-a.is, whom I had first met in Russia ten years ago. (Our most recent encounter was, astonishingly, in the middle of the Orinoco river in Colombia in 2020.) The fishing safari that he offered was initially three rivers, the Stora Laxa, Sog Asgardur and Tungufljot.

Icelandic river fishing is notably expensive, particularly for salmon, so Richard and I decided to create our own challenge that we named The Iceland Macnab: to catch a salmon, an arctic char, a brown trout and a cod during our five-day trip (and leaving the Tungufljot for another day).

The idea of leaving the UK during the never-ending Covid-19 restrictions seemed at times impossible, and the concern of enhanced travel restrictions while away was worse still. However, with evidence that the vaccines were working, the trip was looking hopeful. As an aside, the vaccine has been omnipresent in my recent life.

As a general practitioner, I was involved like so many others with the vaccine roll-out, started by four practices in early January in the East Devon Tennis Centre. This was chosen for its locality and airy space, but the -1C temperature made the day-long vaccine shifts somewhat of an ordeal. Remarkably the elderly, wartime generation, first in line for the vaccine, showed no hesitation as they crunched their way up the icy incline to the centre.

They all turned up and not one failed to attend for their dose of either Pfizer Biontech or the Oxford's Astra Zeneca vaccine. As they came and went, I shivered in my booth, wearing my Russian fishing hat and musing that, with every vaccine administration, I would be one step closer

Duncan Hall, right, adds spice to a trip to Iceland by creating a tough challenge: for himself and his companion: to catch a salmon, a brown trout, a char and a cod within the five days

to casting my double-handed salmon rod down some lovely pool.

Touching down in Keflavik airport on July 12, I felt that long-awaited thrill of anticipation for the forthcoming fishing. Exiting the baggage area, we were obliged to enter the Something To Declare channel to sterilise our fishing gear, and not obliged though chose (in the interests of our bank accounts) to dip into the duty-free to collect a supply of drinks (the tax on alcohol in Iceland is prohibitively costly). Car hire is also expensive, and more so for the essential 4X4 required to traverse Icelandic terrain. We chose a Dacia at £800 for the five-day trip, although the higher wheelbase of Suzuki Jimny would, on reflection, have been preferable for crossing the smaller rivers.



Our first fishing was on the stunning Stora Laxa beat 4, where Richard and I had fished once before in late September 2013. The 55-mile river has carved an eight-mile furrow through the Lazargljufur canyon, in which the top beat is 8km long.

The river is the most remote, precipitous and spectacular river that I have encountered, and this beat remains Arni Baldursson's favourite. He, let's face it, can fish any salmon river on the planet. He has fished this river since the age of 12, when he used to camp on its banks. Having landed close to 17,000 salmon thus far in his lifetime, he is one of the world's most expert salmon fishermen.

There is always the urge to rush to the pool of yesteryear when the fishing was perfect, as we believed it to be in



A fresh 63cm fish from the Klapparenef on a hitched Haugur fly, fished sub-surface, completed the first part of the

ANDIC MACNAB

September 2013. During that trip, the Heimahyljir or Home Pool had a large head of salmon.

Richard caught his first salmon, one of four including a fine 16-pounder, in this pool. But this year there was no sign of fish, which might have been a reflection of the different water height or the early time in the season – or maybe just that the salmon remained unresponsive at the bottom of the pool.

On this occasion, Richard opted for the uncontested pool, and I drove the 4X4 to what I thought was the parking area we had last used in 2013. We were both wrong. Richard managed the challenging 600ft descent intact, while I continued to ground the Dacia as it lurched down a steep track towards the precipitous cliff above the river.

The track seemed to disappear before my eyes. I braked rapidly and stepped out to view my proposed route which, as it turned out, would have led me straight off the cliff.

There are over 50 named pools on this 8km beat alone, and the mountainous terrain makes it appear even longer. Furthermore, as is the norm in Iceland, the beat is shared by a maximum of four rods. The river was moderately high, but despite this, the water remained a clear, stunning cobalt blue because the riverbed is composed solely of volcanic basalt without alluvial deposits.

On the first evening, we met Philip and Victoria Paul from Germany. This was his ninth trip to this beat and his knowledge was useful on access to some of the pools, which for us had appeared frankly dangerous to attempt without mountaineering skills. There is always the reminder of Iceland's geothermal activity beneath the surface, with an ever-present hydrogen sulphide smell permeating even the sinks and toilets. But it does of course offer a continuous supply of hot water, and this produces an unlimited supply for the obligatory hot tub.

Relaxing in that hot tub with a glass of wine on the first evening in our self-



Duncan was pleased to switch from the Covid vaccine to the business of deciding the right flies to take for a five-day trip

service lodge, we planned to drive to the top of the beat on the following day and progress slowly back to the lodge. It rained daily throughout our trip with a continuous upstream wind. Although we rigged single-handed rods to fish hitched flies for the smaller pools and double handers for the larger, it was the latter, using floating lines with a single spey cast that was the order of the day.

Small flies are preferred in Iceland, probably due to the water clarity. Ally's Shrimp in sizes 10-12 is a favourite, along with the longer hair-winged flies like Collie Dog and Sunray Shadow. I landed one salmon on the Klapparenef at the top of the beat on a hitched Haugur fly fished subsurface. Not a monster, but a fresh 63cm fish, photographed and released.

Our fishing ended promptly at midday the following day. But before leaving with newly acquired information, we accessed some of the six pools walled by a high rocky canyon, where the river turns at a sharp right angle. Salmon could be seen at the bottom of the clear water, but despite casting over them with a range of flies, they remained untempted.

The following day, we headed for the Sog Asgardur and a cabin hidden away in

the woodland, with of course the ubiquitous hot tub. This extraordinary river is a mixture of lakes and river, running through a flat flood plain. I had fished the East Ranga just after the banking crisis of 2010 when the fishing prices were bearable, but this is sadly no longer true. The Sog river has similarity to the East Ranga as it descends through its flat river valley. In contrast to the Stora Laxa, where there are very few birds, this lowland river is an ornithologist's paradise. Arctic terns hovered overhead, fresh from their epic migration from the Antarctic; golden plovers and snipe flew up from the arctic shrub and even a pair of rock ptarmigans scurried over the vegetation as we approached the river.

When we arrived at the Sog in cold, blustery rain and the ever-present wind, it was challenging to identify where best to fish. River or the lake? We had booked the trout beat, but were informed that there were three natural croys on the left bank where salmon hold. A panicky call to Arni enlightened us.

"Take two rods: a double-handed with one fly only, a Sunray Shadow to fish the croys, and a 5-7-weight single-handed with floating line, using an upstream-

Angling Travel

nymph for the arctic char. Start from the bench and fish downstream right into the lake. “

We struggled on that evening and returned the following day, refreshed from the hot tub and consolidated the information we had obtained from the Icelandic fishing master and our previous day’s experience. I rapidly caught four arctic char on a red weighted worm imitation cast upstream, but no fish weighed more than 1lb.

Richard had more luck; fishing a strong back-eddy above the lakes. As his weighted Hare’s Ear nymph entered the relatively still glassy blue water, it was hit by a sizeable fish. He struggled for some time to take control, and after some difficulty, I helped him net a fine char of 4lb.

The Sog is renowned for its arctic char. These stunningly beautiful fish, from the same family as trout and salmon, are a different genus, *salvelinus alpinus*. As the name suggests, these are only found in the

It’s possible to fish many of the lakes and isolated rivers at a fraction of the cost of salmon fishing by using the Veidikortid or Fishing Card

colder arctic and sub-arctic waters.

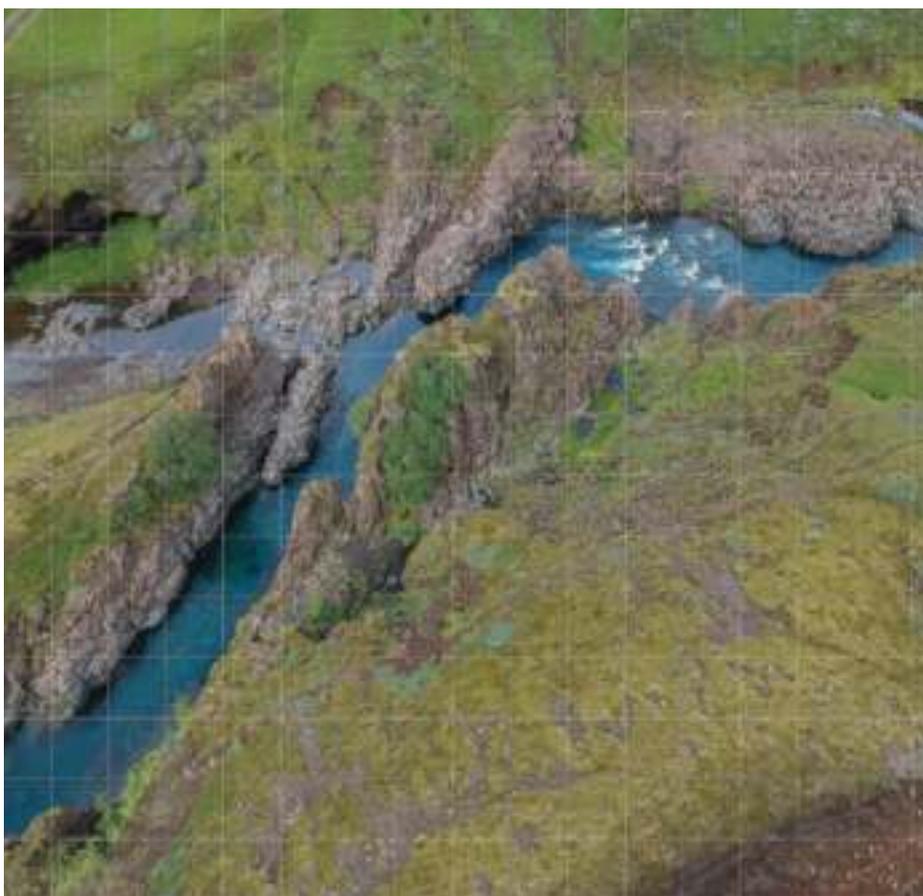
A short rest of the back eddy and Richard had the third of the four Macnab fish: a lovely 3lb speckled brown trout. These Icelandic trout seem to have a more silver appearance than our brown trout.

The final day, I fished downstream into the lake, and on my last cast, vocalising this to any arctic tern that cared to listen, saw the flash as an arctic char of 2½lb took my Hare’s Ear and was successfully landed. The sun had just come out, apparently a condition which is more conducive to char fishing.

We headed for the capital, Reykjavik, with just 24 hours of our trip to go, and it was time to complete an obligatory Covid-19 test before we boarded our return flight. Normally this would have involved and expensive laboratory test in Reykjavik but I had bought an approved Hughes ACON Biotech antigen test from Cerulean Health, with which we could self-test and email with passport details to the UK company. Waiting for us when we arrived at the hotel in the capital was a printed



Beat Four of the Stora Laxa, with 50 named pools, had produced well in 2013 – but not on this occasion



The water, a deep cobalt blue, looks wonderful, but it demands a challenging 600-foot descent to reach the river

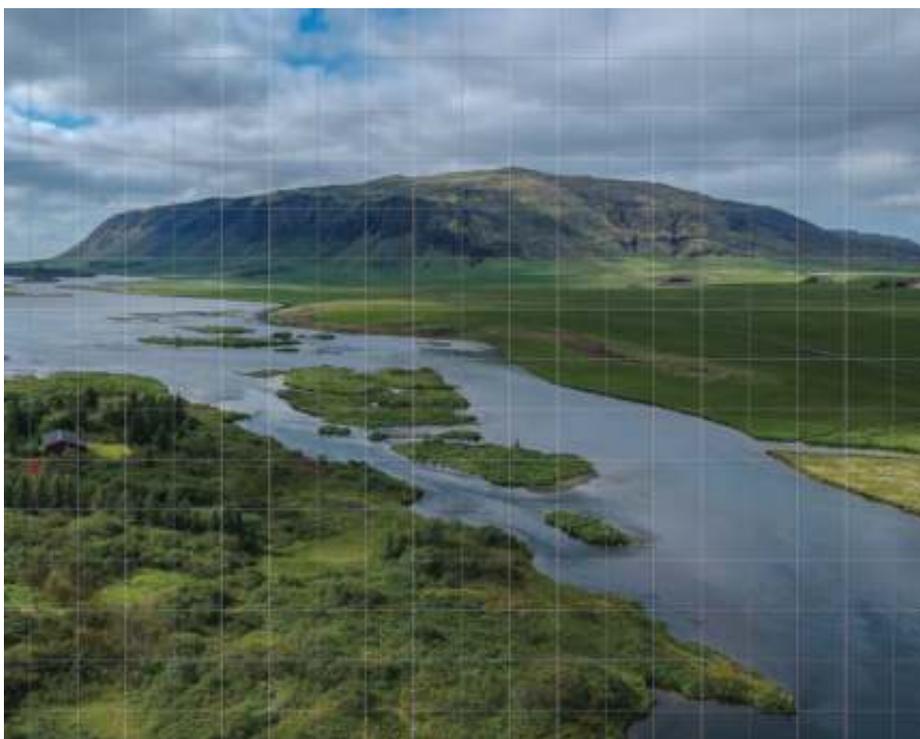
Covid-19 negative certificate and seamless return to the UK.

We drove straight to the harbour in Reykjavik and located a tackle shop, where we bought mackerel bait and information as to where we could cast our bait in search for a cod. There are a number of harbours around the capital supporting their fleet of trawlers and cruise liners, and we headed to one of these.

Within minutes, we had a brace of dabs, but the last species for our agreed Macnab was cod, so we headed for a nearby breakwater, climbed down over the lava boulders and cast optimistically. This actually proved none too hard, as we hauled up ten cod (or rather, codling), coalfish, scorpion fish and several haddock. Sadly none was of much size nor on the fly, but it was our final challenge and we fried a selection for our last evening meal.

This was my third trip to Iceland and certainly not my last. It is a truly unique country with a healthy stock of fauna and flora, stunning scenery – although generally expensive fishing. However, the prohibitive costs are linked to river fishing and especially the pursuit of salmon. On the consolation side, fish numbers are high and the number of anglers chasing them exceptionally low.

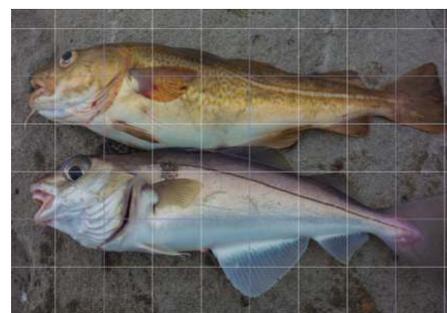
It is also possible to fish many of the lakes and isolated rivers at a fraction of the cost of salmon fishing using the Veidikortid* or Fishing Card. With this, it is possible to fish many of the lakes and on the highland



The river or the lake? It wasn't going to be easy on the Sog Asgardur, with cold, blustery rain and the salmon in dour mood

rivers at as little as £15 a day. This also includes the famous Thingvallavatn, the largest natural lake in Iceland with a deepest point of 114 metres, where hundreds of brown trout over 10lb along with large arctic char are caught annually.

*<http://veidikortid.is/index.php?lang=en>
Duncan Hall has flyfished for 50 years in more than 30 countries and is the author of *Fly Fishing the World on a Shoestring*, which is available from his website www.bigsalmonco.uk



The final piece of the challenge: a brace of codling



The gloriously rich colours of this brown trout were more than matched by the fish that fell to a Hare's Ear nymph, this lovely char weighing around 4lb. Both were caught on the Sog

Zander are not the Trust's remit

IN THE article in issue No 132 of *Classic Angling*, John Bailey makes a reference to an organisation that he calls Canal and Rivers Trust. To the best of my knowledge, there is no such organisation of that name.

However, one reasonably assumes that the author is actually referring to the charity based in England and Wales, whose correct name is Canal & River Trust.

It is my belief that the author could well have committed an act of libel with the implication that the Trust is "absolute in its desire to obliterate zander from the river Severn" and that there is "skulduggery and dirty work at the crossroads".

For the avoidance of any possible doubt, Canal & River Trust has no remit for the management of fish stocks on the Severn. We are merely the



navigation authority here, aside from our ownership of a small number of river lock islands.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, Canal & River Trust has never undertaken any zander management activity on the Severn.

Should Mr Bailey wish to independently confirm this fact, I would suggest that you contact the Environment Agency (EA), which will have records of any consents issued under the Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act for such work.

Zander were illegally introduced into the river Severn some number of years ago, assumedly by anglers. Any zander management activity on

this river, if any has ever actually occurred, would most likely have been undertaken by the EA.

It is my understanding from conversations with various officers that the EA may have possible concerns about the impact of this invasive non-native species to potentially reduce salmon smolt numbers, but you would need to confirm that with them directly.

Regarding Mr Bailey's later comment that the Canal & River Trust holds that zander are not indigenous to the UK or the Severn, the fact is that it is a matter for government and government departments, and not for charities such as the Canal & River Trust to determine which species of fauna or flora are classified as native or non-native.

Anyone wishing to change

the law regarding invasive non-native species is perhaps best served by lobbying nationally elected politicians, who have the power to amend or even repeal conservation legislation such as the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 and the 2015 Keeping and Introduction of Fish Regulations.

As a responsible charity, the Canal & River Trust must adhere to the current legislation, whether the individuals who are employed by it agree with that legislation or not.

John W Ellis
National fisheries and
angling manager
Canal & River Trust

The Editor writes: We are happy to correct any factual errors that appeared in John Bailey's article, and John himself, in the current issue (page 28) acknowledges these.

Angling Heritage, which was set up in memory of Fred J Taylor in 2009, has become one of the world's largest historical archives on angling. Anybody can use and enjoy the hundreds of videos, recordings, letters, articles, magazines and historic tackle. Simply go online to www.anglingheritage.org. It has also established a display of ephemera in Torrington Museum in Devon. The highlights include Churchill's rod, featured in *Classic Angling*; the very first carbon-fibre rod made by Hardy's (donated by Fred Buller); Chris Yates' prototype Barbus Maximus rod as used in *A Passion for Angling* – and much more. Angling Heritage is a charitable trust. You can help it continue to grow its archive and become an invaluable resource for anglers and researchers worldwide.



Here are some ways you can play a part.

- become a member, which also gives you total access to everything in our archives;
- send us copies of your videos, recordings or letters of historic material to add to our collection;
- volunteer to help us build a comprehensive archive of oral, written and filmed material on angling.

With your support, the archive can become THE home of angling's rich oral and written history.

For more information, contact us through the website or call +44 (0)1805 625888

Angling Heritage: www.anglingheritage.org

More than one Leney ca

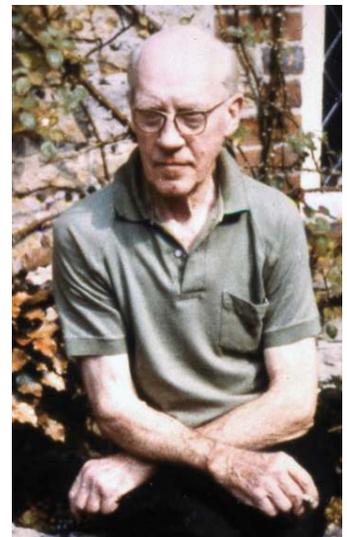
I WAS amazed to read about the closure of the London Zoo aquarium in *Classic Angling* No 128, especially as the event for some reason seemed to receive no publicity whatsoever elsewhere.

I have so many memories of going there as a teenager (and afterwards) to be amazed at the range of fish (at one stage, there was even a large arapaima in a huge tank) and to marvel at the size of Richard Walker's famous 44lb carp.

A friend claims that Donald Leney of the Surrey Trout Farm actually delivered other carp (besides Walker's fish, albeit indirectly) to the zoo aquarium. Is this true?

Robert Gould
by email

Your friend is actually correct. In Kevin Clifford's wonderful *A History of Carp Fishing Revisited* (2011), he states: "At times, he (Leney) managed to get his



Donald Leney: sent other carp to the zoo

hands on much larger fish, and on one occasion, provided the London Zoo for its opening with six king carp weighing 10-20lb each, which he imported from the Dutch fish farm. The largest, a leather carp, weighed 21lb and