

Fishing the River Suir at Cahir in Ireland

By

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The River Suir

The River Suir¹ in Ireland is renowned for its game angling, holding both salmon and brown trout. The Suir main channel and its tributaries flow mainly through counties Tipperary, Kilkenny and Waterford, though very small pockets of the catchment are within Limerick and Cork. It rises in the Devils Bit Mountains and flows in a southerly direction until meeting the Knockmealdown Mountain range where the river changes its course northwards. Further downstream its course is again altered, where, at Knocklofty, the river turns east passing north of the Comeragh Mountains and continues to flow on through Waterford City until it enters the sea at Waterford Harbour. The river is tidal to a point upstream of Carrick-on-Suir.

The river is a paradise for both the trout and the angler. Unlike most rivers, it cannot easily be divided into distinct ecological zones. Almost its entire channel from Templemore down to the estuary at Carrick-on-Suir is a continuous series of shallow and deep (< 2.0m) glides interrupted occasionally by shallow riffles. It simply increases in width as one proceeds downstream, remaining relatively shallow and maintaining its very good trout carrying capacity over practically its entire length. It has many tributaries, which drain large areas of limestone and these give to the river as a whole, most of the best characteristics of a chalk stream.

The River Suir was deemed to surpass the celebrated chalk streams the Test and the Itchen by Lord Grey of Fallodon. In his book "Fly Fishing" first published in 1899, he wrote of the River Suir when he fished it in 1880 "in May and in June it might be the finest dry fly fishing in the United Kingdom". However, the fishing on Irish rivers is challenging. The rivers have abundant fly life therefore making the trout very selective and they often refuse a fly. Lord Grey also wrote "There were trout visibly and audibly rising, which had never seen an artificial dry fly.... They defeated me utterly. I walked and knelt and waded and laboured and perspired under August sun without success."

In most areas the river bed is a stable stone / gravel / sand matrix which is reasonably firm. This is a big strong river and difficult to wade particularly in high water levels. Although the trout stocks are abundant, remember that this does not make them easy to catch. They are extremely selective, so fine leaders and small flies are the norm. This is not due to over fishing; it just appears that these have always been very smart fish.

Insect hatches on the River Suir are prolific, with good hatches of blue wing olive , sedges, spurlings and many other olives. The hatches have declined in recent years as with most rivers, however during warm balmy evenings the river and its tributaries come alive with trout.

The highlight of the angling season is the "Evening Rise" during the summer months from mid-May until the end of August, From 7pm onwards, the river comes alive with spinner falls and hatches, for example in the earlier part of the evening the angler can encounter blue wing olive duns, followed by some spinner action, and after that if conditions are right a hatch of sedge. It is a technical river to fish, with lots of slow pools and "slick" water with conflicting currents, making it hard to achieve a long drift. This adds to the mystery and beauty of the river, making the Suir a fascinating river to fish.

I have been to the Suir twice – once in August 2012 and recently in mid June 2014. I mainly fished the area controlled by the Cahir Angling Club. This area continues from a point 200 m downstream of Cahir town to Garnavilla Ford. It is an excellent trout fishery. The river is broad at this point with a brisk flow and has an average depth of approximately one meter. The banks are quite safe and offer no hindrance, with access to the river for the purpose of wading being achieved quite easily. Great quantities of rocks are placed around the river bed and they provide some very good cover for the trout. There is an excellent population of trout along this stretch some of which are up to 30 cm and more.

Cahir town

Cahir Castle, which is situated on a small island in the River Suir, is the town's main tourist attraction. Next to the castle near the centre of town is the Leaping Salmon sculpture which depicts the centuries old link with fishing. The ancient name of the town is *Cathair Dún Iascaigh* meaning "Town of the fortification abounding in fish"

You can even fish the weir in front of the castle!



August 2012 trip

On my first trip I went with an old fishing buddy David who had been to the Suir a few times before. Based on his previous trips we were very optimistic about the fishing. We planned our trip to the finest detail - and on the basis that conditions would be picture perfect. Well, we arrived and found the Suir to be in flood – and it rained everyday while we were there. We were mostly accompanied by Willy, a local (unemployed) fisherman whose father and brother were both Irish fly-fishing national champions. Willie’s knowledge was invaluable in the bad conditions.

According to local fishermen, this had been the worst weather for fishing since 1946! The River Suir was 1-2 metres higher than usual and wading was near impossible in the best beats. In the places we could wade, it was difficult going with very strong streams and dirty water. Looking at some pictures of the prime fishing times in the past few years, the river looks fantastic- when we were there the river was dark and foreboding, a yellowy black colour. Wading chest high at times was frightening – especially in the dark when the fishing tended to be the best. Because of the “floods’ we also fished two lakes a couple of hours away in the County Kerry.

Around the town of Cahir area we fished a few stretches of the Suir and the Aherlow, one of its tributaries. Despite the poor conditions, we caught many small brown trout – none bigger than about 8 inches. We mainly nymphed upstream with two to three tiny nymphs and a strike indicator. We did not have much luck on dry flies and the hatches were insignificant. We fished most of the day and then late into the night – we were really desperate! In the four days that we fished the rivers. We each caught about 30-40 small browns.



The two days when conditions were really bad, we drove to the County Kerry and fished two lakes. The first was Lough Lean which is part of the River Laune catchment in Killarney, and the second was Lough Caragh which is at the mouth of the beautiful Glencar valley and is noted especially for its spring salmon and grilse fishing and, to a lesser extent, for its brown trout and sea trout.



These are really big waters compared to our South African dams. The style of fishing the lochs was new to me. We drifted in fairly strong winds and cast out intermediate lines with a washing line of 3 to 4 wet flies. The retrieve was fairly slow. Despite two days of hard fishing on the loughs, we only managed to land two sea run trout and a few small browns



June 2014 Trip

I was in Europe and the UK visiting family and friends. I intended fishing in Wales when my old friend Hugh O'Reilly convinced me to join him on a trip to the Suir with the West End Fly Fishing Club. There were eight of us fishing on the trip.

This time the weather was perfect and the river was running just right. Being there at the summer solstice also meant that the light was in our favour - we could fish all day and way into the "night" Our days started with a huge Irish breakfast at 9am - then we fished from 10.30 am until about 3pm when stopped for lunch at the local pub. We then napped until we fishing started again at about 8pm - we stayed on the water until about 1 am.

We only fished stretches of the Suir, mainly at Swiss Cottage and the adjacent Leamy's Lane. On One day we fished a few kilometres upstream from Swiss cottage.



During the day we fished 2 or three small nymphs upstream with strike indicators. On the one day I fished with Tommy, a local fisherman and an expert nymphster. He showed me exactly where to find the fish, how to detect the take and when to strike....there were lots of shouts of “you’re too late!”

During the evening, we usually started with nymphs but changed to dry flies when the hatch began. I was amazed by the intensity of the hatch on the Suir – the insects were thick in the air and trout rising everywhere! The hatch only lasted about 45 minutes to an hour after which we fished small wet flies casting across and letting them drift down with the current, the take usually happened at the end of the drift.

Everyone caught a fair amount of fish between 10 and 20 a day – the fish were not very big and a decent sized fish would be about 10-12 inches. We did spot some larger fish and a few of those were lost. The biggest fish caught was not more than about 800g. The fish in the Suir are wild and all in excellent condition.



Flies used

I bought about 15 flies in London – on the advice of an angler who was familiar with the Suir. All the anglers tied had their own flies and were willing to share and swop and I was given many different flies to use. Besides nymphs, my fly box of South African flies was considered largely inappropriate.

Dry flies: A range of differently tied caddis flies and duns were used by most of us. Some of the other favourites flies were ginger quill, black midge, Greenwell's glory, sherry spinner, claret duster and badger grey.

Nymphs: We used weighted and unweighted nymphs which included copper john, a range of PTNs, black spinner, hare's ear, Jona bug.

Wet flies: I used invictas, a range of spiders, Woodcock and Greenwell's, ginger quill, Wickham's fancy.

ⁱ See <http://www.fishinginireland.info/trout/suir.htm>