

South Hams Fish-In 2001

Peter Macconnell and Andy Rye organised the South Hams Fish In for the weekend of 29 June - 1 July 2001

On a pleasant Friday evening at the start of the last weekend of June 2001, a group of thirteen bass anglers gathered in the South Hams village of Torcross; Mike Oliver, Ross Wilcox and his girlfriend Sue, Bob Spurgeon, Michael Fanner, Steve Pitts, Di Rawles, Steve Pruet, Peter Horner, Gordon Entwistle, Geoff Hancock and ourselves. On Saturday, David Riley, Mike Ladle, Alan Vaughan and Steve Veitch joined us.

Accommodation was provided by the Startlea and Waterside Guest Houses, which adjoined each other on the sea front. The Start Bay Inn, providers of suitable food and alcoholic beverages were but a 70-yard walk away. The venue was chosen partly because it is very scenic, and partly because it is more or less half way between Plymouth and Torbay, giving us reasonable access to forty miles or more of coastline. In the event, we fished less than ten miles of it.

The primary focus was to be fly-fishing and spinning, because it is what we like. We thought that if we could lure (no pun intended) some members down who were fairly expert in these methods, we could learn something from them. We also thought that other members might have the same idea, which proved to be true. We did not discourage bait fishing, and four members did so during the weekend. Our further intention was to resurrect the instructive aspect of BASS Fish-Ins that used to be quite common in the days of Harry Parnham and other BASS luminaries. We were very lucky to have Michael Fanner and Gordon Entwistle amongst the group. They are expert fly casters by anybody's standards.

Fishing began on Friday evening with a visit by Steve Pitts, Bob Spurgeon, Geoff Hancock and us to small South Devon Cove. Geoff and Peter wielded their fly rods, Steve and Andy their plugging rods, whilst Bob did whatever it is he does with a wax filled Jif Lemon and a rubber eel. The result was one bass of four and a half pounds to Andy, taken on a blue and chrome Bomber. The fish, photographed and videoed, was released. 10.30 pm. saw us ready for the pub, a beer or two and preparations for an early start the next day.

Saturday morning brought the first bass to the fly. A four am. start found us spread out between sandy and rocky marks, fishing the last three hours of a falling neap tide. Peter and Geoff both landed a bass on fly, and each hooked and lost another. Peter's was but a schoolie, barely two pounds, but Geoff's was better at about three and a half pounds. Andy had a schoolie and a couple of small pollack to the plug, whilst Steve had a wrasse to the same method. Elsewhere Di Rawles had been out with the spinning rod and seen fish moving. Unfortunately there were no takes. It is possible that the fish were mullet. It was time for breakfast, but that's another story.

By mid Saturday morning the group was joined by David Riley, Mike Ladle, and Alan Vaughan. Before members split up and headed in various directions there was a chance to examine Mike's spinning gear at close quarters. If ever evidence was needed that it is thinking anglers that catch fish, not those with the most up to date and shiny tackle, here it was. Ross and Sue set off to fish a rock mark for pollack, whilst others headed to another piece of rocky shoreline where Mike had a bass of two and a half pounds on his first cast with a small Rapala. Alan tagged the fish. Other anglers had follows from bass but no other fish were caught. By mid afternoon it was time to catch up on sleep lost the night before.



On the Saturday evening the most successful anglers were Gordon Entwistle and Peter Horner who caught six bass between them whilst bait fishing on a beach mark. Several other fish were hooked and lost. David Riley took a schoolie from the same mark that Di had fished in the morning, so maybe some of them were not mullet, but bass after all. Andy and Steve Veitch walked another stretch of rocky coast and got into a real blitz of mackerel and one solitary bass to the plug. All the fish were very close in.

Early on the Sunday morning the keener ones of us were up again by 4.00 am. fishing sandy coves, reef and rock. Geoff, who by this stage was showing not only his expertise with the fly rod, but his focus on catching fish, landed another two bass, a couple of pollack, and a wrasse as well, all on a G Loomis rod, a beautiful twenty year old Hardy reel, an intermediate nine weight line, and a selection of flies of his own tying. Steve Pitts had a "basslet" of barely 12 ounces to the plug. By this stage in the weekend a certain element had more or less given up fishing in order to concentrate on being "grockles", but again more of that later. It was time for another breakfast.

By 10.30 on Sunday morning, the group convened on the beach outside the Guest Houses for a session of fly-casting tuition led by Michael Fanner and Gordon Entwistle. Michael is a qualified professional game fishing instructor and a member of the Advanced Professional Game Angling Instructors (A.P.G.A.I.), and Gordon is certainly a good enough fly caster to be a professional. Seven or eight of us had a go, under the tutelage of these two generous souls. From rank beginners, to regular fly-fishers on the look out for technical tips to develop their technique, all seemed to enjoy and benefit from the experience. If either Gordon, or Michael could be so persuaded, it would be great to see a contribution from them in a future magazine. Something along the lines of Tips For the Improving Fly Fisherman, focusing on fishing into the wind, getting good line speed, keeping a tight loop, and so on. In the meantime, however, many thanks to them both for providing a technical interlude as part of the Fish-In.

For any member tempted to venture down to South Devon, the breakfasts at Startlea and Waterside have a great deal to recommend them, especially if you believe that, in bass fishing, one needs to keep up one's strength. There are few better means of doing this than consuming a Full English/Welsh/Irish breakfast. For those who also think such a breakfast goes down even better when accompanied by hilarious, fantastic, and sometimes rather sinister fishing stories, we would particularly recommend breakfast at Startlea during a BASS Fish-In. Steve Pruett's stories of how he caught a windsurfer (the man and the board) and of how the sailor who cut Steve's line had to hide under a pier for three hours, are well worth a re-telling, as are the various lunatic mis-adventures of Bob Spurgeon and Mike Oliver.

By Sunday afternoon several members were on their way home. Geoff fly fished again and caught another two bass and some pollack. Bob, Ross, Sue, as well as Phil & Jo Hyde, who had put in a late guest appearance, did some mackerel fishing, using what we can only describe as unsophisticated long distance methods. Beer drinking, apparently, followed this. We can only say that we were glad not to have witnessed it. By this time both the organisers had gone home.

It is interesting to observe BASS members together on a Fish-In. Some are dedicated to fishing quite hard, with a degree of focus and determination, whilst others, see it primarily as a social event. Most have a mid-way view between those two. There are one or two, however, who appear to have a deep need to return, psychologically speaking, to their schoolboy days. This is the first time that we have run a Fish-In, and having had the experience, we are firmly of the view that having a couple of these regressed types present, provides immense entertainment value for the rest of the group, and seemingly, lots of fun for them.

All in all, members from different parts of the country seemed to get along with each other. Perhaps the common interests of catching fish and having fun, are enough to do the trick. The farthest traveller did a round trip of 600 miles, and several did round trips of 200-300 miles. More than half the members had not met each other before, so, hopefully, it was not a clique event. Our intention, at this point is to repeat the Fish-In in 2002 in, more or less, the same format.

It is hard to know what to make of the fishing. We were not keeping a formal record, but as near as we can work it out, fourteen anglers caught, between them, about sixteen bass. The best bass was four and a half pounds, with only one or possibly two others making three pounds. Mostly they were around two pounds, and a couple were barely twelve ounces. Additionally there seems to have been about a dozen pollack caught, plus a couple of wrasse, and a few mackerel.

As we understand it, the general tradition for BASS Fish-Ins, with the exception of Shell Island, is to catch almost nothing. So by those standards we did well enough. It is probable, however, that this area would, twenty years ago, have produced several fish in the four to eight pound class; fish that have now been over-exploited by the offshore

pair trawlers, virtually to the point of extinction. On the other hand, of those members who came on the Fish-In, only five had ever fished this stretch of coast before.