

# Lough Carra's brown trout angling

By Chris Huxley

Catch statistics for trout angling on Lough Carra are neither easy to collect nor comprehensive. Since the fishery is not closely regulated and angling is free (i.e. there is no charge), there is no formal mechanism to record catches of trout. Some records are kept by individual anglers, local angling facility providers (such as Peter and Pat Roberts at Kilkeeran who run a B&B and boat hire) and angling clubs but, in general, there is no overall record of how many trout are caught by anglers. The catch statistics from angling club competitions give a rough idea of overall catch rates for takeable trout (see below), and if we knew how many rod days were fished in a year, this would give us a very approximate figure for the total catch. Unfortunately, there is no way of obtaining, or even estimating, the total number of rod days. Although the approximate number of boats on the lakeshore is known (around 150 in 2007 and 2008), there is no information on how often they are used, for how long and by how many anglers.

In 1996, the Central Fisheries Board (now Inland Fisheries Ireland) produced a report which contained some useful information on catches from records collected in previous years. This report estimated that anglers were catching around 700 trout per year, with annual catches varying from a low of 174 in 1966 to a high of 1,793 in 1978 (when the lough was being artificially stocked with hatchery-reared trout). The maximum number of "rod days" was recorded in 1978 as 1,044, resulting in a mean daily bag of 1.72 fish. This figure, however, gives no indication of how many trout were caught and released and is also not comparable with recent catch figures since many of the fish caught in that year would have been from the stocking programme.

Interestingly, the same CFB report estimated that in 1995 pike consumed 4,705 trout, i.e. around seven times as many as were taken by anglers. This clearly has implications in the rationale behind the pike culling operations that are routinely conducted each year. The 1996 report focuses on this issue (for Loughs Corrib and Mask as well as Carra) and concludes that the predation of trout by pike in Carra was significantly lower than in the other loughs because of the culling operations in Carra.

The Lough Carra Trout Anglers' Association holds three fly-fishing competitions each year: an eight hour "mayfly" competition in early May, a five hour "evening" competition in July and an eight hour "September" competition. For each of these competitions (for most years since 2001) the number of anglers is known and the number of trout weighed in is also known. Thus, we have figures that provide a rough CPUE (Catch Per Unit Effort).

The same is available for the Partry Club's August competition. However, this is fished on both Lough Carra and Mask and the figures available do not distinguish between these two origins for the trout weighed in.

In summary, the data available are not at all comprehensive, are subject to many variables for which we cannot make adjustments and, therefore, should not be relied upon to give an accurate picture of the number of trout caught by anglers. However, what the data do show is the degree of variation in catch rates from one year to another, as well as providing an overall conclusion that, over the last decade, the mean daily bag

has almost certainly been considerably less than one takeable fish per angler (note that the size limit has been either twelve or thirteen inches for this period).

In fact, if we take just the Carra Trout Anglers' Association figures for this period, they tell us that, in all competitions combined, 711 anglers weighed in a total of 252 trout, giving a CPUE for all these competitions of 0.35 fish per angler. This suggests that most anglers can expect to catch one takeable fish for every three "days" of fishing (bearing in mind that, for the purposes of this exercise, a "day" of fishing is probably around six hours of actual fishing time).

Figure 1 below shows the CPUE for all the abovementioned competitions, as well as an overall annual figure which excludes the Partry data (since that includes trout caught on Mask). From these results, it is clear that there is considerable variation from year to year and competition to competition. This is to be expected since weather conditions will have a significant effect. However, there are several points of interest that arise from examination of the figures:

Firstly, CPUE ranges from less than 0.1 fish per angler to just over 0.6. Even taking into account the nature of the data used, this is a clear indication that, **on average**, anglers cannot expect to catch more than one takeable fish in a day's angling on Carra.

Secondly, although we lack the data for 2007 and 2008, the mayfly competition results declined from a peak in 2004 and 2005, after which the mayfly population crashed (almost certainly as a result of pollution of the lough from excessive nutrient inputs). This tallies with most of the anecdotal reports from anglers that trout were extremely difficult to find/catch in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009. As pointed out elsewhere on this website (see "Lough Carra's brown trout population"), this coincides with the Fisheries Board stock assessment results in 2009 showing a 25% reduction in the trout population from 1996. However, I do not believe that the extremely low catch results are entirely due to the decline in the trout population, but are also caused by a fundamental change in the feeding behaviour of the trout. In recent years, a trout rising to feed on the surface has been a relatively rare sight and anglers have resorted to techniques which previously they would not have used on Carra (such as nymphs fished deep).

Thirdly, and this might be cause for some optimism, CPUE in Carra competitions rose steeply in 2010 to around 0.6 and maintained this level in 2011. Conversely, the Partry data show the lowest CPUE in 2010, but this is almost certainly due to the weather conditions (sunny and flat calm).

These figures are in stark contrast to those from 1978 – when the lough was stocked. What would be very interesting now would be to have some reliable data over the whole period from 1978 to the present to illustrate what changes in CPUE have occurred. Such information might be gleaned from diaries kept by individual anglers and, perhaps, from the records kept by Peter Roberts. I will be attempting to obtain as much information of this type as possible and will include it in a revised version of this report.

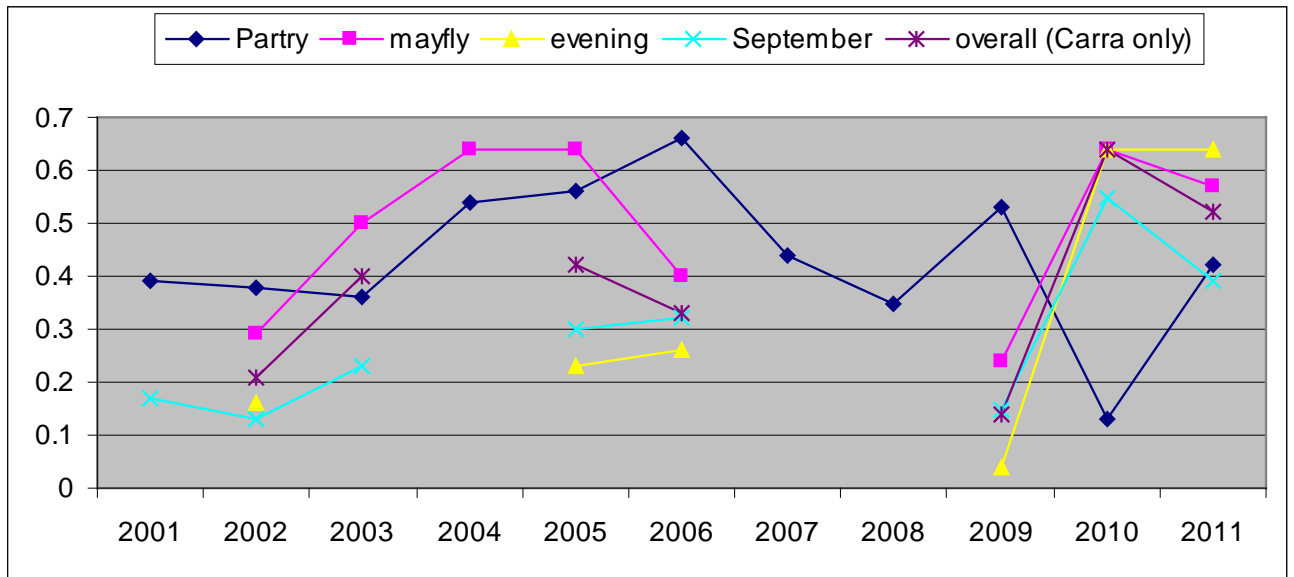


Figure 1. CPUE for each of the competitions for which data are available, as well as overall CPUE for all Carra Trout Anglers' Association competitions.