SAVE THE SPRING

Save the Spring December 2025 Update

The River Dee

ATLANTIC SALMON TRUST

This year's milestones and achievements

Save the Spring is a partnership between the River Dee and Atlantic Salmon Trust, supported by the University of Stirling and UHI Inverness.

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riverdee.org.uk
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Habitats Reconnected

Works carried out under the Save the Spring programme have complemented wider efforts across the upper catchment by the River Dee team throughout 2025, where reconnecting fragmented habitats has been a key focus. The upper catchment - upstream of Aboyne, is key to spring salmon spawning.

This year, with the ongoing support of the Balmoral Estate, we reconnected a 190m side channel of the River Muick which had been cut off from the main stem of the river by significant erosion and sedimentation during severe winter flood events. This work was completed in September and, by early November just 44 days after the work finished, salmon were seen spawning in the channel. The team was able to visually record six adult salmon and four large redds (salmon nests), indicating successful spawning. This is a hugely positive sign which shows just how important channel reconnection and realignment can be for wild salmon recovery efforts. In addition, juvenile salmon parr and brown trout have been seen using the restored channel as well.

Further restoration work was carried out on another previously reconnected 375m side channel in the River Muick, supported by Glen Muick Estate. Employing local contractors, we added 40 tonnes of gravel to the channel - a technique known as 'gravel augmentation' - to provide better habitat for salmon spawning. This material had previously been washed downstream during flood events, forming large deposits which we were able to re-use. Once again, the team was able to witness adult salmon moving into the area and counted three salmon redds, as well as adult salmon, sea trout and juvenile salmon with underwater cameras. The reinstatement of this channel provides salmon with an important mid-river spawning zone as the only other known spawning sites were 3km upstream and 1.3km downstream.

Salmon were filmed spawning in the restored channel just 44 days after work completed.

Along with channel reconnection, other work has been progressing. Over 70 large woody structures in the form of dead trees were installed, principally on the upper River Dee with support from the National Trust for Scotland's Mar Lodge Estate. We have seen how these structures are helping to add complexity and biodiversity to stream channels elsewhere in the catchment and look forward to monitoring the effects of these interventions over the coming months and years.

The River Dee team also planted a further 25,000 native riverside trees prior to April 2025, with another 3,500 planted this autumn. We've entered a new season of this work, during which we'll continue to build stability, resilience and biodiversity in the catchment to benefit wild salmon and other species.

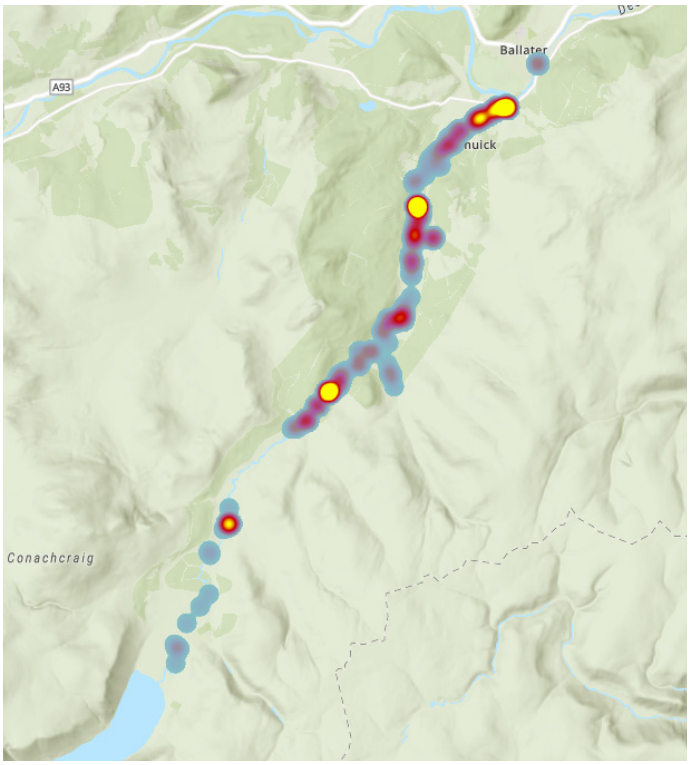
Looking ahead to 2026, we are set to embark on a significant Mar Floodplain restoration project in the summer.

Two adult salmon filmed spawning in a restored channel, using areas where gravel augmentation work took place.

Smolt-to-Adult Supplementation Trial Milestone

As reported in detail in our October 2025 Update, this year we reached a key milestone in the programme's smolt-to-adult supplementation trial. Thanks to a huge combined effort, particularly from our colleagues at the University of Stirling, 75 mature adult salmon from the programme were released back into the River Muick in the autumn, ahead of the spawning season. Full details on why this approach is being taken, and how it is practically being carried out, can be found in our last update, including the challenges and unknowns that lie ahead.

Since their release the team has been busy radio tracking to monitor the movements of the 48 radio tagged fish. The 'heatmap' below offers a snapshot of their dispersal throughout the Muick, with the yellow hotspots showing where fixed radio monitoring equipment is in place, and therefore able to record more detections than elsewhere. On-foot surveys with handheld equipment have enabled the fish to be located in areas less easy to access.



The team has been out in all weathers operating portable radio tracking equipment to monitor the movements of released fish.

Key to measuring the impact of the trial over the long term will be juvenile surveys and genetic monitoring. Genetic samples were taken from every fish which has entered the trial. Through future juvenile survey work and genetic sampling, we will be able to determine the contribution to the population made by fish in the trial, matching juveniles to their parents. With this information, and after conducting the trial for several years, we will be able to understand the viability and impact of this technique.

With a further 100 smolts brought into the programme in 2025, we look forward to sharing the progress of this second cohort of fish next year, along with how the lessons we are learning along the way are enabling us to adapt and improve the trial going forward.

2025 in numbers

Some of this year's Save the Spring highlights.

25,000
native trees planted

71
large woody structures

190
metres of river reconnected

40
tonnes of gravel used for augmentation

100
wild smolts brought into our trial

75
adult salmon from our trial released

Millions
of people reached through TV, radio, press, social media and events

How you can support Save the Spring

Save the Spring is a 20-year programme of work to restore and futureproof the upper River Dee catchment, heartland of its famous spring-run wild Atlantic salmon - a population of fish which has declined by 80% in recent decades and is now at risk of extinction.

Its goal is to rebuild and secure a long-term future for this iconic population of wild salmon, working across the landscape to boost biodiversity and build resilience to climate change by restoring native woodland, wetland, peatland and working in the river channel itself.

Not only will this help the Dee's precious wild salmon recover, but it will also bring far-reaching benefits for other at-risk native species, the wider environment and local communities.

Wild Atlantic salmon are essential for our ecosystems, for local communities and for Deeside's shared natural and cultural heritage. Save the Spring is taking action to restore their habitat and their numbers for the future. If you represent a business aiming to enhance your sustainability and environmental strategy, Save the Spring is the ideal partner to help you meet your goals while engaging your employees in meaningful environmental stewardship.

Get in touch with us via the contact details below and join us on this journey.

SUPPORT US

Individuals

To support Save the Spring as an individual, contact the River Dee team at **info@riverdee.org**

Corporate support

Find out how your business can play a positive role in shaping the future of the catchment, aligning with your own environmental and sustainability strategy.

Contact the Atlantic Salmon Trust's Corporate Ambassador, Mark Cockburn, at **mark.cockburn@atlanticsalmontrust.org**

Spread the word

Follow and share our **#SaveTheSpring** social media posts to help us reach an even wider audience.