 **LAAC Winter League**

 **Season 2015 To 2016.**

This winter, the plan was to have 2 sessions at Achagour, Glen of Rothes and Lagg, with a single session at Rothiemurchus. The final session at Lagg near Lochinver will of course include the now customary presentations and BBQ.

The first leg at Achagour got underway on the 31st of October with an excellent turnout of 14 adult and 3 junior members. Though windy, it was a warm day for the end of October and with fish showing on the top of the water the signs and fishing gods were promising a good day’s sport. At 10:00 the team darted off to try their luck in all 3 lochs with most heading to the bank with the wind at their backs. After the first half hour the wind dropped enough to allow some movement around the lochs. Davie Macgregor was no slouch in taking advantage in this window and casting into the wind in the top loch he hooked and landed a 4½ pounder. Word was spreading that the bottom loch was not fishing at all well but both the top and middle lochs were both yielding fish. It wasn’t too long before the bottom loch was deserted by the Loch Achonachie squad who started to swell the numbers fishing the middle loch. The juniors seemed to be going well with Danielle Eccleson bagging up in the bait loch and Ramsey Rait winkling a nice trout out from under the bridge in the top loch. Our other junior, Mathew Stewart, caught his first trout on the fly, a nice little blue trout weighing in at a pound exactly. As the session wore on word was spreading that most had caught fish and quite a number had bagged up with Neil MacRitchie and Okain McLennan swinging hefty looking bags around. Davie MacGregor had caught another good sized fish and this was to prove vital at the weigh in. Davie had 4 fish for 12lb 12oz, Okain, 4 for 10lb 8oz and Neil 4for 8lb 9oz. In total there were 7 limit bags and only one blank who will remain nameless, unlucky Barry. The biggest fish was the last landed by Davie weighing in at 5¾lb, a good marker for the rest of the winter league. The junior weigh in was a much closer affair with Danielle & Ramsey having to weigh their fish without bags. In the end Danielle’s brace weighed in at 3lb and Ramsay a bit back on 2lb 8oz. The winter league trophy was duly presented to Danielle with the accompanying applause from the seniors and juniors alike. The junior results were as follows:

1st: Danielle Eccleson

2nd: Ramsey Rait

3rd: Mathew Stewart.

Three weeks later the team headed off to Rothiemurchus outside Aviemore for the second leg. The weather had been pleasantly mild to that point but sods law always dictates that things change when least expected or wanted. On the Friday night there was a good drop of snow followed by a hard frost. Undeterred the hardy few slid their way down the A9 hoping that the frost wasn’t severe enough to freeze the lochs solid. Going over the Slochd the car gauge went down to -6ºC but thankfully had risen to -2ºC in Aviemore. Rothiemurchus has a powerful burn running through it and this combined with an overnight wind had kept the lochs pretty much ice free. As usual it was a 10:00 start and soon as the whistle sounded the squad headed down to the fly only areas. It was good to see young Ramsay Rait come along with his grandpa Ali Morrison and join the seniors for a day out. Even though it was freezing cold there were quite a few fish showing but catching them seemed to be another matter. Davie MacGregor went right to the fly fishing boundary post and found a few obliging fish including one that Davie estimated to be at least 6lb. By mid-session Okain McLennan, Neil MacRitchie and Ian MacPhail all had a couple each but Davie had already bagged his limit. With about an hour to go Okain looked to be into a good powerful fish. As it turned out it was an absolute beauty it’s just a pity it was the wrong species. Okain had caught a salmon of around 4lb, resplendent in its spawning colours but still on good nick. It must have ran up the feeder burn, unlucky Okain. All too soon it was weigh in time with Davie looking like the clear winner but it looked be close for the rest of the squad. Davie’s four fish weighed in at a handsome 15lb the biggest being 5lb. Notice the earlier exaggeration of at least 6lb. Ian MacPhail managed to winkle out another trout and his three weighed in at 7lb exactly bringing him second place. Derek Ritchie and Neil MacRitchie shared third spot with bags of 3½lb exactly. The next session is in a fortnights time out west at Lagg, something we will all look forward to.

After a few late autumnal storms the first weekend of winter was with us along with the eagerly awaited 3rd leg over at Lagg. Tom had stocked both lochs prior to our visit, giving some confidence that the fishing would be just as outstanding as in previous winter league visits. The bag limit was set at three fish per rod with no fishing in front of the hut. The weather forecast for the 6th of December was appalling with 60mph winds and wintery showers predicted. Never the less, 11 of Loch Aconachie’s very best winter wanderers headed west in a pitch black morning to test their skills in whatever conditions Mother Nature would throw at them. As it turned out, it was cold, there was hale, rain and a howling wind, we all had a whale of a time. Before we started the John Allen cup was presented to Alex Mark for catching a 9½lb ling, thankfully not from Meig but sea fishing out of Scrabster. The John Allen cup is presented to any Loch Achonachie member who catches the biggest fish on a Highland Sea angling club charter trip.

Once all the back slapping and handshakes were over with the team headed out, some to the top loch and some, you’ve guessed it, to the bottom loch looking for some shelter. On the top loch Neal Drummond was very quickly into fish, all around the 4lb mark and all but one returned. Ian MacPhail, Davie MacGregor and Neil MacRitchie had 2 each within the first half hour but decided, as it transpired, wisely kept theirs. Down on the bottom loch those that went around the loch struggled while those that went just around the corner did well. Brian Scobie soon bagged up along with Derek Williamson. Barry Whitford had a couple of out of season brownies but nothing else. Ian MacPhail dropped down from the top and bagged the trout of the day, a fin perfect 7 pounder. After the first hour the trout went off the boil and it was a struggle to bag up leaving Neal Drummond regretting waiting for that big fish. At the weigh in Ian MacPhail was top rod with 3 for 14lb. Davie MacGregor was second with 3 for 11¾lb with Neil MacRitchie 3rd with 3 for 11¼lb. This left Davie clear at the top of the winter league going into the Christmas break but all was still to fish for when we visit Glen of Rothes in the New Year.

Over the winter holiday period the UK and in particular the north east of Scotland were battered with storms bringing in unseasonal torrential rain. Early in the New Year both the Dee and Don Valleys were flooded out along with the hatchery that supplies Glen of Rothes. Thankfully, Kevin had stocked his fishery before the Christmas break, so even though the fishing promised to be difficult there were some rainbows to be caught. 13 adult members turned up on Saturday the 9th of January to be greeted by a cold but pleasant day for the time of year. This leg always involves the odd dram for the non-drivers and Mr MacRitchie was as usual more than generous with his excellent sloe gin. It was good to see Lewis finally getting out for a cast after injuring his knee whilst on holiday last October.

Soon enough 10:00 arrived and the squad headed off to their favourite areas. Those that went to the far side of the big loch were quickly into fish whilst others struggled. Ali Morrison found fish in the small loch but seemed to lose more than he landed. Neal MacRitchie and Derek Williamson were seen to land a couple of big trout which always takes the pressure off. As the day wore on the fishing became more difficult and those that bagged up early looked to have the advantage. Ali Hunter hooked and landed his 3rd trout with seconds remaining and that was that for the 4th leg. Back at the shop some had blanked while 5 had their limit. Neil MacRitchie had the best bag at 3 for 9lb 6oz Derek Williamson was 2nd with 3 to 8lb 6oz and Okain 3rd with 3 to 6lb 15½oz. The biggest fish went to Neil MacRitchie at 4lb 15½oz. More importantly for Neil he cuckooed Davie out and took over at the top of the winter league. There are 5 rods with only 2 points separating then in 3rd, so all to play for. The next leg will be back at Glen of Rothes on Sunday the 7th of February where we have our first 5 leg total and a fair idea of who or who may not be best placed.

 Before we knew it January was gone and the 5th leg, back at Glen of Rothes, was with us. Kevin was in bullish mood after England had beaten Scotland in the six nations and thankfully he was also on an up because the fishery had recently been stocked, with some of the trout reputedly around the 10lb mark. The 5th leg normally starts to separate those who can still win and those that are trying to be placed, or searching for the biggest fish to keep up their interest. Neil MacRitchie was looking to keep his nose in front of the pack with Davie MacGregor looking to go back on top. The forecast was for near gale force artic winds, but, even though it was cold and a bit windy at times the day was pleasant enough. At the off, the squad spread out across both lochs instead of cramming themselves into the hot spot at the near corner of the big loch. At first the sport was a bit slow, Davie MacGregor’s delight, when he hooked up soon turned into disbelief when he landed a skimmer bream that had slurped in, his red fritz. The strange theme continued when Derek Ritchie hooked and landed a bonnie brownie of around 5lb. A cast later and Davie hooked and landed another brownie, this time it was a brammer between 7 and 8lb. Neil MacRitchie had a couple of keepers fishing opposite Johnson Swinton on the wee loch but started to regret putting another two pounder back. As the session wore on the sport was steady and most had caught fish. Ali Morrison who had done nothing in the first 2½hours had his 3 in a twenty minute moon walking spell, which included a stonker of at least 9lb. This was to prove decisive and Ali weighed in the top bag with 3 to 13lb 14oz, Davie MacGregor was 2nd with 3 to 10lb 9oz and Okain was 3rd with 3 to 6lb 12oz. Ali’s big fish was 9lb 2oz and takes over as the best of this winter league so far. Neil MacRitchie only came 9th with his 2 for 4lb 2oz, dropping him back to second behind Davie. With only 2 legs to go the winter league will be between Davie, Neil and Okain, with Davie now 6 points clear at the top. There are however a whole pack breathing down Okain’s neck looking to wrestle 3rd spot out of his mitts at the last gasp. All to play for early in March when the winter league moves back to Achagour.

 March arrived with winter weather still blasting away, dishing out keen frost and snow showers. The main concern was frost, as Achagour had been frozen off for the last weekend in February. Thankfully there had been some stormy weather in midweek which freed up the lochs. Saturday arrived with a bitter north wind, snow flurries and a couple of call offs due to the seasonal cold bug that’s been doing the rounds. It was therefore surprising that twelve senior members plus a junior, Ramsey Rait, turned up to brave the Artic weather. Davie MacGregor, was by this stage well out in front and was looking to come 4th or better which would all but wrap up this year’s winter league. Okain or Neil MacRitchie would have to win this leg to make the last leg at Lagg a decider. The tipple of the day was a concoction that MacGregor had thrown together called rusty nuts made from 65%, standard £15 a litre whisky, and 35% of the cheapest, £8 a bottle amaretto. The fact that this jollup went down well says nothing for the teams taste in drinks but more for a cast iron constitution. At 10:00 the squad roared off with Davie going to the top loch Neil to the middle and Okain to the bottom loch. Fish were taking from the off and the sport was steady if not spectacular. Early on, young Ramsey hooked and landed a beauty of 5½lb on the top loch. Everybody else seemed to be catching standard stockies and it was difficult to say who was doing best. Stevie Dowds landed a good fish of around 4lb and Neal Drummond seemed to be into some slightly better fish. By weigh in time there were quite a few 4 fish limit bags, including the three who could still win. As it turned out Neal Drummond had the top bag with 4 to 10lb 14oz. Second was Stevie Dowds with four to 10lb 2oz, third was Okain with 4 to 9lb 2oz. Importantly Davie MacGregor came 4th with 4 to 8lb 11oz and as a result won this winter league. Surprisingly even though Neil came 6th he and Okain could not be caught, both securing joint second place. The biggest trout by a senior, was Stevie’s, which swung the scales to 4lb exactly. Even though the league itself has been won and lost there’s still the biggest trout to play for. Ali Morrison has the biggest trout of the league so far at 9lb 3oz and with the final leg being at Lagg there’s every chance that this could be beaten. Last March there were 2 or 3 over 10lb, so all to play for.

 With the podium already played out, to add a bit of craic to the final leg the decision was made to add a £10 voucher for the Lagg winner and a £10 voucher for 10th place. During a fairly miserable March morning the squad headed west for the final winter league leg. The views of west Ross and Sutherland are incredible at this time of year and grey sky accepted, this year was no different. By 09:30 the team had assembled outside the fishing hut and the first drams had been poured looking forward to the party atmosphere that’s usual at the final leg. Okain had been up a couple of days prior to the final leg and had lost a big brownie, estimated to be in double figures, just in front of the hut. It therefore remained to be seen if Ali Morrison could hold on to his biggest fish. 10:00 saw everybody scatter with the lads splitting 50/50 between the top and bottom lochs. As is usual with Lagg sport was to be had from the first cast with most of the rods bending from the off. The fish were of excellent quality, stripping line, with reels screeching around the lochs. However for some reason it went quiet after the first half hour and from there to the end it was hard going for most of the team. Rumours went out that Okain may have a fish big enough to catch Ali’s 9 pounder but even though there were 7 limit bags, there were, relatively speaking, no more big fellows at the weigh in. As it turned out Okain’s best was 8lb leaving Ali Morrison with this leagues biggest fish at 9lb 3oz. Barry Whitford was top rod on the day with 3 to 12lb 12oz Lewis Ross was awarded the 10th place voucher for coming 11th due to Davie MacGregor missing Ian MacPhail’s position in the final totting up, could the dram have had some influence? One for Macgregor to sort out at work as Brian Scobie came 10th. Once the prizes were dished out the new junior trophy was presented to Ramsey Rait who had an outstanding year supporting the club and it’s competitions; thanks Ramsey. One thing we have in our angling club is someone who’s good at something when it’s needed, step forward Ian MacPhail, BBQ king who knocked up another brilliant scoff to send everybody away with that satisfactory full up glow. The 2015 – 2016 Winter league result was

1st Davie MacGregor : 10 points

 2nd Neil MacRithie : 16 points

2nd Okain McLennan : 16 points

Biggest fish 9lb 3oz Ali Morrison.

All too soon it was time to finish up and head home with another winter league behind us. Davie might have won but the real winner was Loch Achonachie, keeping members meeting over the winter, getting a bit of craic and planning for the 2016 season. Without the highland rainbow trout fisheries we could not do what we do over the winter season and our thanks go to Cindy and all at Achagour, Kevin at Glen of Rothes, Rothiemurchus estate, Tom and Olive at Lagg for inviting us to fish. All being equal we’ll be back next year.

Davie MacGregor Competition Secretary.