



ROOT AND BRANCH

Paul Gaskell, of the Wild Trout Trust, offers a structured approach to fishery management – woodman, spare that tree!

EVER TRIED SUGGESTING that you chop up and haul out a barbel angler's favourite fallen willow? How is it that this side of the Atlantic almost none of our fly-fishers' eyes light up when they see a good-sized pile of debris or a fallen tree?

Contrast that to Stateside, where such things are labelled "lunker structures" and approached with great enthusiasm. We Brits seem to harbour a near-fanatical fear that a fly might be lost on an inconvenience such as a large semi-submerged tree trunk. This is a bit surprising when you consider that streams

with an abundance of this material will typically have far more, and far heavier, fish than equivalent streams with little or no debris.

I don't know about you, but I'd rather cast at hundreds of fish – and lose a couple of flies in the process – than cast at an empty stretch of river and bring home all my flies in pristine condition, unmolested by trout.

Dave Southall's home stream, the Thornton Beck, a little limestone brook in North Yorkshire, is small enough to jump across in most places and is full of wild trout – everything from stream-spawned babies up to a maximum of around 12 inches. Even the largest of these will take up a good deal of



Plenty of good trout cover on the Thornton Beck in North Yorkshire.

Trout Talk



space in its Lilliputian surroundings. Despite this, a reasonable trip out for Dave (and, if you are lucky enough to be invited, his guests) will be perhaps 30-50 fish in around three hours' fishing, with as many again spooked while rods creep into position.

This highlights another function of woody debris that is very, very handy if you are an angler – it provides a bolthole for a startled fish. Now, you will have certainly blown your chances of catching the actual fish you spooked, but the further that fish has to bolt to reach cover, the more of its stream-mates it will scare in the process. On more featureless streams it isn't unusual to spoil a full 20- or 30-yard stretch with the domino effect of panicking fish pinballing around the pool. If the fish you scare are never more than a couple of yards from sunken tree roots, a fallen log or a dense clump of branchy debris, then you are never going to create that "panic in the disco" effect of fish blundering around into each other as far as the eye can see.

It also goes without saying that you can use these great big lumps of debris to hide yourself from the fish and get so much closer than is possible in exposed reaches...

It is no exaggeration to say that plentiful cover may well be the very best defence that fish have against not just clumsy anglers, but predators of all stripes – including goosanders and cormorants. Of course, to the initiated, the in-stream woody debris is known to do far, far more than simply provide the fishy equivalent of a thatched roof. The stuff actually makes

free from silt and produces piles of gravel in a trout's preferred size range (typically 10 mm-40 mm in diameter).

Localised scour around debris, along with living tree-roots in the riverbank, promotes a natural meandering stream profile as well as producing that fabulous, lumpy "egg box" form of the stream bed that fish love. We are all familiar with trout, grayling and salmon holding up in "pots", and it is useful to know that both large boulders and fallen logs are responsible for producing these features. Fallen logs, however, also provide overhead cover and certain kinds of invertebrate food that boulders do not!

Unfortunately, it is very rare to find streams that do not suffer from either a lack of input of woody debris due to loss of trees from the surrounding landscape or well-meaning working parties or river-keepers continually removing debris. The Thornton Beck is very lucky to have Dave Southall looking out for its interests, as he knows full well that "clearing out and tidying up" the beck would significantly reduce its fish-holding capacity.

What the Wild Trout Trust, and other knowledgeable river managers, do with artificially installed flow deflectors is attempt to imitate the processes that naturally occur when debris is in good supply and is allowed to accumulate.

There are many, many ways in which woody material can be imported and installed into rivers in order to dramatically improve their performance as fisheries. The available

"Artificially installed flow deflectors imitate processes that naturally occur"

the stream around itself... it is not merely a passive component that happens to sit on a pre-formed stream bed.

Take, for example, a fallen log. When this washes up into a stable resting place (as they invariably do), it will begin to do several things. First, the water flowing over and under its rounded profile will dig a hole in the stream bed – the size and shape of this determined by the size and orientation of the log. The silt, gravel and perhaps even cobbles that are blown out of the stream bed to create this hollow will settle a little way downstream. The largest cobbles will settle in the fastest flow, the gravels in slightly slower water and the silt in the slowest, ponded sections, in the margins or behind another obstruction. This grading or "sorting" of the stream bed is vital for trout spawning because it keeps the gravels

techniques can form a bewildering array and the process is subject to strict consenting and permissions procedures. This is where the expert advice of specialists like the Wild Trout Trust conservation team can help guide your efforts to protect and improve your fishery. Advisory visits and practical training is available to all free of charge from the Wild Trout Trust (barring a contribution to travel costs). The good news is that, as with all cutting-edge river management, these efforts also enhance the wildlife and flora in and around the streams.

As these processes and practices become more widespread, more people will be able to look forward to fish-filled days, casting dry-flies and upstream nymphs into fabulous lies to be snapped up by fantastic wild fish of all sizes.



Fallen branches create fish-holding areas and harbour many natural food items.



Introducing woody debris to a small stream.



"The Thornton Beck in North Yorkshire is very lucky to have Dave Southall looking out for its interests"

When a hooked fish has somewhere close to run to, the rest are less spooked.



A Thornton Beck brownie – these little fish are very prolific here.

Factfile

Contact Dave Southall at Pickering Fishery Association, www.pickeringfishery.co.uk
 If your stream lacks large woody debris, join the Wild Trout Trust, www.wildtrout.org, e-mail projects@wildtrout.org, or phone 023 9257 0985 to organise an advisory visit. Online habitat manuals are also available to download free or purchase in high resolution for both upland rivers and chalkstreams.

