

Idsjöströmmen, a section of the Gim River in Northern Sweden, has experienced one of the most remarkable come backs in conservation history. Transformed from a waterway rendered almost void of life by logging practices to a thriving wild fishery, Idsjöströmmen is a living monument to habitat restoration and special regulations.

## Return of a River

By Lars-Åke Olsson

The early history of the Gim River mirrors that of many other rivers in Northern Sweden. In the 1850's the forest industry took control of many waterways to transport timber downstream to the coastal saw mills. In order for these timber highways to exist, the river had to be cleared of obstructions. Boulders and rocks were removed, sometimes with the help of dynamite. Dams were installed to hold the water and release it when the logs were ready to be sent downstream. The rivers became canals, their centers framed by retaining rocks, wooden walls and floating logs to help facilitate easy passage of thousands of tons of timber.

In 1968 the logging boom on the Gim River ended. It became more profitable to transport logs to the saw mills by truck. The company responsible for the structures in the Gim River was charged with the task of over seeing its restoration. Unfortunately, the restoration that took place was the removal of only some of the man-made structures—the river was never returned to its original condition. The Gim River became wide and shallow. The middle section—the old transportation canal—was flat and smooth and had very few lies for fish. Gone also were the dams, which used to hold the spring water, and regulate river levels well into the summer. When the run off started in May, it swiftly flushed through the system. By the end of June, the river level dropped dramatically. This alteration to the aquatic environment of the Gim River destroyed the riverbed, decimated the insect populations of stoneflies, mayflies and caddis—which, in turn, caused the decline of the grayling and trout populations. During the years that followed, anglers could go for days without seeing a rise, having a strike, or catching a fish.

### Restoration

In 1976, I, other dedicated fly fishermen, and some of the villagers from Gimdalen decided to take restoration matters into our own hands. With permission from the local fishing right owners we started to manually place rocks back into one section of the Gim River—*Idsjöströmmen*. The results of our labor were almost invisible, but a seed for the future had been planted.

### Idsjöströmmen

It quickly became apparent that to properly put the river back in place an excavator would be

needed. Funds were raised and soon the heavy equipment was hired. Boulders and rocks were lifted and shifted giving Idsjöströmmen a viable riverbed to support a wild fish population. Thresholds and weirs were built helping to raise the water level and slow the speed of the current. Grayling and trout found new lies along this one mile stretch and long-abandoned spawning grounds were once again available. These improvements also helped to protect the fish from predators, and there was plenty of food. Stoneflies, mayflies and caddis regenerated and laid their eggs like never before in modern time. Idsjöströmmen was in harmony. A good ground had been laid. Because of this successful effort, Idsjöströmmen's restoration began to serve as a model for the rest of Sweden's many logged and damaged rivers.

Unfortunately, at that time, the fishing pressure was tremendous. There was a 10" size limit for grayling and trout, and no bag limit! Few fish had a chance to reach the age of their first spawning, before they were killed. Not many fishermen bothered to put their fish back - the old competitive attitude was still present; "If I don't kill it, somebody else will, so I'd better do it first". As a result the fishing improved only slightly after the restoration.

It was not difficult for me, with my many fishing days on Idsjöströmmen, to understand why the fishing was so poor. More work was ahead of us.

### **Idsjöströmmen becomes a Catch-and-Release River**

During the fall of 1988 I got a most unexpected surprise from the fishing board of Gimdalen; an offer to lease Idsjöströmmen for five years. In essence, I got a chance to fulfill the dream of my life— to become a river-keeper. This meant I would be able to manage Idsjöströmmen and help it to become a river where the fishing quality was on the same level as some of the best rivers in England and the USA. I hesitated at the thought of creating this special section. People who had fished Idsjöströmmen their entire lives would now be restricted because of the fly-fishing-only-rules. After much consideration, I decided it was a chance of a life time I couldn't miss. I had to be willing to face all the difficulties ahead.

In 1989 some of the fishing right owners who didn't like the idea that I was leasing Idsjöströmmen demanded a meeting with the fishing board, who was responsible for offering me the lease. A meeting at Kullagården, the village center, took place. By the end of the evening I still had my contract but it was reduced from five to three years. The sum of money I had to pay each year was large. I hoped only to break even that first year.

### **New size limit and new bag limit**

I realized there was only one thing to do to increase the quality of the fishing, adopt a fly-fishing and catch-and-release policy. However, it was still too early to expect Scandinavian fly fishermen to release all fish so I had to allow every fly fisherman the opportunity to kill a few fish above the 15 inch limit.

By 1991 I saw some improvements. The fish were bigger, averaging 14 inches, but too many fish above 15 inches were still being killed. I raised the size limit to 16 inches, and instituted

a new bag limit of one fish per day - if it was necessary. I always informed the visiting fishermen of my philosophy, and policy with the Idsjöströmmen, along with the usual information about insect hatches, flies, and where to fish.

### Slowly there was change.

Fishermen began to voluntarily release all their fish, even those over 16". It was great to get that kind of response from Scandinavian fly fishers. They were positive and enthusiastic, and have really helped to developing the high quality fishing that exists on Idsjöströmmen today.

In 1992 I was delighted and honored when I received the Federation of Fly Fishers Conservation Award for "Extraordinary contributions to the protection and conservation of game fish resources."

In 1995, I decided that it was time to raise the size limit to 18", and allow just one fish per fisherman, per visit. At the end of the year I could see that it had been even better than in 1994. It was reported that two 23" grayling had been caught, 16 between 20-22" were caught and released, and three brown trout fought for 20 minutes before they broke off.

### Restoration Again

During one of the last days of September in 1995, Lasse Bergvall (of the County Administration Board of Jämtland) and I worked together to plan the restoration. Later, with the help of Lars Häggström and his excavator, sections of Idsjöströmmen were finally restored. The result was very rewarding, not only did this restoration effort improve the habitat for fish and aquatic insects, the river looked more natural and more inviting than ever before. Two more extensive restorations have occurred to make further improvements; one was completed in 1998, the other in 2002.

### Idsjöströmmen Today

The river has been completely transformed since 1970. River restoration, along with the implementation of catch-and-release has brought Idsjöströmmen back to life. Today, fly fishers from Sweden and the rest of the world find the river and the surrounding area a place of renewal and quiet respite.