

# A saga of success

*From a rod-catch of 53 salmon in 1988 to one of more than 14,000 twenty years later, the story of Iceland's Ranga River is remarkable. **Peter Gathercole** went there last season*

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER GATHERCOLE

ICELAND'S APPEAL IS the wildness of its terrain - its lakes, rivers, glaciers and still-active volcanoes. A resourceful people, the Icelanders have harnessed this power of nature using the abundant geothermal activity to provide heat and electricity. This resourcefulness has also been applied to transform the Ranga River, a stunning piece of water in the south of the country, into one of the best salmon rivers in the world.

Last year I joined Gudmundur Atli Asgeirsson

("Gummi") for a couple of days on this river I'd heard so much about. Although I've fished a number of Icelandic salmon rivers, what intrigued me so much about the Ranga, which splits into two branches - the West and East Ranga - was how it had provided the basis for a radical experiment in river management. With salmon numbers in UK rivers in long-term decline, the idea that a river that once supported very few salmon could be managed in such a positive way was one I was keen to understand.

The key is a massive smolt-release programme - one that began in 1989. Before this, in 1988 the Ranga produced a grand total ▶

BELOW THE FALLS  
Kevin Brady from Ireland fishes the West Ranga's spectacular Aegissidufoss pool.



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Peter Gathercole is a regular contributor to T&S and has been a professional angling photographer, writer and fly-tyer for more than 35 years. He is also chairman of the Fly Dressers' Guild

of 53 salmon. In 1990 it produced 1,622, making it Iceland's most prolific river that year. While the Ranga has cold, clear water, the volcanic-sand riverbed provides little opportunity for those fish to spawn successfully. By stripping the returning fish and rearing their progeny to the smolt stage before placing them in ponds fed by the river (they are held there for a week or two to become imprinted and then allowed to migrate downstream) the Ranga has become one of Iceland's top salmon rivers and in 2008, its best year so far, an incredible 14,315 fish were caught.

While the success of this project is there for all to see, it comes at a price. The cost of producing so many smolts - 420,000 in 2014 and 500,000-plus in 2015, divided between East and West Ranga - is one that few river management teams would countenance.

Gummi's role as a guide meant that for some of the time he was looking after a party of Irish fly-fishers. As we were sharing a rod, which is common practice on many Icelandic rivers, it meant I had plenty of time to myself. During my visit the fishing was just starting to get going after a slow start. Even though it was late July the river was still high but fortunately, thanks to the spring-fed nature of the West Ranga, the water was perfectly clear enough for fly-fishing.

The river boasts some wonderful stretches of fly water. One of the best known is the Home pool,

conveniently situated opposite the lodge, where meals are taken, and accommodation cabins. A picture window offers a marvellous view of the pool and any fish that show, which they often do. A 30-second stroll later and you are casting a fly with Hekla, one of Iceland's most active volcanoes, providing a wonderful backdrop.

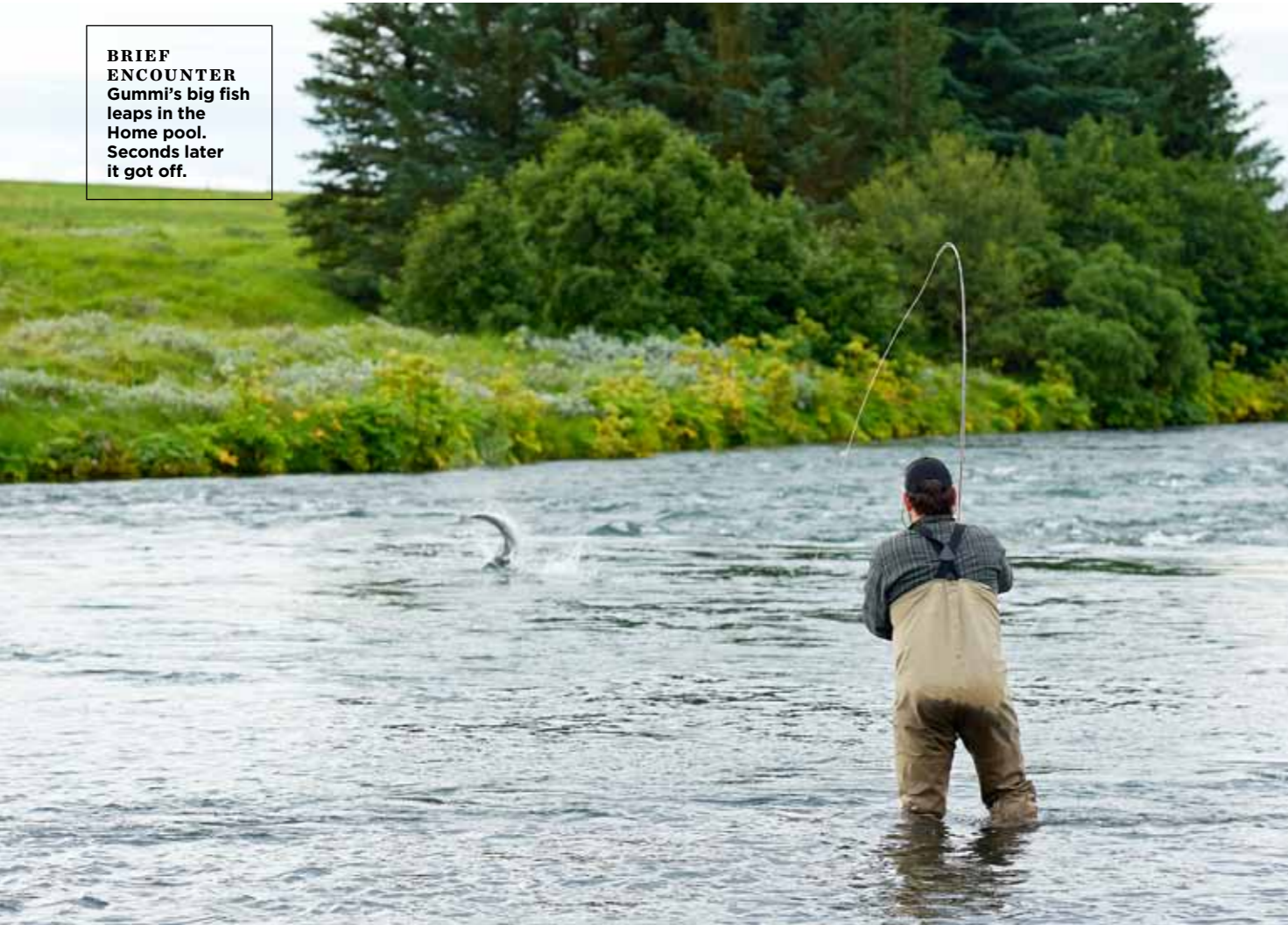
Wading is relatively easy as the riverbed consists mainly of dark volcanic sand. Even so, in the high water we experienced the sheer power of the flow needs to be negotiated carefully when edging down a pool. There are two waterfalls, the most impressive of which is Aegissidufoss, which heads a big, deep pool of the same name.

Metal cages are dotted along the bank into which fresh salmon are placed before being taken away to be stripped of eggs and milt. Hen fish longer than 70 cm (about 9 lb) are required to be placed in the holding boxes. These make up a proportion of the broodstock used to maintain the river's impressive runs of salmon. And they are impressive. Even last year, which was not one of the better seasons, more than 3,000 salmon were caught.

Although fishery rules on the West Ranga stipulate that every salmon over 70 cm must be returned if not retained for stripping, it is still possible to take fish for the table. Grilse may be kept and our party did take a couple, including one that had been adipose



**BRIEF ENCOUNTER**  
Gummi's big fish leaps in the Home pool. Seconds later it got off.



clipped. This procedure indicates that the fish had an implant inserted in its nose when still a smolt and is used by the Ranga management to determine from which of the smolt ponds the fish came.

My chance to fish the Home pool came on the first morning. Gummi told me to make a series of short casts with my floating line and sinking polyleader before wading out too far. With little more than three yards of line beyond the tip-ring I let the fly flutter across a small "V" of broken water in the pool's neck. The line stopped, drew tight then tore off downstream. I was just congratulating myself for taking Gummi's advice when the fish jumped. It was a sparkling fish of 6 lb or 7 lb. It jumped again and the fly came back. I turned to see Gummi pretending not to have noticed.

I fished a little further down the neck but in the high water I wasn't confident about going any deeper. No more takes and with a shared rod I

reasoned this was just the time to give Gummi a cast. As I reeled in he was already wading towards me. I ran back to get my camera, and was just in time to see Gummi lift into a fish that hugged the riverbed, putting a good bend in the 14-footer.

It was a strong if unspectacular fight and soon one of the other guides was easing out into the current, ready with the net. Its tail broke the surface, giving us a proper glimpse of a beautiful fresh salmon. Then the hook pulled. The netsman made a desperate lunge but the fish was gone.

While enjoying a swig of coffee Gummi suggested I try the channel on the far bank. Although it was my turn I thought better of it. Gummi was the superior caster and it needed a long line to hit the spot.

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quo ium idebisc ipsandi tatinci aut  
eum quibusam volestiorem nos*

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**ABOVE LEFT**  
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He changed fly to a golden tinsel-based monstrosity far removed from any accepted salmon pattern I'd ever seen. It wasn't long before he made a good cast, punching the fly right into the fast water close to the far bank. One cast later he was into a salmon.

Unlike his first, this one was far more of a handful, making a series of long, powerful runs. Eventually heavy pressure took its toll and Gummi had regained enough line to bring the fish out of the fast run. All was looking good when the fish jumped clear of the water - a great arching leap displaying its dark back and silver flanks. This was a much bigger fish - perhaps not 20 lb but definitely in the high teens. Thoughts of how I was going to photograph such a magnificent salmon were cut dead as the line fell slack.

As the four beats on the West Ranga are rotated on a half-day basis the afternoon saw Gummi and me fishing the imaginatively named 17A pool. It was a wide, fast-flowing

stretch with few obvious features, though that was partly due to the high water.

We'd been fishing for less than an hour when a call came that an angler on the upper part of our beat was playing a good fish. I grabbed my camera and headed upstream.

The angler turned out to be Jóhannes Hinriksson, river manager of the West Ranga. His fish, though having been played for almost ten minutes, was sitting well out in the main current. I said nothing to Jóhannes but was quietly praying that he wasn't going to lose it.

I needn't have worried for after five minutes more of steady pressure a big, bright hen fish was netted by Karl Eyjolfur. At 16 lb the fish was well over 70 cm ▶



**ABOVE**  
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**BELOW**  
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long and therefore one to be kept for stripping. As the nearest holding cage was a distance away the fish was quickly slipped into a length of water-filled polythene tube so it could be transported safely.

As he set off, Jóhannes suggested I have a cast with his rod. It would have seemed churlish to refuse, and I'm glad I didn't, as a few minutes later the line went tight and I was playing a very powerful fish.

This one set off to the far bank at a rate of knots, executing a series of cartwheels on the way. It was exciting stuff indeed - surely this one would stay on? After the initial commotion the fish settled into a dogged battle. All I could do was apply as much pressure as I dared and bide my time.

Everything was going to plan - the fish seemed to be tiring. Suddenly it set off on a long downstream run. Stupidly I stayed put instead of following. As the fish kited across the current toward my bank the line went slack. With so much line off the reel

## [ Tackle and fishing ]

**THE WEST**  
Ranga is situated in the south of Iceland some 90 km east of the capital, Reykjavik.

**Season:**  
June 22-Oct 19.


**Tackle:** Rods of 12 ft-14 ft rated 9-10 will serve you well. Sink-tip lines work well, fished as slowly as possible. Slow stripping can also be effective.

**Flies:** Sunray Shadow, HKA Sunray, Friggi, Black and blue, Snælda original, Blue Snælda, Pink Snælda, Black Snælda, Collie Dog.

**Contacts:** Gudmundur Atli Asgeirsson (guide) [www.flyfishinginiceland.com](http://www.flyfishinginiceland.com) and [info@flyfishinginiceland.com](mailto:info@flyfishinginiceland.com)  
Jóhannes Hinriksson, West Ranga river manager: [johannes@westranga.is](mailto:johannes@westranga.is) [www.westranga.is](http://www.westranga.is)

**Prices:** 250 euros to 1,500 euros per rod per day. The 1,500 euro option is during prime time and includes accommodation and a guide.

**Getting there:** I travelled with WOW air [www.wowair.co.uk](http://www.wowair.co.uk)



Blob needs putting in the right place

my one hope was that the salmon had swum back upstream. But it was not to be - yet another fish had been lost. This time I had no one to blame but myself.

The only positive outcome from this event was that much to my relief I landed the next salmon I hooked - a nice cock fish around 12 lb, which was good enough to come in with little drama. In fact, all the other fish that Gummi and I hooked the following day were landed so our run of bad luck had finally come to an end. As is often the case, I still remember the fish we lost more than those we landed. **T&S**

