

Leaping salmon stuck after river level drops

Hundreds of salmon have been trapped in a river after water levels fell due to a lack of rainfall, making it too difficult for them to leap upstream.



Two hundred fish have been stuck in the river Teme at Ludlow, Shropshire for three weeks, with another 800 on their way. Photo: ALAMY

Diggers and sandbags have been used to create 'fish runs' to help them escape upstream to breed.

Two hundred fish have been stuck in the river Teme at Ludlow, Shropshire for three weeks, with another 800 on their way.

Teams from The Environment Agency are using diggers to make trenches and lining them with sandbags to make it easier for the salmon to get up the weirs.

Crowds have gathered to watch the fish trying to get up the newly dug channels - cheering and clapping when the odd individual makes its way up past the sandbags to continue its journey.

One bystander said: "I've been watching them trying to jump-up for the last three weeks - they're getting really tired now and aren't leaping as high. I've been coming here to watch the salmon for 30 years and have never seen the water this low. It's great to see this beginning to work - I saw about 20 fish make it up last night."

The first of the Atlantic Salmon to make their way up The Teme are four or five years old - some have come all the way from Greenland to make their final journey, first up the River Severn and then to the spawning grounds some thirty miles further up the Teme from Ludlow.

Fisheries Technical Specialist, Chris Bainger, 43, from The Environment Agency, said: "The water is now at summer levels - the level below the weirs has dropped, making it the distance too high for the salmon to leap. And there isn't enough water flowing over them either - it's like trying to swim through air for the fish.

"What we're doing is helping but what we really want is rain - another three inches is what the salmon need. Normally the water is a metre higher at this time of year.

"The first fish to arrive here each year are the larger 'spring-run' salmon. Poachers have been helping themselves to them so we've put in a twenty-four-hour surveillance team to guard them.

"If the water level falls any more the bigger fish simply won't make it up and we're considering trapping them and moving them by hand.

"Although this would be a last-ditch attempt to help them as they really shouldn't be handled - the females are in a 'gravid' state - each one is packed-full with about ten thousand eggs and these can be lost if the fish are picked up.

"The fish are trying to get up-stream to the nursery areas, where they came from. That's where they'll spawn and lay their eggs in the clean gravel where they'll be safe from being eaten. The river-bed here, where they are trapped is not right for them - if they spawn here, which a few are, the eggs will simply be washed away or eaten by predators."

Other permanent fish-runs and fish-ladders exist at other weirs and obstructions along British waterways, but this is the first time emergency runs have been made to help the salmon due to low water levels.

The team from the Environment agency are constantly watching and moving the sandbags to help get the flow of water just right so the fish can make their way to safety.