

ANDREW RYAN AND PETER O'REILLY

# Ireland's FIVE BEST TROUT STREAMS



*Fly fishing for wild trout plus breathtaking scenery, sightseeing, and world-class golf*

**I**RELAND IS A POPULAR destination for travelers from the United States in search of golf and sightseeing. The island is known for its Atlantic salmon fishing and its lake (loch) fishing for trout and northern pike. But less known to many Americans is the wealth of fine trout streams, some of which are the best in Europe, located in magnificent countryside.

The rivers Suir, Nire, and Tar in the southeast of Ireland and the Boyne and Kells Blackwater in the Irish midlands, about an hour drive from Dublin, are arguably the five best wild brown trout streams that Ireland has to offer. Each of the rivers has its own character, and each offers a variety of fly-fishing experiences.

Ireland is an easy destination to reach. The larger U.S. airlines fly to Dublin or Shannon—and the rates are reasonable. Aer Lingus flies from Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, Philadelphia, San Diego, and San Francisco. To get around you need a car rental. Car rental prices vary from €250 to €500 per week depending on season and size of car.

Irish trout fishing is challenging: All the fish are wild, indigenous browns averaging from 10 to 14 inches. A typical day fishing in Ireland consists of from 8 to 15 browns ranging from 10 to 15 inches long.

The rivers are of a high caliber, and one of the most famous Irish trout waters, the River Suir, was deemed to surpass the celebrated British chalkstreams the Test and the Itchen by Lord Viscount Grey of Faldoon in his book *Fly Fishing* (1899). He wrote of the River Suir when he fished it in 1880: "In May and in June it might be the finest dry-fly fishing in the United Kingdom."

Irish rivers have abundant insect life, however, and the trout are selective, often refusing anglers' flies. Lord Grey also wrote: "There were trout visibly and audibly rising, which had never seen an artificial dry fly... they defeated me utterly. I walked and knelt and waded and laboured and perspired under August sun without success."

## Seasons

THE IRISH FISHING SEASON runs from the beginning of March until the end of September. These seven months provide a variety of fishing conditions. Much of Ireland's beauty lies in its greenness, which means that we get a lot of rain, even in the summer. Because of rain, water is high in the spring and the fishing is mainly with nymphs and wet flies, with dry-fly fishing in the warmer parts of the day. The summer months are warm with less rainfall, and the low river levels provide excellent dry-fly fishing, especially in the mornings and evenings. Fall weather is unpredictable, but in recent years the region has had mainly low water with little or no rain. The fish are wiser in the fall, so much of the fishing is with small dries and nymphs with fine tippets.

*Ireland's wild brown trout (snouts) live in a broad range of stream types—from large limestone rivers such as the Suir (left) and Boyne to mountain freestone streams to small chalkstreams. When you're not fishing, there's world-class golf, shopping, and sightseeing for the entire family. John D. Kelly photo.*

## Hatches and Flies

IRELAND'S AQUATIC FLY life is similar in many ways to the United States. Streams have good hatches of caddis, mayflies such as March Browns, Blue-winged Olives, and spurwings (similar to Pale Morning Duns), midges (also called Buzzers), stoneflies, and other specific local hatches. Hawthorn Flies, Heather Flies, and Black Gnats (*Bibio* species) are small, black terrestrials that are extremely important for Ireland trout fishers but only regionally important in the U.S. Reed smuts (*Stimulium* species) are what U.S. anglers call Blackflies and are an important aquatic trout food in all the rivers in this article.

Five flies that are a must in your Irish fly box are Klinkhammer Specials, Elk-hair Caddis, Compara-duns, Beadhead Pheasant Tails, and CDC emergers. This selection in various sizes covers most fishing situations. However, ask guides or tackle shops for local knowledge.

## Equipment

STANDARD U.S. RIVER TROUT FISHING outfits are ideal for Irish rivers. A 9-foot 5-weight with a floating line is right for the larger rivers (Suir and Boyne), while a 3- or 4-weight serves well on the smaller streams (the Nire, Tar, and Blackwater). Tippet sizes range from 5X to 8X, with leader lengths from 10 to 15 feet (and sometimes 18 feet). Bring chest waders with felt soles, layered clothing, and a breathable, waterproof wading jacket. The



The River Suir (above) has excellent dry-fly water and is noted for its hatches. It is often compared to English chalkstreams or the Henry's Fork.



The two main tributaries to the River Suir are the Tar and the Nire. The River Tar at Goatensbridge (above) is a classic, slow-moving limestone river with weedy banks that hold abundant aquatic insects but make casting challenging in the summer. The River Nire is a freestone stream with fast, rocky stretches. The water near Fourmilewater Bridge (right) has some of the best fishing on the river.



## IRELAND MAP KEY

1. Boyne Fishing Map [www.fishingireland.net/bf/bfpage.htm](http://www.fishingireland.net/bf/bfpage.htm)
2. Cleoneav Fishing Centre, Cleoneav [www.flyfishingireland.com](http://www.flyfishingireland.com)
3. Golf [www.irishtourism.com/ireland-golf-locations/golf-courses-ireland.htm/](http://www.irishtourism.com/ireland-golf-locations/golf-courses-ireland.htm/). Cleoneav Fly Fishing Centre is in the heart of the famous Sunshine circuit of golf courses (a collection of 15 golf courses within a one-hour drive).
4. Rock of Cashel for other historic Ireland sites, see [www.heritagerepublic.ie](http://www.heritagerepublic.ie)
5. Kilkenny Medieval City [www.kilkenny.ie](http://www.kilkenny.ie)
6. Waterford City and crystal factory [www.waterfordtourism.org](http://www.waterfordtourism.org)
7. Jameson Whiskey Heritage Centre, Midleton [www.whiskey-tours.ie](http://www.whiskey-tours.ie)
8. Blarney Castle and Wooden Mills, Blarney [www.blarneycastle.ie](http://www.blarneycastle.ie)
9. Cahir Castle, Cahir [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie)
10. Clonmel. Excellent shopping and traditional music in pubs. For general tourist information, visit [www.irishtourism.com/](http://www.irishtourism.com/).



For a new generation of Irish anglers, catch-and-release fishing for wild brookies (above) is the key to the fishery's future. In the summer, you can sight-fish to rising trout until 11:00 P.M.

weather can change from warm in the morning to heavy rain in the afternoon.

## Techniques

MUCH OF THE rising is with dries. From May to September trout feed on the surface on a variety of hatches. The best dry-fly fishing is from mid-May to mid-September when prolific hatches of mayfly, caddis, and midges emerge at dusk.

A typical evening begins fishing with emergers at about 7 P.M., and changing to duns and then spinners as the hatch progresses. At dusk, which during midsummer is around 10:30 or 11:00 P.M., skating large caddis is a good technique.

The daytime fishing is also excellent, especially on small, shaded streams. Many successful anglers fish a small fly such as a #18 Pheasant Tail behind a bushy dry fly.

High-stick or Czech-style nymphing is a good technique when there are no rising fish in the faster water. Weighted nymphs with tungsten head heads work best. This setup uses a heavy nymph (#12-14) with a smaller beadhead pattern (#16-18) tied off the back. Watch the leader for any sudden or odd twitches to detect strikes. The smaller pattern waggles behind the larger one and catches 90 percent of the fish.

## Access to Water

ACCESS TO IISH WATERS is relatively easy. All the fishing is privately owned, some of it by individual owners, fisheries associations, or fishing clubs. You need a fishing permit. (There is no state license for trout fishing.) You can obtain a permit or license from your guide or lodge, tackle shop, or often at the local pub. The best guidebook to Irish rivers is *Rivers of Ireland: A Fly Fisher's Guide* by Peter O'Reilly, available from Amazon.com or Stackpole Books ([www.stackpolebooks.com](http://www.stackpolebooks.com)). During the past decade there has been a big turnaround in the attitude of Irish anglers, and they now embrace catch-and-release fishing.

## Rivers

**River Suir.** The River Suir is the second longest river in Ireland. It flows southeast from Devils Bit mountain for 115 miles to where it enters the sea at Waterford. It's a large limestone river with pools and glides and has a fine-gravel bottom that makes for easy wading. It ranges from 50 to 60 feet wide near the source to up to 200 feet wide in the lower sections. The river becomes tidal at

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## IRELAND'S FIVE BEST . . .

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 Carrick-on-Suir, which has some excellent salmon fishing. The Suir is noted for its dry-fly fishing and is often compared with English chalkstreams or the Henry's Fork in the U.S.

The river has excellent hatches throughout the season. In the spring (April and May) trout feed on small mayflies, midges (both adults and emergers sizes 18 to 22), and some caddis. In the summer, Blue-winged Olives, spurrings, and caddis hatch. In the fall, most anglers fish midges or dry flies with nymph droppers.

The highlight of the fishing year is the summer evening rises. From 7 P.M. on, the river comes alive with spinner falls and hatches. It is a technical river to fish, with lots of slow pools and slick water with conflicting currents that make it hard to get a long drift. You'll find many free-rising browns in this water ranging from 8 to 14 inches. The larger trout are difficult to catch but usually fall for a skating caddis or Woolly Bugger during high water. Clonavan Fly Fishing Lodge has access to many private catch-and-release sections on this river.

The Suir has many tributaries along its length. Two of the most famous are the rivers Nire and Tar.

**The Nire.** The Nire is a spate river (freestone) that flows from the Spillage Lakes in the Comeragh Mountains. It is a fast, rocky river with runs and pools along its 12-mile length. At its source it flows from the lakes through peat bog land. The water has an almost teal-like color and it is prone to spate. On many occasions it rises two feet in as many hours, but due to its steep gradient it quickly drops back to normal.

The Nire has a lower pH than the River Suir, which gives it a different range of insects and hatches, including stoneflies, caddis, and mayflies. In late April and early May there is an exciting fall of Hawthorn Flies (*Bibio* sp.), a black terrestrial that lives on the hawthorn tree. The trout gorge on them for several weeks, providing some exciting dry-fly action with large black imitations.

The fish range from 8 to 12 inches, with some fish up to 22 or 25 inches. Due to the tea color of the water, the browns are some of the most beautiful in the Suir system (dark colored with deep red spots). A typical day on the Nire can result in up to 20 fish, with catches of over 50 fish regularly recorded. Many of these trout are small, so a 3-weight rod is ideal.

Fourmilewater Bridge is a typical Irish humpback bridge on the Nire. Above and below it are some of the best pools and runs on the river. It also has the charm of

being located beside Lonergans Bar, one of the only places in the country where you can have a pint of Guinness while fishing!

**The Tar.** The Tar is another major tributary of the Suir, only three miles away from the Nire. It flows down from the Knockmealdown Mountains and over more fertile land than the River Nire. It is a classic chalkstream/limestone with glides and riffles and little gradient. The many weedbeds in the Tar are ranunculus, a beautiful plant that flowers in June and July. The abundance of this weed creates excellent habitat for aquatic insects, and it is thick with nymphs. The beautiful flowering ranunculus, lots of trout, and clear water make this a trout-fishing gem.

Fish range from 8 to 12 inches, but there are lots of them: The Tar was once considered the most densely populated trout river in Europe with up to 5,000 wild trout per mile. A large fish on the Tar is around 15 inches, though they are rare.

Tar hatches are similar to the other rivers in this article and small dries and nymphs are the most productive. When the weeds are thickest in June and July, the fishing is confined to the channels between the weeds and the deeper pools. This is a difficult time to fish this river, but if you are an accurate caster it is great sport because the fish are concentrated in the channels.

## Southeast Ireland Visitor Attractions

THE FIVE RIVER VALLEYS of Ireland's south east region have, since earliest times, served as avenues of invasion, commerce, and trade. Vikings, Normans, and others left fascinating evidence of their cultures. It has been preserved in the villages and towns, churches and abbeys, castles and historic sites, along with modern formal and informal gardens. See the map and sidebar for a list of things to see and do in the region. For more information on tourist sites and stream fishing in the Suir region contact:

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 www.flyfishingireland.com

## The River Boyne

THE RIVER BOYNE rises in the Irish Midlands (in County Kildare) and flows 70 miles northeast before entering the Irish Sea at

Drogheda, 20 miles north of Dublin airport. The fishing is controlled privately by angling associations, 18 of which have provided permits on their water (booked through David Byrne at [dbyrne@flyfishingireland.net](mailto:dbyrne@flyfishingireland.net)).

This magnificent river drains the fertile limestone plains of North Kildare and Meath. It is one of the country's premier salmon and trout rivers, as famous for the quality of its wild brown trout, sea trout, and salmon fishing as the surrounding countryside is for its fine horses and cattle herds.

Along with the fishing, there is much also to see and do. The Boyne Valley is rich in archaeological remains, historic sites, and other places of interest. The mysterious prehistoric chambers at Newgrange (3500 B.C.) are older than the pyramids of Egypt, and the numerous remains of early abbeys and medieval castles bear testament to a colorful history.

The river holds superb stocks of wild brown trout with an average size of about 1 1/4 pounds. Two-pounders are relatively common, and trout of three to five pounds are present. The trout fishing extends for more than 100 miles on the main river and tributaries.

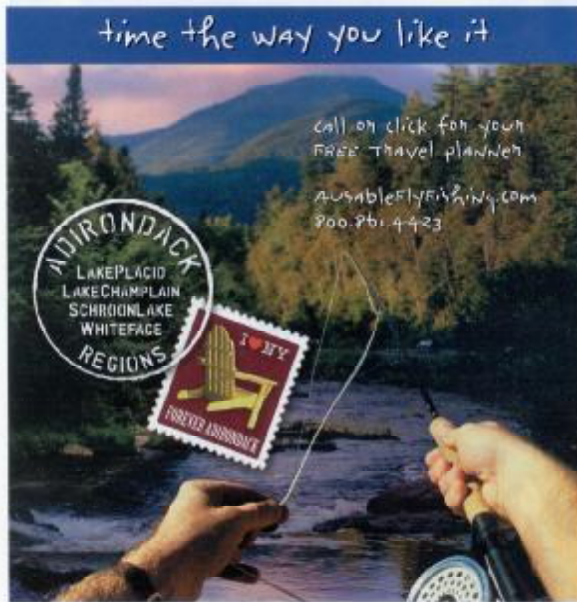
This is a wide, deep river in its lower  
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## IRELAND'S FIVE BEST . . .

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reaches, where many of the big trout hold, and avoiding drag with a dry fly can be a problem. Fish the fast streamy water and the glides and avoid the deep flats unless you see fish rising.

### Hatches

THE RIVER HAS ALL the insect species associated with a limestone river (for detail on hatches go to [www.fishingireland.net/bvt/bvgame.htm](http://www.fishingireland.net/bvt/bvgame.htm)). Caddis and Blue-winged Olives are especially prolific, and you can expect hatches of a variety of mayflies (especially *E. danica* from the second to third week of May to the second week of June). *E. danica* is also known as the May Fly and bears resemblance to Green Drakes in the eastern United States. Midges and Black Gnats (*Bibio johannis*) are especially important.

Popular local dry flies include the Grey Duster, Klinkhammer, Black Gnat, Grey Flag, and Spent Gnat. Local wets include Wickham's Fancy, Black Pennell, and Mallard and Claret.

The prime salmon water is mainly between the towns of Navan (particularly between Slane and Oldbridge during summer) and Drogheda. The first notable runs arrive in April, with the grise arriving in late June. There is also an autumn run in August and September. (The annual rod catch is estimated at between 500 and 800 fish, with an average size of 7 to 8 pounds.)

### Sea Trout

THE RIVER GETS AN EXCELLENT run of sea-run brown trout, peaking in July with good fishing through September. Catch-and-release is encouraged, and some clubs make it a condition of issuing a visitor permit. The fish average 1 1/2 pounds. Fishing during the evening or at night is the most successful way to catch sea trout.

**The Kells Blackwater.** The Kells Blackwater is the largest of the Boyne tributaries, flowing southeast from Lake Ramor for 18 miles before joining the main river in the town of Navan, about 25 miles from Dublin. It's a medium-size limestone river and one of the most productive trout streams I have ever fished. The stretch from Lugawooly down through Maullin Bridge has diverse water and is challenging and rewarding to fish.

The river also gets a run of Atlantic salmon. The peak of the season depends on water levels, but usually occurs between mid-May and the end of June and is heavily fished by local anglers.

From Lake Ramor to O'Daly's Bridge, the river is deep and sluggish and holds a small number of big trout. The section

from Lugawooly to Headford can be especially good, with abundant trout to 2 pounds or more. Downstream of Headford the river changes character. Parts become sluggish and weedy in low water, and local knowledge is essential to find the best water.

The Kells Blackwater has all the usual limestone hatches, and caddis imitations (both adult and pupa) are important. There are various species of *Baetis* and other mayflies as well as midges. Like the Boyne and its tributaries, this is primarily a dry-fly river and catch-and-release is strongly encouraged or required by the fishing clubs. The best fishing is on waters controlled by the Kells Angling Club, including stretches from Nine-Eyed Bridge at its source to Mabe's Bridge just north of Kells.

Several other limestone tributaries to the Boyne are worth fishing. They can be researched at [fishingireland.net](http://fishingireland.net) and by contacting David Byrne at the e-mail address below.

In addition to the excellent stream fishing described above, while visiting Ireland you should sample its excellent loch fishing for wild brown trout (with boat and ghillie) and northern pike, perhaps the best in Europe. Ireland also offers world-class horse racing, golfing, hiking, ruins tours, biking, literary tours, and castle tours. It is an English-speaking, inexpensive, and safe destination for fishing and nonfishing couples.

David Byrne is angling coordinator for the Eastern Regional Fisheries Board in Ireland. He can provide detailed information, arrange angling itineraries, and book beats and accommodations for visitors to this region. Beat costs (for trout) run from 10 to 15 euros per person, per day. Atlantic salmon fishing costs run from 25 to 50 euros per day (a salmon license costs from 10 to 20 euros). Gillies (guides) cost between 140 and 180 euros per day. Byrne also provides free color brochures and detailed maps outlining the brown trout and salmon fishing available.

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ANDREW RYAN is manager, head guide, and instructor at Clonnav Fly Fishing Centre. PETER O'REILLY is author of *Rivers of Ireland* and *Fly Fishing in Ireland*.