

Browns of BRITTANY

In the mood for a family trip to France where you can catch pretty wild browns like this? **Peter Gathercole** explains all... »

BE INSPIRED

*Catch pretty wild
fish in France's
Brittany region*

Brittany's River Elorn
is home to some truly
beautiful wild browns.

Philippe lifts into a fish that was lying between the ranunculus weed.



The soft mesh from a proper catch-and-release net minimises damage to the fish.



BRITTANY has long been known as a popular destination for holidaying Brits. But perhaps less well known is that it's an ideal place to mix a family break with some very enjoyable trout fishing, especially if your thing is catching beautiful wild brown trout from clear streams. The advantage being that when family duties call, the stunning Brittany coast is only a short drive away.

There are a number of rivers and streams in Brittany that support excellent populations of wild brown trout, including one I fished last summer.

The river in question, the Elorn, is noted as one of the best wild trout rivers in western France, both for the size of its fish and their number. Trout over 16 inches (40cm) are more often found here than anywhere else in Brittany and you can hone your angling skills with fish up to 20 inches (50cm).

The river not only supports a healthy population of wild brown trout but also enjoys runs of Atlantic salmon. While the numbers of salmon aren't huge they're substantial enough to make the chance of catching one a possibility, especially during the spring and then again from late summer into the autumn.

The Elorn is a gentle, easy-going kind of river – no big rocks to trip the unwary though it still requires a reasonable level

of skill to gain full enjoyment from it and certainly requires that the visiting angler already has some understanding of how to fish running water.

My guide for the trip

My host and fishing companion for my short Brittany trip is Philippe Dolivet. Philippe has been guiding in France, Ireland and latterly in the UK for almost 30 years. At one time, he was editor of French flyfishing magazine *Plaisirs de la Pêche*, but since the title's demise he's been working full time as a guide and instructor, teaching a steady flow of clients how to flyfish for trout and saltwater bass.

As on any small stream, a combination of a stealthy approach and short accurate casts is the most successful ploy. Philippe quickly lets me know how vital this is on any stream, especially when trying to catch the bigger fish.

If you're thinking of fishing the Elorn, remember to pack a pair of waders. It's an intimate little river, in parts heavily tree-lined – its grassy banks dotted with ferns and foxgloves. In the flow swirling braids of bright green ranunculus are home to prolific insect life, forming channels where the trout hold in the current picking off a steady stream of hatching insects. It's shallow and easy to wade.

Light lines and tippets are required and an accurate cast, too, as the fish are often



Amadou absorbs moisture from dry flies.

found tucked into small pockets in the weed or under the shadow of overhanging branches.

Chosen flies

Dry-fly fishing is the most successful method, especially during the height of summer where profuse beds of starwort and ranunculus make fishing a weighted fly tricky. On the Elorn, small flies are a must, especially during the height of summer – 16s, 18s and even the odd 20 are the most effective sizes, the flies themselves tied to represent the Elorn's insect life.

Olives, stoneflies and sedges provide the bulk of the trout's food and this is

Ever had the feeling that you're being watched?



“Carefully working our way upstream we often spot a nice trout sitting in a tricky place confidently sipping down small olives.”

reflected in the patterns that Philippe uses regularly. These include a small CdC Olive Dun with a V-shaped wing usually tied on a size 18 or 20 hook. When the fish are taking adult sedge flies, a size 16 Florian Drag Cannelle Cinnamon Caddis is very effective while another Florian Stephan-inspired pattern – the Olive Emerger – works extremely well when trout are taking something tiny right on the surface.

About the Elorn

The river feeds the Lac du Drennec, a 270-acre expanse of water stocked with rainbow trout and offers some great flyfishing in its own right. It doesn't end there though, for the Elorn re-emerges at the dam on the lake's western shore. From there it flows towards the town of Sizun and then on to its estuary at Brest.

Being fed from the reservoir, the Elorn's middle section has the advantage of being kept at a stable temperature so that, even during the height of summer the water – even without additional rain – remains cool and clear when other similar-sized rivers are struggling. This makes it an ideal location for any angler wanting to mix a family summer holiday with a spot of fishing.

During my visit, we concentrate on the

middle section, the more overgrown part. The lower river is 16km in length meandering its way between the towns of Landivisiau and Landerneau. It's more open than the stretch we fish and is where he normally takes anglers he's guiding or teaching.

Interestingly it's only possible to fish the Elorn on four days in the week – these are Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Wednesday. The logic behind this restriction is simply to give the river and its trout a time to rest – the intention being to help conserve its stocks. For the visitor, this shouldn't be an issue for there are a number of other rivers that can be fished along with Drennec Lake.

Carefully working our way upstream we often spot a nice trout sitting in a tricky place confidently sipping down small olives. Getting the fly to drift drag-free right in the channel without getting caught on an overhanging branch, is easier said than done; however, the satisfaction achieved when the fly lands delicately in just the right spot only to be taken with confidence as it drifts over the fish more than makes up for all the frustration.

The Elorn's wild browns

In the main they're handsome, chunky little fish, golden-flanked with »



Philippe battles with a lively wild brown. The Elorn trout fight hard.

numerous large spots – some black, some red ringed with white. They also fight well above their weight. While most of the trout on the Elorn are around 8-10 inches there's always the chance of something pushing 18 inches or so – if you have the skill and a bit of luck on your side.

Past glories

Philippe tells me that in Brittany there's the often-used saying that goes something like, "big weather, big fish." Indeed, when trying to catch the larger Elorn trout nothing beats typical 'Breton' weather with cloudy skies, a light drizzle and moderate temperatures. Even plain old rain is acceptable as long as there's not enough to cause the river to rise and colour up.

He remembers one particularly successful day last year that was cold but humid when only the better Elorn trout fed. As Philippe put it: "A day when you wouldn't want your dog to venture outside," but nevertheless he managed to tempt close to a dozen very pretty fish, the best measuring just shy of 16 inches.

He recalled that: "The river seemed asleep except for some better noses poking through the surface film, sucking in tiny grey mayflies. I spent the better part of the day fishing seven or eight trout lies, ones that I was confident would hold good fish. I probably made no more than 20 casts that day but each was with the utmost stealth and care and as close as possible to the fish, optimising both presentation and hooking."

Philippe is almost evangelical about this stealthy approach. As he points out, when

Elorn fish are stunning. It's as simple as that.



Stealth is required to fool trout from this beautiful stream.



CdC Olives form the bulk of the patterns.

Dry Caddis patterns also scored well.

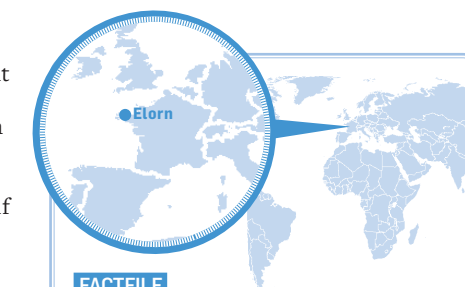
"Having a plan of attack skews the odds of landing a bigger fish in your favour."

trying to catch the bigger fish, wading too aggressively can often induce a fish-scaring wave. Even if that's not the case, it's still easy to scare smaller fish, which bolt upstream and in turn spook the larger trout that simply melt away under cover.

The importance of stealth

His advice is that if you do manage to get within casting range of a good fish, don't cast straight away. Instead take a moment to assess the situation. Obviously, you need to know if the fish is holding station or working across the current and how often it's rising. What's also important is judging where the fish is likely to bolt to if hooked. As with any tree-lined river there's plenty of submerged roots by which a trout can make its escape. Even a medium-sized Elorn trout is a handful and having a plan of attack skews the odds of landing a bigger fish more in your favour. So, dry your fly, check the leader then watch what's happening. Do you have a clear back cast? And are you close enough to get perfect presentation?

Take my word for it, if you're ever lucky enough to fish the Elorn, especially along the lovely canopied middle section and come across one of its bigger wily trout then you'll do well to heed this advice. ➡



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