

STORLAKS FISKE LÆRDAL 2014

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Stuart Lang & Jan Landen

Storlaks means bog salmon in Norwegian.
Storlaksfiske translates to big salmon fishing.

Chasing Silver's Fishing Diary Series

With this exciting and enthusiastic story from the Queen of Rivers – Lærdal, CSM introduces a new series – Fishing Diaries worth remembering. We aim to publish such diaries a couple of times each year, older and newer reports from around the salmon world. If you think you have a story worth sharing (and have photos of sufficient quality to illustrate it, please contact the editor.

After years of waiting, my Lærdal dream was about to become a reality. Through good fortune, fate, or maybe just some good old Scottish charm, I managed to secure the opening 5 days on the famous Eri Beat 9th – 13th June 2014. I did think it strange that the river was opening on the 9th and not the 1st, but selfishly I didn't really care. We were fishing opening week and that's all that mattered. Given what was on offer, it wasn't difficult to pull together some friends to join me. Team Lærdal was assembled. It consisted of Four Scots and two Danes. All experienced salmon fishers but maybe the Scots quartet were marginally better at drinking.

I think it's fair to say, there are few rivers that can rival the majestic and stunning Lærdalselva as a fly-fishing destination for wild Atlantic salmon. The "Queen of Norwegian Rivers", as it was aptly named, has long been the destination of choice for a select-few fly-fishing enthusiasts. From wealthy noblemen and businessmen to movie stars and celebrities, this river has hosted them all, including the King of Norway himself.

At this point, I should add that my fascination with Lærdal began around same time as my first ever trip to Gaula in the mid 1990s. For those who remember, The Norwegian Flyfishers Club (NFC) used to publish a magazine and some glossy brochures. This promotional material was mainly centered on Gaula and the NFC beats, however, it sometimes did a small feature on Lærdalselva. This sparked

my interest – a beautiful river with big salmon. However, my excitement soon turned to disappointment, when they announced that the river was infected with Gyro (1997) and subsequently closed for fishing. I would have to wait. I frequented Gaula for many years and enjoyed some wonderful fishing there, but Lærdal was always on my mind. Fast-forward 20 years and my dreams have become reality.

For a trip such as this, full preparation was an absolute requirement – reels, lines, backing all needed a full check over. New fluorocarbon and extra strong hooks were purchased, and some big black winged flies added to the box. With flights & car hire booked, it was time to go.

Eri Beat

On Sunday 8th June we all met up at the famous Ekornbo Lodge. Built by Coca-Cola back in the 1980s, this is a fantastic lodge for a small group of hardcore fishermen. It offers peace and tranquility away from the river, and with its large, open veranda, it's perfect for relaxing, having a beer and sharing fishy tales of the past – and hopefully the present. With our room selection done (all the rooms/cabins are named after the pools btw) and gear unpacked, it was time to go and look at the beat.

We jumped in the car and headed upriver. I distinctly remember arriving at the hut opposite Goliath pool and was blown away by the volume of water going through the pools. This was going to be a challenge, but little did we know how big that challenge would be.



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Water level was just over 80 m3/sek and temp was 6oC. Magne, our host and local farming legend, assured us this was perfect conditions for early season fishing on Eri. As we were chatting, Stuart had wandered over the bridge to look at Charlie Pool – which is fished from the left bank. He returned to the hut with a look of shock on his face. We asked what he saw? I'll quote exactly what was said for best effect.....

Stuart - "The pool is full of salmon!"
Malcolm - "Have you been on the wine already Stuart?"

Stuart - "No, honestly, the pool is full of big salmon"

Me - "I don't believe you. It's probably just big stones and the ripples on the surface making them look mobile"

Stuart - "The pool is full of salmon - go and see for yourselves"

We were obviously intrigued, so off we went across the bridge. We all got the polaroids on and carefully gazed into the pool. Nothing was obvious at first but then, through the small windows in the current, we could see the grey shadows holding just off the main flow - lots of them, and they were all big. Wow - this was quite a sight to behold. We offered Stu our sincere apologies for questioning his judgement and then quickly headed back to the lodge to prepare.

Midnight was fast approaching, and the excitement was building. This is what we salmon anglers all dream of – the opening days on the famous Lærdal River and big salmon in the pools. Well, in Charlie pool for

sure. I had already prepared a beat-pool rotation which divided us into 3 groups of 2 rods and then split the beat accordingly. Straws were drawn and we were divided accordingly:

The Danes - Steffen Arendrup and Jan Landen – Charlie, Badehølen and Goliath
Red bull - JV & Stuart Lang – Old Eri and Per
Old men - Alan Brown and Malcolm Newbould – Rock and Tore

The Danes had won the lottery. We just had time to make a toast and thank the salmon gods for this opportunity.

July 9th

We all set off to our allocated beats to be ready just after midnight. Stuart started in Old Eri, and I decided to start half down Per pool. We fished for maybe 2 hours – not a touch! The pace of the flow seemed a little quick for these pools, but as we didn't have



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any other reference point, we carried on fishing. No offers. We headed back to the lodge eagerly awaiting the others to arrive.

Alan and Malcom returned - no action to report.

Jan and Steffen returned – 1 x 10kg for Steffen in Badehølen & 3 x storlaks lost by Jan in Charlie.

All 3 went out of the pool and either broke the leader or straightened the hooks. An eventful 3 hours...

Stronger measures seemed necessary. A good start by the Danes, despite the losses and terminal tackle failure. Spirits were high.

I decided to change setups. Set up 1 - LTX X1 14.6 with Nextcast sink 1/3 – 7ft of 30lbs fluorocarbon leader and a tungsten black and blue Monkey

12cm wing and a size 6 Sawada treble hook. Setup 2 - Loop Goran Andersson 14.6 with Nextcast Float/1 with 10ft sink 6 tip – 9ft of 30lbs Fluoro and a Sunray – 15cm.

Next stop was Rock pool and Tore. We aimed to arrive at 3am. On arrival, the air felt cold, so we decided to get some shut eye in the car before starting. It often pays to follow your instinct. This was a good call. When we woke, the light was just changing, and air temp was starting to rise. It felt fishy. I started at the top of Rock pool, while Stuart went in halfway down. Set-up 1 seemed the best choice. After 20 minutes fishing, my fly was suddenly snatched by an aggressive salmon, just a few metres from the tail of Rock pool. This immediately got my

adrenalin flowing and I went from half asleep to full-on focus in a matter of seconds. It was a hard-fought battle but after 25 minutes I managed to land a stunning 10kg storlaks. My first Lærdal salmon of 2014 caught on the opening day. What a start!

When luck is on your side, always take advantage. My next run through Rock pool I fished through the tail section and into Tore. This pool is shared with Hauge beat. Eri has the top half and Hauge the bottom. Halfway down the top part I thought my fly wasn't reaching where I needed. I stripped off some more metres of running line, but instead of speycasting, I executed a perfect overhead cast which landed exactly where I intended.

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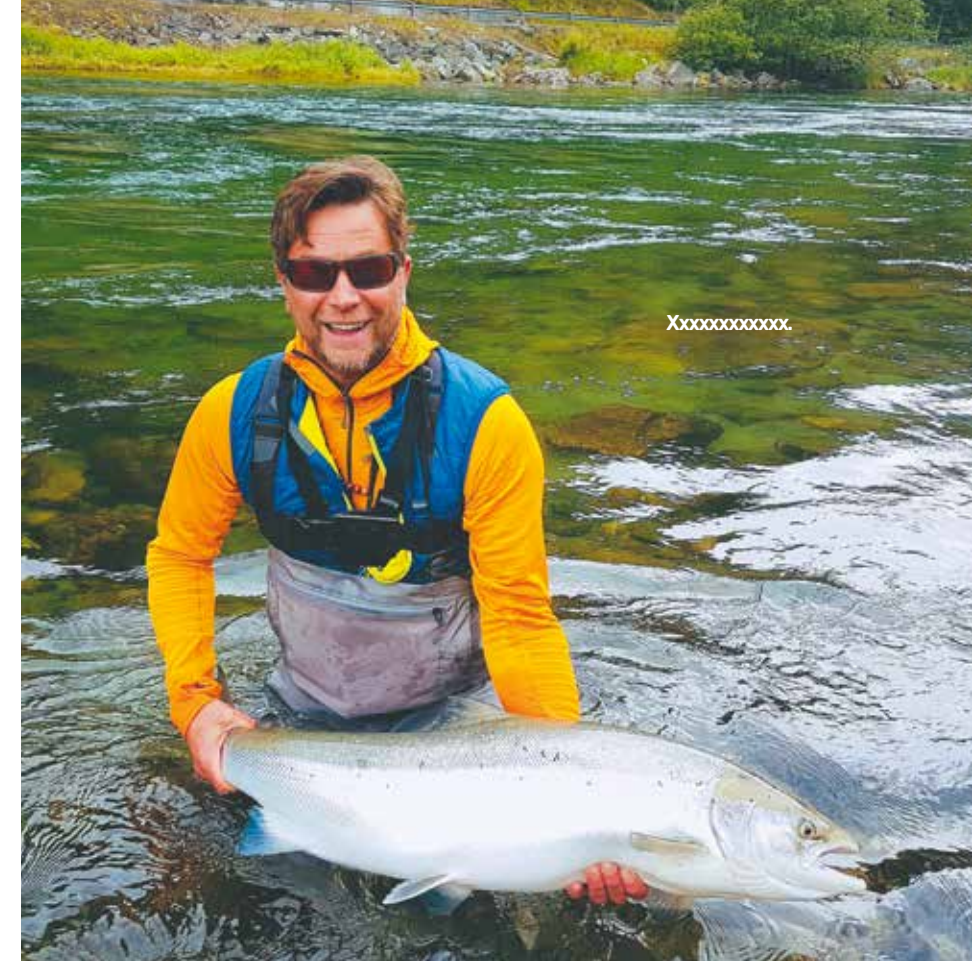
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Bang! I immediately hooked into another salmon. This one felt bigger and took me all the way down to the tail and almost into Hunderi Beat below. Every time I gained some line back on the reel, it would just take off again. It was a hard fight but after 30 minutes of heart stopping excitement, Stuart helped me land a stunning 14kg salmon. Lærdal was living up to its reputation. I needed some coffee and a rest. Stuart fished on a little longer, but no more action was had. It was time to change beats.

The sun was just starting to hit the tops of the mountains when we arrived at the top beat. We decided

to start immediately. Stuart went over to Charlie pool, and I went up to Badehølen. I was using the same set-up. Halfway down I felt a long slow pull on the line – fish on. FYI- I don't give the salmon any line - they pull, and I just hold on. I shouted for Stuart as the salmon quickly headed downstream towards the bridge. If it went under, I was in big trouble. I turned the brake on full and applied a lot of side pressure to try and bring the salmon out of the fast water and more to my side. It seemed to work, and I managed to hold him in the pool. By this time Stuart had noticed what was happening and came over to help. I managed to walk the salmon all the way back to the top of the pool and after another 20 mins, Stuart helped me beach a beautiful 12kg bar of silver. This fish was fat as a pig – a perfect Lærdal salmon.

Three storlaks in one morning – I was pinching myself. All taken on the NC sink 1/3 and the black/blue Monkey with wing length 12cm.

It was Stuart's turn next. He started back in Charlie Pool and immediately hooked a big salmon. The salmon decided it wasn't staying in the pool, and just took off at great speed. Stuart's Hardy reel was

screaming; the salmon was now out of the pool and in this washing machine of white water (top of Goliath pool), and still heading downstream. Suddenly the noise from the reel stopped, the line went tight, then bang! The Hardy reel had seized - probably from overheating! The leader had broken, and the salmon was gone. There was silence for a moment, followed by some shouting and swearing. Lærdal was being kind and cruel at the same time. The sun was now shining down the pool, so we decided on breakfast and some sleep – and for Stuart, a change of reel. Arriving back at the lodge, Steffen and Jan told us they had some action in Rock but unfortunately it was another story of the salmon winning the battle.

Day 1 – 4 landed, 4 lost.

June 10th

Water level still around 80 m3/sek and 60C. Some clouds and 6-18c. Stuart and I decided to follow our instincts again and not fish the night session, opting to start at 3am – daybreak. We headed off to Charlie. Stuart had first run down the pool, while I headed up to Badehølen. My luck was in again as I hooked another storlaks at the top of the pool – much higher up than the previous one.



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Fortunately, this one didn't try to head back to the fjord, so the fight was more straightforward, but still exciting. With help from Stu, we landed another 12kg bar of silver. Same set-up as the day before. I sat down on the bank, poured a coffee, and pressed the pause button. This was a moment to savor. As Ferris Bueller once said – "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it." That's exactly what I did. The Lærdal valley is so beautiful when you stop and look.

Meanwhile Stuart was sitting at the bench on the opposite bank, overlooking Charlie. I pulled myself together and headed over. We chatted for a bit, Stu changed his fly and started at the top of the pool. The light was good, so I walked down to the tail and just stood and watched. If salmon enter the pool, I might see them- that was my thinking. Sure enough, after a few minutes I noticed some dark shadows entering the pool. I waved to Stuart to move halfway down the pool and cast. I stood back and waited. He just had enough line out and made a perfect cast. As he uttered the words "Is that covering them" the line tightened and Mr storlaks was on. Stuart was not letting this one out the pool. The fight was hard but this time the reel wasn't screaming. It was more of a slow purr. After 20+ minutes, I helped Stuart land a beautiful salmon of around 10kg. What a magical moment – a partnership working in harmony. Breakfast was calling.

After refueling, we headed to Per and Old Eri. It was a brief session. We just didn't feel the height was right for those pools. Or maybe we just weren't fishing with the right set-up? Probably a bit of both, but confidence

is everything in salmon fishing, and neither of us felt confident in those pools. However, we were confident in Rock Pool – which was next.

Stuart had the only encounter at the tail of Rock, but unfortunately the salmon got the better of him.

Meanwhile one of the old men team-Malcolm caught a lovely 7kg salmon in Charlie. It was time for a team gathering and dinner. Moments like this are so important on a trip. Cooking food, having drinks and sharing time together is one of the highlights of the experience.

It was now 8.45pm. Stuart and I had the upper beat for the late session, so time to go. I went into Charlie while Stuart went up to Badeholen. First run, halfway down, I was in. I knew it wasn't a storlaks, but it still fought hard. I

landed it successfully. A medium laks of approx 7kg. I took a seat at the bench and opened a bottle of wine. Life was good! Stuart then came in behind me but on the opposite side – right bank. As he neared the tail he hooked into salmon. This was a storlaks. I quickly ran over the bridge. Once again, this fish didn't want to stay in the pool and within seconds it was heading into the washing machine below. The line went tight, and after some pulling and maneuvering, the leader broke, probably around a large stone. The fish was gone! Stuart was understandably a little upset, so I gave him the wine bottle I had opened earlier; that seemed to help a little. We both agreed that controlling these big salmon in smallish pools with heavy flows is not an easy task. Quick thinking is critical.

Back at base camp, it was more of the same – fish hooked and lost.

Day 2 – 4 landed, 4 lost.

We just didn't feel the height was right for those pools. Or maybe we just weren't fishing with the right set-up?



Some brief observations

- Lærdal is a clear river, blue/green in colour. Flies matching those colours work best.
- The river is deep and fast flowing.
- Presentation is key to success. Controlling fly speed and depth.
- At 6oC, salmon were happy to come up and take a fly – as long as it was presented below the turbulent layers and fished at the right speed.
- Lærdal Salmon are aggressive, especially in June when they are fresh. Visual activity = great opportunity.
- Any weakness in tackle will be exploited – everything must be 100%.
- Resting pools and picking the right moments = more success. Read the conditions.

NOTE: Just to say that all our salmon, except one (sadly injured) were safely returned. We all know how important C&R is to the survival of these wonderful specimens.

June 11th

Water 78 m3/sek & Temp 6oC. Air temp 8-20oC. More sun. Rock pool & Tore was our early morning session. I was hoping Stuart could bounce back from yesterday's disappointment and he did just that. At the tail of Rock, he hooked a storlaks. No dramas, no broken leaders, no seized reels, just a hard-fought battle lasting 25 mins. The result was a stunning 11kg chrome bar. A fantastic start to the day and a well needed confidence booster for Stu. Me – zero touches.

After a quick breakfast, we headed up to Charlie for a couple of hours. The sun had burned the clouds away and it was now a blue-sky day. The team decided to head back to camp – Stuart included. However, something told me to stay and finish my session. I opted for a change and picked up my LTS with float/1 and type 6 tip with the 15cm sunray (Setup 2). Halfway down the pool, I see a slight swirl on the surface and then my line tightens. Fish on. It felt like a good salmon.

Obviously, I was conscious of the previous disasters, so I played hard. I also thought it wise to seek help. Charlie pool is not the easiest place to land a fish on your own. I phoned Stu. Within minutes the whole team were there. We eventually landed a sparkling 10kg storlaks under a blue sky and full sun. With 80 cubics of cold water, the sun is not an issue.

Day 3 – 2 landed, 2 lost.

In 3 days, I had hooked, landed and released six storlaks with an average weight of approx. 11kg. This was fishing paradise!

We all returned to the lodge for a long leisurely afternoon, enjoying some fine wine, good food and some laughs together. Everything was perfect and the Danes turned out to be expert cooks. In my slightly inebriated state, I offered Alan my setup (No 1) with a special fly hoping it might change his luck.

June 12&13th

Conditions remained consistent with previous days. Water fluctuated a little with snowmelt, but levels and temps remained much the same. Over the next 1.5 days, Alan landed 2 x storlaks – 9 & 11kg in Rock and Charlie. Did he fish with more confidence because he knew my setup was working, or was it just luck? Maybe both. I was just happy he caught two great Laerdal salmon. Stuart had another storlaks in Rock pool while the Danes were still practicing some long-distance hook & release. However, Jan redeemed himself and landed a beautiful salmon from Charlie pool.

As for me, I never had another offer, but I did manage to finish off the wine.

Our action-packed trip had drawn to a close. Between us all we had

hooked 25 big salmon and landed 13. Overall average was over 10kg. With more knowledge and experience of this type of river and the pools we may have landed more, but that’s salmon fishing – we are always learning.

Regardless of numbers and stats and hook to land ratios, this trip will be remembered by us all forever. The excitement and joy we all experienced will probably never be matched – anywhere. This was salmon fishing at its absolute best, in a location which takes your breath away and shared amongst friends who made it so special. Magne (the farmer) made us feel at home, and we got to sample his amazing strawberries and raspberries – the best in the valley!

As previously mentioned, Lærdal is known as the “Queen of Norwegian Rivers” – and I now know why.

Until next time!

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LÆRDAL

What does the future hold for this magnificent river?

As of today – in 2026, Lærdal remains under review for salmon fishing. For the last 5 years it has been open for Seatrout fishing only. I would like to ask the board and the governing bodies to reconsider this position.

From spawning count evidence, the current 5-average is around 700 salmon. Measured against a 5-year average from 2013-2017, which was around 1000, it’s a 30% decline. That may sound alarming and it’s certainly not a good sign, however, when we consider the global decline in Atlantic Salmon, the story is much the same – some worse, some better, but the trend is down. This isn’t a local issue. It’s universal. We may be looking at the “new norm” in terms of salmon populations. So, how do we manage this new normal? I think the first thing is to stop making comparisons to past decades. It’s not relevant anymore. The expansion of Aquaculture and changes to our climate and oceanic conditions has completely changed the landscape. What does this mean? In laments terms, it means smolt survival is at an all-time low, which means less salmon are returning to all rivers, including Lærdal. With these

continued challenges and obstacles to increased marine survival, this situation is unlikely to improve.

So, what’s the answer?

Do the government continue with this stop-start policy based on salmon spawning targets while simultaneously ignoring the biggest bottleneck to increasing the number of spawning salmon – Aquaculture and sealice. Or should they look at imposing restrictions – i.e Fly fishing only, catch and release and rod pressure reduction on beats?

Example - instead of 6 rods on a beat, reduce to 4. These are all viable options which I am sure both anglers & famers would consider. Offer them the choice. This seems a sensible alternative to stopping salmon fishing altogether.

This is not to say C&R will increase salmon populations -that’s not it’s purpose. C&R is just a conservation measure with the sole purpose of allowing the continuation of salmon angling on Lærdal, with all its associated social and economic benefits, while ensuring

minimal mortality of adult salmon. Personally, I see this as a better solution to what’s currently in place.

Let’s keep in mind, that over the last 5 years Lærdal’s loyal flyfishing enthusiasts continued to support the river and the local community by returning year on year and happy to embrace current regulations (seatrout fishing only) for the benefit and protection of the river’s valuable salmon and seatrout populations. In other words, the anglers who love Lærdal already accept and practice C&R. It’s embedded. This Lærdal FlyFishing Community is now established and has embraced conservation as standard practice. Should this not be a good foundation to build on? This community of conservation minded flyfishers should be welcomed and encouraged – they are the future.

I would like to ask the Riverboard and the governing bodies to consider this seriously. Do we really want to stop all salmon fishing on Lærdal indefinitely or can we recognise the value it offers locally, nationally and internationally, embrace the new norm and find sensible solutions for all concerned and connected to this wonderful river. ●