

Salmon Watch Ireland

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Five Years of Fish Counter Data: Signs of Recovery, Serious Warnings, and an Important Story from the Erriff.



The publication of Inland Fisheries Ireland's 2025 Consolidated Fish Counter Summary Report provides an opportunity to examine what Ireland's fish counters have been telling us over the five years from 2021 to 2025.

The picture is far from uniform. Some rivers have shown encouraging increases, while others remain seriously depleted. Just as importantly, the comparison demonstrates the value of long-term monitoring: when reliable counter data are combined with tagging, telemetry, and environmental information, they can begin to identify where management interventions may be making a difference.

IFI itself acknowledges the wider problem. The 2025 report notes the continuing decline of Atlantic salmon stocks and emphasises that increasingly rigorous management requires reliable and robust stock assessment.

Five-year comparison: The table below compares a selection of important counters. Figures represent salmon recorded.

River / Counter	2021	2025	Change	Comment
Kerry Blackwater	555	934	+68%	Encouraging increase
Eske	380	877	+131%	Strong improvement
Feale	3,213	5,111	+59%	Sustained improvement
Erriff	2,348	1,160	−51%	Remains below average
Bunowen	844	459	−46%	Significant reduction
Lackagh	331	50	−85%	Exceptional deterioration
Boyne*	2,611	995	−62%	Recorded component only
Waterville/Currane	1,247	No reliable total	—	Serious monitoring gap

*The Boyne counter covers only part of the river channel, so this should not be interpreted as a 62% reduction in the total Boyne stock.

The differences between rivers are important. They demonstrate that although declining marine survival affects salmon over a very wide geographical area, individual catchments can respond quite differently. That makes management of pressures that we can control—exploitation, barriers, habitat, water quality, hydropower, and aquaculture—all the more important.

Feale – is reduced exploitation helping?

The River Feale is one of the most encouraging examples in the five-year series:

Year	Salmon recorded
2021	3,213
2022	6,566
2023	4,183
2024	5,199
2025	5,111

The 2025 count is approximately 59% higher than in 2021. The counter operated throughout 2025, was rated Good and its data were verified.

There is an important management context. The Feale has been operated as a catch-and-release salmon fishery, while the recent TEGOS series records no legal commercial draft-net harvest from the Feale/Galey/Brick stock. IFI has itself confirmed the catch-and-release status of the fishery.

This does not prove that reduced exploitation alone produced the improvement. Marine survival, river flows, recruitment, habitat, and water quality will all influence returning numbers.

Nevertheless, the basic conservation benefit is undeniable: salmon which are not killed by recreational or commercial exploitation have an opportunity to reach their spawning grounds.

The Feale therefore provides encouraging evidence consistent with the principle that reducing exploitation can assist stock recovery. At a time when many salmon stocks are struggling, protecting returning adults is one of the most immediate management measures available.

Feale – encouraging improvement, but the generational lag matters.

The Feale recorded 5,111 salmon in 2025 compared with 3,213 in 2021, an increase of approximately 59%. This is an encouraging development, particularly in the context of reduced exploitation and catch-and-release management.

However, salmon biology means that the benefits of conservation measures must be assessed over several generations rather than from a single year's return. As a broad working timeframe, ova deposited for one winter may produce returning grilse approximately four years later, while multi-sea-winter salmon may return approximately five years later. Consequently, the 2025 adult run principally reflects

spawning success, juvenile production and marine survival originating several years previously.

This generational lag is particularly important when evaluating the effects of reduced exploitation. Fish protected from harvest must first survive to spawn; their offspring must then survive the freshwater juvenile stages, migrate to sea as smolts and survive the marine phase before returning as adults. The full benefit of protecting additional spawning adults therefore only becomes visible in subsequent generations.

The Feale should consequently be regarded as an important river for monitoring whether sustained catch-and-release and the absence or reduction of commercial exploitation translate into a continuing increase in adult returns. The appropriate test is not one good year, but whether the improvement persists across successive four- and five-year salmon generations.

Kerry Blackwater – encouraging, but the classifications need explanation.

The Kerry Blackwater increased from 555 salmon in 2021 to 934 in 2025, an increase of approximately 68%.

This is a particularly useful counter because IFI describes the installation as providing a total count for the river. It operated for all 365 days in 2025, was rated Good and the data were verified.

There is, however, an anomaly requiring clarification.

IFI divides the 934 fish into 364 “Spring Salmon”, 358 “Grilse” and 212 “Late Summer Salmon.”

The Kerry Blackwater is not generally recognised as supporting a spring salmon run of the magnitude suggested by the counter classification. IFI's 2025 report records 364 fish under the category “Spring Salmon”; however, subsequent clarification based on examination of the counter video suggests that at least some of the fish recorded during the spring period were relatively small and may represent early running grilse rather than the larger multi-sea-winter fish normally understood by anglers and fisheries managers as spring salmon. This highlights the need for care when interpreting the seasonal categories presented in the counter tables.

Importantly, the scientific advice used to determine the overall health and status of the Kerry Blackwater stock is based on the total estimated salmon return rather than treating the counter's “Spring Salmon” category as a separate spring stock. The key 2025 figure is therefore the verified total of 934 salmon recorded returning to the river. The apparent classification anomaly should not be interpreted as

evidence that the Kerry Blackwater has suddenly developed a substantial spring salmon run.

Lackagh – an exceptional fall in 2025

Perhaps the most alarming individual result is the Lackagh:

Year	Salmon recorded
2021	331
2022	127
2023	315
2024	469
2025	50

That represents an approximately 89% reduction between 2024 and 2025.

Importantly, IFI does not attribute this collapse to a malfunctioning counter. The 2025 counter operated throughout the year, was rated Good and the data were verified. IFI describes the run as poor and notes that the Lackagh remains below its conservation limit.

IFI provides no specific explanation for such an exceptional year-on-year reduction.

The Lackagh result therefore deserves urgent investigation. River conditions, juvenile production, marine survival, predation, exploitation, and other pressures should be examined before any conclusion is reached about its cause.

Erriff – the value of intensive scientific monitoring

The Erriff deserves separate consideration.

IFI has designated it as its National Salmonid Index Catchment, meaning that counter data are supplemented by trapping, PIT tagging, acoustic telemetry, juvenile monitoring, and other research.

The salmon series remains concerning:

2,348 in 2021 → 1,281 in 2022 → 1,398 in 2023 → 990 in 2024 → 1,160 in 2025.

The 2025 salmon return was therefore approximately 51% below 2021, and IFI again described the salmon run as below average.

The recent sea-trout story is quite different.

Sea trout increase strongly.

Year	Erriff sea trout
2023	844
2024	1,356
2025	2,089

The sea-trout count has therefore increased by approximately 148% between 2023 and 2025.

The 2025 figure is particularly robust because the counter operated throughout the year and was verified.

The question is: what might be contributing to this improvement?

Erriff sea trout and salmon farming in Killary

The Erriff flows directly into Killary Harbour, where salmon are farmed at Rosroe. This makes the catchment particularly valuable for examining the interaction between wild salmonids and open-net salmon farming.

Marine Institute sea-lice monitoring shows that conditions at Rosroe differed substantially between 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Spring 2023 – older farmed salmon present

The older 2022 farm generation remained at Rosroe throughout the early 2023 migration period.

Total salmon lice reached:

3.60 lice/fish – 7 March
11.79 lice/fish – 21 March
2.37 lice/fish – 4 April
1.13 lice/fish – 28 April
2.43 lice/fish – 3 May

The farm stock was not harvested out until May 2023.

The Marine Institute identified the March Killary result as the highest mean mobile salmon-lice level recorded on one-sea-winter farmed salmon nationally during 2023.

The Erriff counter recorded 844 sea trout in 2023.

Spring 2024 – dramatically lower lice pressure

A new generation of farmed salmon was present at Rosroe in 2024. The farm was therefore not fallow, but the lice situation during the wild migration period was completely different:

2024 inspection	Total salmon lice/fish
24 January	0.00
22 February	0.00
13 March	0.00
26 March	0.05
8 April	0.00
22 April	0.15
13 May	0.07
24 May	0.96

These exceptionally low levels coincided with the period when wild seatrout and salmon smolts migrate from the Erriff through Killary.

The Erriff subsequently recorded 1,356 sea trout in 2024, 61% more than in 2023.

Spring 2025 – older farm stock harvested after March.

The 2025 situation provides another important comparison.

The older 2024 farm generation entered its second year at Rosroe, but Marine Institute records indicate that the farm stock was harvested following the March 2025 inspection.

This is potentially significant because the large second-year farm stock was therefore no longer present at Rosroe during much of the critical April–May wild smolt migration period.

The subsequent Erriff counter result was:
2,089 sea trout
That was:
54% higher than 2024, and
148% higher than 2023.

The three-year sequence is consequently striking:

Year	Rosroe during spring	Erriff sea trout
2023	Older salmon present into May; March lice peak 11.79/fish	844
2024	Young generation; exceptionally low spring lice	1,356
2025	Older generation harvested after March	2,089

This association deserves serious scientific examination.

While three annual counter totals, considered in isolation, cannot prove causation, the observed pattern strongly suggests that salmon-farm conditions in Killary are contributing to Erriff sea-trout survival.

The increase from 844 sea trout in 2023 to 1,356 in 2024 and 2,089 in 2025 coincided with a marked reduction in exposure to large, farmed salmon and associated lice pressure during the critical spring migration period. This relationship becomes considerably more persuasive when viewed alongside the wider Erriff evidence: PIT-tag studies showing major differences in marine return between cohorts exposed to contrasting farm conditions, telemetry identifying significant losses during passage through Killary, measured lice infestation of wild sea trout, and Marine Institute records documenting the changing lice burden on farmed salmon at Rosroe.

Taken together, these independent lines of evidence strongly support a causal role for salmon-farm-related lice pressure in influencing Erriff sea-trout survival, while recognising that marine conditions and other environmental factors also contribute to year-to-year variation.

The important point is that this is no longer simply a geographical association between a salmon farm and a sea-trout population. There is a biologically plausible pathway, measured exposure, temporal variation in that exposure, observed losses during migration through Killary and substantial differences in subsequent survival. The exceptionally low farm-lice conditions during the 2024 migration and the removal of the older farm stock following March 2025 provide particularly

valuable contrasts with 2023, when large, farmed salmon remained at Rosroe into May and lice levels reached 11.79 per fish. The simultaneous improvement in Erriff sea-trout numbers is therefore consistent with, and adds further weight to, the substantial scientific evidence that reducing salmon-farm lice pressure can improve the prospects for wild sea trout.

Telemetry – where are Erriff sea trout being lost?

IFI's 2022 acoustic telemetry experiment provides particularly valuable information.

Twenty wild seatrout smolts were acoustically tagged during April and early May.

Remarkably, all 20 successfully reached Killary Harbour.

IFI subsequently recorded that approximately 35% were lost during their migration through Killary towards the sea.

Only one ultimately returned to the Erriff.

The sample is small and disappearance from the receiver network cannot automatically be attributed to mortality from salmon lice or salmon farming. Nevertheless, the experiment demonstrates that the transition through Killary represents an important stage of the migration where substantial losses can occur.

That makes the environmental conditions encountered within Killary particularly important.

PIT tagging provides an even stronger test.

IFI has also PIT-tagged Erriff seatrout smolts, allowing particular groups of fish leaving the river in a particular spring to be followed through subsequent returns.

Published return rates have varied enormously between cohorts, including:

Smolt cohort	Recorded return
2017	4.9%
2018	24%
2019	2.9%
2020	11%
2021	16.7%
2022	18.5%
2023	5.9%

The difference between 2018 and 2019 is especially interesting when placed alongside the Rosroe production cycle.

In spring 2018, young, farmed salmon at Rosroe carried extremely low lice burdens—approximately 0.05–0.10 lice per fish during April and May.

The corresponding Erriff PIT-tag cohort subsequently produced the highest return in the series: 24.1%.

By spring 2019 the same farm generation was older. Marine Institute monitoring recorded substantially higher lice burdens, including 15.99 lice/fish in February and 5.18 in April.

The corresponding Erriff sea-trout cohort produced a return of only 2.9%.

That represents an approximately 88% reduction in return rate between the two cohorts.

This provides a compelling reason for further controlled investigation.

A natural experiment in Killary?

Taken together, the Erriff evidence is unusual in its depth.

We have:

fish-counter data → PIT-tagged sea trout → acoustic telemetry → farm production cycles → measured farm lice burdens → wild sea-trout lice monitoring.

Rather than relying on simple correlations, these datasets provide an opportunity to evaluate a very specific management proposition.

Salmon Watch Ireland believes consideration should be given to ensuring that Killary Harbour is free of large, farmed salmon throughout the critical wild salmon and seatrout smolt migration period.

The Erriff could then provide an exceptionally valuable scientific test.

PIT-tagged seatrout and salmon smolts could be monitored during years when large, farmed salmon are present during migration and compared with cohorts migrating when the farm is fallow, harvested out, or contains only young fish with very low lice burdens.

The recent sequence makes such research particularly relevant:

2023 – large farm stock and elevated spring lice → 844 sea trout

2024 – young farm stock and exceptionally low spring lice → 1,356

2025 – older stock harvested after March → 2,089

This pattern should not be overstated, but neither should it be ignored.

Waterville/Currane – monitoring must be restored.

The position at Waterville is very different.

In 2021 the counter recorded 1,247 salmon and approximately 3,500 sea trout. In 2022 it recorded 837 salmon and approximately 1,280 sea trout.

Reliable comparable annual figures then effectively disappear.

Problems with the counter prevented complete annual results for 2023 and 2024. In 2025 it operated only from January to May, was classified as Poor and the results were unverified.

Particularly concerning is damage to the second counting channel, which historically accounted for the largest proportion of the Currane seatrout run.

For a sea-trout fishery of the historic importance of Lough Currane, restoring a fully functioning counter must be a priority.

Salmon Watch Ireland requested that the counter be repaired and we are able to report that the counter is working this summer and that repairs and upgrade have taken place.

Monitoring must lead to management.

The five-year comparison contains both good and bad news.

The Feale, Eske and Kerry Blackwater demonstrate that substantial numbers of salmon can still return and that improvement is possible.

The Lackagh and Erriff salmon figures demonstrate that serious problems remain.

Waterville demonstrates the consequences when a strategically important monitoring system fails.

And the Erriff sea-trout programme demonstrates something else: the enormous value of collecting sufficiently detailed scientific information to move beyond simply counting fish.

The Feale also provides an important management lesson. With salmon protected through catch-and-release angling and without a reported commercial draft-net harvest from the stock, substantially more returning adults have the opportunity to reach their spawning grounds. Its 2025 count of 5,111 salmon—59% above 2021—is encouraging.

The Erriff provides another potential lesson. Its improving sea-trout numbers have coincided with a period in which exposure to high lice burdens from large, farmed

salmon during the spring migration has been markedly reduced compared with 2023.

Neither observation establishes a single cause for stock improvement. Salmon and sea trout face multiple pressures throughout freshwater and marine phases of their lives.

But that uncertainty is not an argument for inaction.

It is an argument for reducing every significant and manageable source of mortality while measuring the response.

For Salmon Watch Ireland, which means protecting returning adults from unnecessary exploitation, restoring habitat and water quality, removing or mitigating barriers, addressing hydropower mortality, maintaining high-quality monitoring and ensuring that wild salmon and sea trout are afforded the greatest possible protection from aquaculture-related lice and other pressures during their vulnerable migration to sea.

Where management reduces avoidable mortality, we should measure the response. Where stocks improve, we should learn from it. And where they continue to decline, we must be prepared to act.