

Freshwater Pearl Mussels - The endangered jewel in the crown of Scotland's rivers

Freshwater pearl mussels are an important species in many of Scotland's rivers but are under severe threat from continued criminal activity. The threat is so severe that pearl mussels are now a UK wildlife crime priority. Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish police forces, the

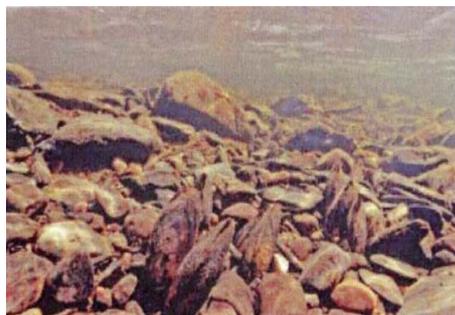
National Wildlife Crime Unit and other agencies are working together to raise awareness of the issue and to reduce wildlife crime. Anyone taking, disturbing or harming it faces prosecution and possibly prison – the freshwater pearl mussel continues to be damaged illegally. As people who are often out enjoying our rivers, canoeists and kayakers can play an important role in detecting and reporting potential crimes involving pearl mussels.

Freshwater pearl mussels are similar in shape to the common mussel found on the seashore but are much larger (growing up to 12-15cm long), a brown colour and live buried or half-buried among the gravel in stable areas of riverbed. The freshwater pearl mussel thrives in clean, fast-running water that's low in nutrients and calcium, with boulders, gravel and coarse sand on the river bottom. They have an unusual lifecycle, with the larvae attaching themselves to the salmon and trout gills in the summer. There they remain, without harming the fish, until they drop off the following spring and burrow into the riverbed to grow into adults. The mussels can act as 'biofilters', as they filter out particles and help to maintain the water quality.

In Scotland, we have a significant number of the world's remaining known breeding populations in our rivers, including many of the rivers mentioned in the Scottish white water and canoe touring guides. Threats to the pearl mussel include pollution from various sources such as sewerage systems, industry, intensive farming and forestry, as well as engineering on river beds. Those carrying out engineering works on river beds may in some cases be breaking the law if the works disturb pearl mussels. Added to these factors are the criminals who go pearl fishing in search of the pearls the mussels sometimes contain.

This continued pressure, and the slow rates at which they grow (larger pearl mussels can be over 100 years old), make the pearl mussel one of the most endangered species in Scotland.

Criminal pearl fishing is more likely in rivers between May and September when water can be shallower. So, if you are out canoeing or kayaking on Scotland's rivers this summer and happen to see anything suspicious, or if you suspect an offence may have been committed, please contact your local police station immediately to inform them. If possible, try to speak to the local Wildlife Crime Officer. Suspicious activity can include people searching in the river (often with glass-bottomed buckets), or piles of dead shells on the riverbank, scattered in the river itself, or at a secluded spot nearby.



When out enjoying our rivers, should you see any live pearl mussels it is important to remember that they should not be disturbed.

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