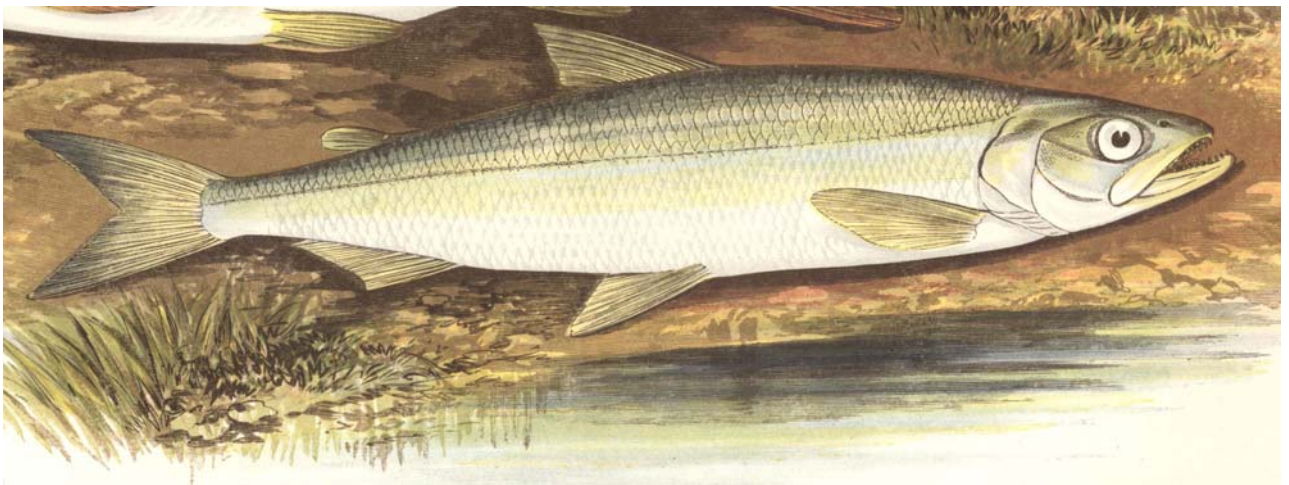




### **3 THE FISHES OF THE TWEED AND THE EYE**

#### **E.3**

#### **Sparling** *Osmerus eperlanus* **Smelt**



*Photo E.3.1: Sparling / Smelt. Taken from British Freshwater Fishes, by the Rev. W. Houghton, illustrated by A.F. Lydon, 1879*

The family Osmeridae has ten species (marine, migratory and freshwater) distributed through the Atlantic, Arctic and Pacific oceans. They are small, laterally compressed silver fish with adipose fins that show they are related to Salmonids. Most of the species are food fish and they have strong smell, similar to that of Cucumber. Only one species, the Sparling or Smelt, is found in British waters. It is a small fish, generally 10 to 20cms long, but occasionally up to 30cms. It could be confused with Salmon or Sea-trout smolts, but can be distinguished by the fact that it no spots or colouration at all and has the characteristic smell of its family. Its range is the Atlantic Coast of Europe from southern Norway to North-west Spain, where it is found in coastal waters and estuaries, migrating into large, clean rivers at spawning time. Purely freshwater populations are known, but the only one in the British Isles, in Cheshire, became extinct in the 1920's due to pollution. Pollution of estuaries resulted in the loss of many populations, but there are now cases



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where the species has returned to estuaries that have been cleaned up, such as the Thames. The spawning run is in March and April and typically lasts for only a few days. The eggs are sticky and attach themselves to any hard surfaces available. The eggs hatch after about a month and the young are swept downstream to the upper reaches of the estuaries where they start to feed. Though mortality amongst the spawning adults is high, many survive to spawn repeatedly. Only two populations are known to survive in Scotland, one on the River Cree in Galloway and the other on the Tay, and both still support fisheries.

**Sparling on Tweed:** As long ago as 1838, George Johnston in his *"A List of the Fishes of Berwickshire."* classed them as *"very rare"* and said that he had only ever heard of a single specimen being taken from the Tweed (he later came across two more). As this was at a time when the Tay, the Forth and the Northumberland Tyne all had major fisheries for this species, it can be assumed that its absence from the Tweed was (and is) an indication of unsuitable conditions, probably the lack of an estuary of any size. Bolam (1919) reported Smelt as being *"a very rare visitor to Tweed, where I have never, personally, been able to meet with it, although I have been assured by old fishermen that an occasional specimen does still occur."* There is a record of a single Sparling from the stomach of a salmon found during a study of Salmon feeding carried out using fish netted by the Berwick Salmon fishing Company (Tosh, 1894). The specimen is recorded as being *"almost entire"* and 4.875 inches in length, so there need be no doubt as to its identity. The Salmon, of course, could have eaten this fish before reaching the Tweed.

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A charitable trust established by the River Tweed Commission to promote the development of fish stocks in the Tweed River System

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