



A Wild Rose in winter





The Orkney-built fishing boat, renowned for its strength and seaworthiness, is well suited to the harsh and unforgiving Scottish winter weather. Alan Harper and photographer Lester McCarthy spent a day aboard the *Wild Rose* in the Firth of Lorn

FISHING is not an easy way to make a living. It is always wet, often cold and not devoid of danger, while its rewards are subject to the ebb and flow of fickle markets and the vagaries of wave and wind. Off Scotland's west coast, in the Firth of Lorn and the Jura Sound, Lachlan McLachlan and his son Eoghann make their living from prawns and lobsters in the Orkney fishing boat *Wild Rose*.

Summer is the time for fishing, just as it is the time for cruising this beautiful coastline. But all through the winter, in all but the most severe conditions, the *Wild Rose* can be seen poking her nose out of her home port of Cullipool on the island of Luing to check fleets of creels in the waters of Scarba, Lunga, Eilean Dubh Mor and even round the back of Garbh Eileach and A'Chuli, where the ponderous North Atlantic swells roll in with a self-important air and the next stop, as they say, is Newfoundland.

Lachlan McLachlan has been working out of Cullipool for more than 25 years. His own experience follows on that of his father and grandfather, both of whom were lighthouse keepers and part-time fishermen, and if pressed he will admit with a smile to "a wee bit of local knowledge". After a long apprenticeship in open boats, he had the *Wild Rose* built by James Hourston of Shapinsay, Orkney, about three years ago, with a view to going out further, staying out longer, and coming back with more. The lights in the Sound are still a McLachlan responsibility, but they are automatic, and only need periodic checks and occasional repairs.

Lachlan is a traditionalist when it comes to boats, and as far as he is concerned glassfibre is still too modern to be taken seriously. The oldest glassfibre boats in the area go back about 15 years, but aside from conceding that they are still afloat, he prefers to reserve judgement. He also wanted a substantial keel to give the new boat an edge over the locally-built craft, so when he heard of the beamy, deep-draught clinker workboats turned out by James Hourston in his old Shapinsay schoolhouse, they sounded just the thing.

Left: Lachlan and Eoghann McLachlan haul in lobster creels off Garbh Eileach while Hamish looks on. Above: a rare break from fishing — lunchtime at Scarba.

He was asked by the yard how long he wanted his new boat to be. Thirty feet seemed about right. And how wide? Well, quite beamy; say ten feet. The traditional Orkney fishing boat has 'floorboards' to allow the deck to drain straight into the bilges, but Lachlan specified a watertight deck with scuppers draining over the freeboard. He also asked for a strengthening beam below the deck just aft of the wheelhouse to take the weight of a trawl winch, and just forward of that sits an 80hp Sabre diesel which can be lifted out — just about — through a hatch in the wheelhouse floor.

When delivered the *Wild Rose* was 31ft long by 13ft 6in ("She filled out a touch when we were building her, mon"), built of larch on oak frames, with a tight iroko deck sweeping down from the dramatic high prow to the broad working area amidships and astern, just six or nine inches above the water.

In cross-section the local fishing boats are almost horizontal from the keel outwards before the hull curves up towards the waterline. An Orkney boat, however, has its first two or three clinker planks rising near to vertically before beaming outwards to give a long and hollow keel, which in the *Wild Rose* is filled with a ton of secondhand lead as ballast, and reaches down six feet at the stern and four at the bow. Like an industrious little iceberg, there is more to her than meets the eye; she is not so much a fishing boat as a converted Viking longship.

Lester and I went out as deck cargo one blustery day in the early part of the winter, to watch Lachlan, Eoghann and the *Wild Rose* work the lobster and prawn creels while Hamish the dog looked on, waiting for fish to chew on and dreaming of wrestling with conger eels. There can be 60 or 70 creels in a fleet, joined in series and marked at each end with a buoy, and Lachlan might have several hundred creels out at any one time. If they all came up full he would need a boat the size of a small tanker, but they don't; and in winter they are almost all empty, except for stray crabs which command such a low price at the quay they are not worth bothering with.

To catch lobsters you need shallow water with a jagged, rocky bottom: an ideal place would be a steep-sided lump of rock close inshore, which needs to be crossed over and encircled by the creels, getting them down the sides and in all the crannies. Lachlan uses a Furuno echo sounder to survey new lobster grounds, and looks for a very hard echo and widely-varied depths. Before the days of sounders "a wee bit of local knowledge" could pay off in knowing where to put the fleet down, but there is still no substitute for Lachlan's knowing exactly how close to the rocks he can put the boat in a heaving sea, with one hand on the wheel and the other controlling the winch as Eoghann hauls in the creels and stacks them high on the deck. At times we were so close in it seemed that we must strike bottom: the next wave, surely, would lift us gently forward and crunch us down on an unforgiving pinnacle of granite. But of course it never happened. The stack of creels got higher, crabs

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spreadeagled themselves as they were tossed back into the sea, the rope screeched in the winch, Hamish looked on hopefully and Lachlan gave us a cheery running commentary.

Passing round the northern shore of Garbh Eileach the Atlantic swells looked mountainous, but Eoghann said they were just average; sometimes in the troughs not only the horizon but the whole of Mull disappears from view. Even so, the sea was boiling around the rocky coastline, and the tide was pulling a wide, white trail of foam as far as the eye could see into the Firth of Lorn.

With her deep keel and ton of ballast the *Wild Rose* has the slow and determined roll of a boat of uncompromising seaworthiness. Sitting on the port rail next to Eoghann — him with his hands in his lap and leaning into the roll, me affecting nonchalance and gripping the trawl cage with white knuckles — I soon got used to the sea spraying through the scuppers and washing across the deck. "She'll only go over so far," said Eoghann, with a smile either at my worried expression or at the boat's sea qualities. He was right. I began to enjoy the ride. Eoghann is 19, and has been fishing full time for nearly three years. He enjoys the work, and the excitement of it. As for the cold, it's only the first drip down the back of your neck that's of any consequence; after that, it makes little difference.

Dublin Bay prawns — scampi — live in the depths of the channels, and can be found where there is the soft, even echo of a flat and muddy bottom about a hundred fathoms down. These are the creels which Hamish watches most closely: saithe is his favourite fish, but he'll settle for rock cod, sitting on the nets in the stern and chewing them like old shoes. Every now and then a trapped conger eel comes up, thicker than a man's arm, with wide, snapping jaws and a thoroughly disgruntled demeanour, which Eoghann has somehow to extricate and manhandle over the side before Hamish takes it on and loses.

Working the creels is the most economical way to run the boat, as the engine is never taxed and uses only about 40 or 50 gallons a week from its twin 50-gallon tanks. In July, though, the trawling season starts, and with several hundred pounds of trawl gear and net over the stern that figure more than doubles. But Lachlan still feels it to be worthwhile. When he took delivery of the *Wild Rose* there were only a couple of other creel boats of similar size in the area, and now there are several more, after the already-

dwindling stocks. Local Sabre agent Alastair Robb had fitted the necessary hydraulic systems, so a trawl cage was added to the stern, and the *Wild Rose* became a part-time trawler in an effort to stay ahead of the pack. It worked, but only for a while: now there are other trawlers to contend with.

In the summer, the tourists flock to the west coast, and Lachlan — never slow to spot an opportunity, or "turn a pound" as he puts it — indulges in some skippered chartering for day-trippers and anglers. The anglers he can't quite understand, but many of the trippers want to be taken across to see the famous whirlpools of the Corryvreckan tidal race between Scarba and Jura, and he takes them to the best — and safest — vantage point, on Scarba itself, overlooking the narrow channel. While amused by the tourists' awe and curiosity, Lachlan himself views the 'great race' with a quiet respect. He knows how it feels to have the *Wild Rose* suddenly knocked onto her beam ends by some invisible hand, or to go over fearsome, toppling waves — "big stoppers" — which just hang, curling viciously, over one spot, borne up by the rush of water.

And of course he also knows about the weather, which decides for him each day whether or not they go out at all. On one occasion when he concedes that perhaps they shouldn't have been, shortly after taking delivery of the new boat, a wave broke over the gunwale and swamped the deck. In an open boat it would have been the end, but the *Wild Rose* just shook the

water off her back and carried on, and Lachlan's confidence in his new craft began to grow. No, he says, the really frightening times are when there's time to worry, like when the steering goes, or the throttle sticks in full ahead when you were hoping to go astern; but they don't happen very often. "You've got to just trust the boat," he told me. "When she's beam on to the waves and rolling and you're bringing up the creels, you've got to take it. And you've got to get used to water on the deck. You know she can cope with it."

The last fleet of lobster creels before coming back into Cullipool fouled around the rudder, and Eoghann lowered himself over the stern to try to free it. Gasping for breath in the freezing water and holding on to the transom with one hand, he at least ascertained that there was no creel anywhere near the propeller, so Lachlan put the engine into full ahead to see if he could free it that way. Racing into the bay with the fleet buoy chasing us a hundred yards behind, something had to give, and in the end it was the rope. Ah, well.

It was a reasonable haul, for early winter. There were some bucketsful of prawns to take into the market at Oban, and at winter prices the handful of lobsters didn't seem too bad. *Wild Rose* was due for her annual coat of paint between Christmas and New Year, and the season should start picking up properly in March. And in the meantime she'll continue to nose out into the firth and find herself alone round the back of Garbh Eileach. As Lachlan says, with satisfaction: "She's no' bad." □



Eoghann struggles with an eel which came up in one of the creels, while Hamish attempts to join in. Lobsters or prawns are a more welcome catch.