



A basket of freshly caught prawns, hours away from a dollop of garlic mayo



## WHEN THE BOAT COMES IN

Hughie Macleod has been fishing these Hebridean waters for more than 30 years at the helm of his trusty creel boat, landing succulent langoustines fresh for your plate with a wedge of lemon

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Dunstaffnage Marina, where the Novar Star berths

A small, sturdy boat powers across the sea in the grey, early morning light, trailing a wake of white spume. It is a mere speck on the wide expanse of water ringed by wooded headlands, low bays and cloud capped mountains. In this sheltered part of Scotland's west coast, the sea only extends to the horizon in the southwest, where a channel between the islands of Mull and Kerrera opens out into the Atlantic Ocean. Hughie Macleod throttles back the powerful engine so that it idles quietly and the Novar Star glides to a halt. He has arrived at work.

The pink buoy just off the bow is attached to a rope line of 40 creels and his first job of the day is to haul these aboard to gather the catch of prawns that are trapped inside. Attracted by bait, prawns crawl into the small net cages and are then unable to escape through the funnel-shaped entrances. Using the strength and balance that come from working on a creel boat for over



Speeding through the Falls of Lora, a tidal race under Connel Bridge



Hughie tosses the creels back overboard



30 years, Hughie leans over the side and hooks the buoy out of the water with a broom. Hauling on the rope, he pulls up enough slack to hook it over a pulley and around a winch wheel. Then the winch motor chugs away and winds the taut rope out of the sea, spinning off sparkling droplets of water.

Hughie coils the wet rope in the stern until the motor changes tone, fighting against the resistance of a creel jammed against the pulley. In a slick movement, he slips the creel off the pulley onto the gunwale, unclips a door on the end and reaches inside to pick two large pink prawns out of a group of green crabs. His left hand drops the prawns into an orange plastic basket and reaches for fresh bait – the tail and backbone of a salmon – which he wedges between two taut strings in the centre of the creel. Tipping the writhing crabs back into the sea, he closes the creel and places it in the stern of the boat.

By the time the tall, solidly built figure returns to his

**“ TWO ENORMOUS BIRDS WATCH HIM WORK. A FAMILIAR SIGHT, THEY ARE A PAIR OF SEA EAGLES THAT NEST ACROSS THE BAY ”**

station, the next creel is up at the pulley and he repeats the process. The work has a dance-like rhythm and soon the creels are stacked in rows four high. One of the juvenile herring gulls that has been following the boat lands on the topmost creel and is confident enough to remain there as Hughie works beside it.

A fishy smell comes from the remains of decomposing bait and when this falls out the waiting gulls swoop upon it. Occasionally the head of a young seal bobs up behind the boat. When the whole line has been lifted he turns the boat around and gently motors

parallel to the shore, letting the rope pay out and dropping each creel back overboard in turn. Once the deck is empty, he opens the throttle and speeds over to the next buoy to repeat the process.

#### IN SIGHT OF SEA EAGLES

Hughie has GPS onboard, but he only uses it to gauge the depth. He relies on memory and a mental map of the area built up over the years to locate each buoy. That mental map extends underwater to help him differentiate fertile areas of mud from rocky seabed, and to avoid dangerous skerries lurking just below the waves. Before midday he has lifted six lines of creels and his yellow oilskins are spattered with silt.

The catch has been poor because autumn gales have churned up the seabed, creating turbid conditions that make prawns reluctant to leave their burrows. Also a larger trawler has been raking the area he fishes,

hoovering up and killing the sea life under its nets.

Motoring home past the tip of a point, he recognises two enormous birds that have been watching him work. A familiar sight, they are a pair of sea eagles that nest across the bay. Their pale heads and yellow bills turn to watch his progress until, with a massive wing beat, one takes off, its tail gleaming against the dark green water.

Before reaching his berth at the marina, Hughie pauses within sight of the forbidding medieval towers of Dunstaffnage Castle to scrub the deck and hose down his boat. By mid-afternoon the prawns are with the chef of the Pierhouse Hotel at nearby Port Appin and Hughie is back in his garden with his wife, exercising another of his well-honed skills – growing prize-winning vegetables.

You can try Hughie's prawns at the nearby Pierhouse Hotel in Argyll, [pierhousehotel.co.uk](http://pierhousehotel.co.uk)