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South Fork Outdoors

Restoring Alewife Runs

Publication: The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press

By Mike Bottini Apr 25, 2011 5:27 PM

UPDATED Apr 26, 2011 11:39 AM



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Ten years ago, largely due to the lobbying efforts of Bob Conklin of Riverhead, fisheries biologists affiliated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State Department of Environmental Conservation and Cornell Cooperative Extension installed a fish ladder to help alewives (

Alosa pseudoharengus

) gain access to suitable spawning grounds on the Peconic River. This was the first fish ladder I'd heard of on Long Island.

In addition to helping this anadromous species overcome the barrier between its offshore feeding grounds and freshwater spawning habitat—a dam located in

Grangebél Park—the project generated a lot of public interest in this species of river herring and its important role as a major link in the estuarine ecosystem, as well as its role as an important link between the freshwater and marine environments. As DEC fisheries biologist Byron Young put it, "Everything loves to eat alewives—its presence enhances the prey base of both the freshwater and marine ecosystems. Largemouth bass, pickerel and yellow perch feed on the young alewives from late spring through the summer months, while striped bass, bluefish and seals, to name a few, feast on them year-round in the marine environment."

Most of our avian piscivores could be added to that list: egrets, herons, cormorants, osprey and gannets. And mink, raccoon and otter form part of the gauntlet of predators that alewives must navigate on the spring spawning runs. On the other side of the equation, alewives consume large quantities of zooplankton, as well as some small-sized fish, such as sand lance.

At least 50 percent of the adults will not survive the rigors of spawning and the gauntlet of predators patrolling the shallow spawning areas. And only 0.02 percent of the eggs laid will produce 3- to 4-inch-long juveniles that make it to sea the following fall. However, each female lays 60,000 to 200,000 eggs, so the 0.02-percent survival rate still yields a not insignificant 1,200 to 4,000 juveniles per female.

After three or four years at sea, the survivors, now 10-inch-long mature adults, are

ready to reproduce.

This year, East Hampton Town completed work on a potential spawning site at Staudinger's Pond, which empties into Northwest Creek. According to Natural Resources Director Larry Penny, Staudinger's Pond was created in 1957 by way of excavating an existing freshwater swamp and marsh. Although there are no historical records of alewives spawning in the pond, Larry thinks they can be coerced into using the area with a few modifications: widening and deepening the pond's outlet that links it to Northwest Creek; installing large, flat rocks to form "step pools" leading up from the creek to the pond; and fabricating a dam with removal slats to regulate pond height relative to high water in the tidal creek.

My fish reference, Bigelow and Schroeder's "Fishes of the Gulf of Maine," updated in 2002, mentions that "most alewife are believed to return to spawn in their stream of origin." This problem is tackled by collecting gravid (ready-to-spawn) alewives elsewhere, and placing them in the modified creek. In this case, Larry, Mark Abramson and Howard Reisman, with the permission of Southampton Town Trustees, have collected 25 to 30 alewives from North Sea Harbor in each of the past two springs, and released them in the creek just below Staudinger's Pond.

A recent visit to the site revealed another potential problem one always encounters when working with water and sand: erosion. The outlet and new stream channel might not follow the approved blueprint.

There are also plans to improve alewife access to Scoy Pond in the Grace Estate, and Stepping Stones Pond in Montauk, both apparently historical alewife spawning areas that have been diminished by poorly designed and situated road culverts. These plans involve replacing the existing culverts with much larger ones.

In the meantime, alewives continue to spawn in our coastal ponds that are opened to the ocean each spring: Georgica Pond, Sagg Pond and Mecox Bay.



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