



Update on the 2020 Alewife Run

It's spring in Maine and that means warmer days, trees budding leaves, and gardens growing. It also means alewives and other species of river herring are returning to our communities after spending another year in the open ocean. And for me it means helping coordinate local monitoring efforts of community members counting and sampling alewives to estimate run size and health of alewife runs into Bagaduce ponds and streams.

Only this year was a bit different... with a pandemic swirling and social distancing in place, we questioned whether we would be able to count fish in the same manner that we usually do. Ironically, at a time when alewives are doing the exact opposite of social distancing, they were filling brooks so full that they turn black and children start wondering if maybe they could walk across the pools of water on the backs of fish that seem to occupy more volume than the water in the streams in which they swim.

Well, we figured out ways to get around sharing hand tally counters and data sheets, and created online reporting methods that work just as well. So counting has gone on without hesitation. And one positive difference this year was that it wasn't exactly difficult to find volunteers with some time on their hands to spend a half an hour here or there counting migrating fish to help us estimate run size. This year, many people are looking for something to do, although I think they are looking for more than just that. This year, in order to protect our community members and ourselves we are sacrificing connections, connections with those people that we love to spend time with outdoors and in larger groups than we do in a cold Maine winter.

People are searching for connections to replace the ones that new social norms have taken from us. Not surprisingly, they have found that connection in a species that shares our communities and that symbolizes the strong connection that anyone living in a coastal Maine community understands: our connection to the sea and to fish and to all of the ecosystems we inhabit. People often ask me why volunteers are willing to spend roughly 750 hours of community service, every year on the Bagaduce,

to monitor, manage, and steward these runs. My answer is simple. You will understand what connection really means when you live in a community whose existence is largely based on the benefits of fish and fishing; and once a year, almost to the day, hundreds of thousands of fish that were born in our communities, after spending most of their lives in the open ocean, return home to start a new cycle of life.

I am happy to say that I have seen more people than ever (young and old) this year staring into streams, mesmerized by these incredible fish and this incredible connection.

Alewives connect our communities to the sea, but they also connect many other ecosystems and species. Alewives are a keystone species that turn phytoplankton and zooplankton into food that is then available to support populations of birds, fish, mammals, trees and countless others, at all stages of their lives, and in all ecosystems they inhabit.

This is why the work being done on the Bagaduce is so important. The communities of Brooksville, Castine, Penobscot, and Sedgwick have been working with Partners like Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries and Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and with support from volunteers, individuals, and groups like the Bagaduce Watershed Association, and many, many more. They are working to bring back the full potential of this connection that alewives make and all of the benefits that come with it. Several restoration projects have been completed, with several more to come over the next two years. When these projects are complete, alewives will soon have clear passage into all of the Bagaduce Watershed's streams and ponds where they have historically run. State and Federal policies are now supporting these efforts and recognizing the Bagaduce Watershed as being an essential, successful restoration that benefits the entire Gulf of Maine ecosystem.

In short, we are making things happen! We all benefit from supporting this connection that binds us to the land and water that surrounds us.

Submitted by Mike Thalhauser, Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries, June 2020

