

Fishway passage to Highland Lake celebrated

By Linda Maule (published: September 14, 2006)

Alewives should make their way next spring with ease

FALMOUTH – By next spring, some 150,000 adult alewives will have an easier journey from the sea to Highland Lake.

The fish will swim from up to 120 miles out in the Gulf of Maine into Casco Bay and up the Presumpscot River at the head of tide in Falmouth, hang a right at Mill Brook in Westbrook where they will swim through the Highland Lake fishway and over the Highland Lake Dam so they can spawn in 640-acre Highland Lake.

It will be the first time in 10 years that the alewives will be able to make the trip without help from the Maine Department of Marine Resources and other volunteers to get them over the dam.

Several natural resources groups, landowners and a lot of volunteers have made it possible to restore the fishway and the degraded stream channel so the alewives, as well as sea lamprey and eels, can make the annual trip.

Friday people who were involved in the fishway and stream channel restorations, plus anyone else who wants to attend, will be celebrating in a formal ceremony at 10:30 a.m. at the fishway at Mill Brook.

“The passage is in the process of being completed, and the expectation is that it will be close to done” by the celebration, said Lois Winter, conservation biologist and outreach specialist with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the Gulf of Maine Coastal Program in Falmouth.

The history of the fishway goes back to 1936 when the city of Westbrook built a dam at the outlet of Highland Lake. This cut off native sea-run alewives from their historic spawning and nursery habitat.

More than 50 years later, in 1988, the DMR constructed a concrete fishway at the dam to allow the alewives to pass upstream to spawn in Highland Lake and to then move downstream to the Gulf of Maine. During a massive flood in October 1996, however, the dam breached, and the fishway was destroyed. The downstream channel was then degraded and over-widened. A new dam and fishway were built in 2000, but they have not worked effectively.

“What happened,” said Winter, was “when the dam blew out, a lot of sediment got deposited downstream and over-widened the channel. That made it really mush for fish to decide where to go. ... The route to the fishway wasn’t clear because of sediment dumped in.”

The restoration, at a total cost of \$150,000, will correct the problem by maintaining the proper velocity of flow and creating a proper stream channel design, said Winter.

The change, she said, “will bring biological vitality back to Falmouth, Windham, Westbrook and Portland and the whole Gulf of Maine.”

The new fishway was designed by environmental consultants Kleinschmidt & Associates and was constructed by Shaw Brothers of Gorham. The environmental consultants worked in close coordination with the DMR, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other organizations also helped make the project possible, including the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership and the Maine Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership.

Landowners and volunteers were also necessary to the effort, said Winter.

One of the key factors to getting to the current restoration, said Winter, was also the removal of Smelt Hill Dam at the head of the tide on the Presumpscot River in recent years.

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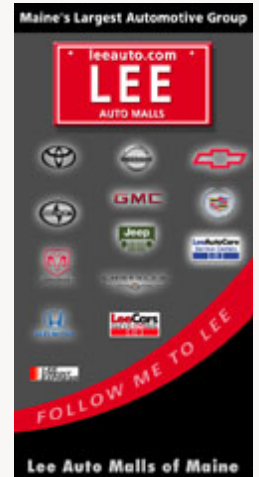


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“That opened up the bottom seven miles to Westbrook. A dam at the head of tide is the worst location for sea-run fish. It was really the key to bringing these fish back. With the removal of Smelt Hill Dam, shad, blue heron, smelt, Atlantic salmon, sea lamprey and American eels will increase in a spectacular way.”

Last year, she said, the DMR had biologists at the base of the fishway where they helped trap the alewives and “flip them over the dam. ... Many, many, many did not make it.”

“Next year is going to be much nicer,” said Winter, adding, “It will be an astounding feeling of seeing this river corridor come back to life because of reconnecting the river that allows that to happen.”

“You’re talking about a huge soup of food and the tremendous energy that can move back and forth. ... People will see more osprey, eagles, great blue heron, more mink ... bigger fish and more striped bass. ... That’s what happens when you increase the forage base.”

For more information on the celebration, call 781-8364 or 990-9569.

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