

The Damariscotta Mills Fish Ladder

damariscotta - "place of an abundance of alewives"

The Alewives and Damariscotta Mills

The annual migration of alewives in this area dates back to prehistoric times. Since 1741, state and local legislation has protected the alewives' access to their freshwater spawning grounds in Damariscotta Lake.



Beginning in the early 1800s, the alewives had been harvested by hand net and a thriving enterprise developed catching and either smoking or pickling them for year-round consumption both locally and around the world. In the late 1940s, mechanical dippers with electric hoists were installed to increase the harvests. These remain standing at the base of the fish ladder.

The Alewife

Alosa pseudoharengus
"false herring"

The alewife is known by many other names, including sawbelly, wall-eyed herring, big-eyed herring, spring herring, buckie and cat-thrasher.

The alewife belongs to the same family as the herring and shad. They are anadromous, that is, they grow in salt water, but spawn (reproduce) in fresh water. They are 10 to 12 inches in length, with the female being slightly larger than the male. Males are identified by their lighter color.



The Fish Ladder

Construction of the original fishway was begun in 1807 and has evolved to the present configuration of the 42' vertical ascent from Great Salt Bay to Damariscotta Lake.

Due to excessive harvesting and deterioration of the fish ladder, the alewife population had seriously declined since 1950. In 1993, the towns of Nobleboro and Newcastle legislated an eight year moratorium on catching or disturbing alewives during their spring spawning run.



No one knows exactly how the alewives "know" which stream or river to swim up to return to the fresh water pond or lake in which they were born. What is known, is that at sexual maturity (3-4 years), some new force drives the alewives to return to the place of their birth in mid-spring to spawn.

The alewife spends most of its life in the ocean in large schools. It is believed that most alewives stay in coastal waters near the fresh waters where they were hatched.

The fish ladder is maintained by local volunteers and organizations to assure safe passage of the alewives on their journey from the ocean to their final destination in Damariscotta Lake.



Over time, the fish ladder has slowly decayed, with rocks falling into the resting pools or partially blocking the flow of water, and leaks developing in the walls. In 1995, many local residents and area associations joined together to restore the fish ladder. A local stone mason repaired the walls and dug out the resting pools. The leaks in the pool walls were sealed with Gunnite.



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