



Updates from the Trail: April 2023

Species spotlight:

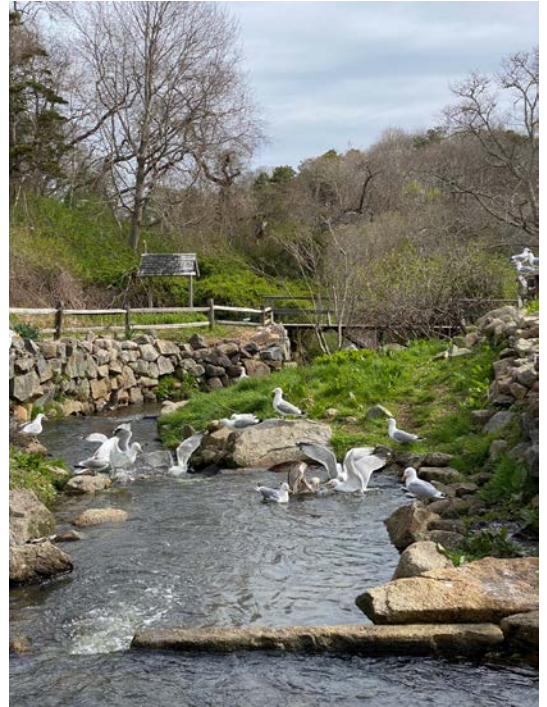
River Herring

(Alosa pseudoharengus) by Lissy Perna

Every spring, a miraculous and historical migration takes place. Thousands of herring swim from Cape Cod Bay, up Stony Brook into Brewster's freshwater ponds to spawn. Like clockwork, the silvery bodies of river herring, or alewives, jump and fight their way up the fish ladders at the Stony Brook Grist Mill. This migration takes a few weeks. All herring pass through an electronic fish counter located at the seining pond next to the mill, keeping track of the totals for each year. After laying their eggs, the alewives return to the ocean, weary from their long journey. These herrings make this yearly journey up to eight times in their lifetime.

The herring are a protected species and are only allowed to be taken from the freshwater streams and ponds by tribal members. The Wampanoag people have been harvesting herring for centuries, using the fish as food, bait, and fertilizer for growing vegetables. Herring are also food for river otters, striped bass, and seagulls. Seeing a squawking flock of seagulls flying above the Grist Mill is a good indicator that the herring have arrived. Another way to predict their arrival is the water temperature, which needs to be above 50 degrees before the inundation of fish enters the brook.

River herring, considered a keystone species, are essential to a healthy coastal environment, and the documentation of the numbers of herring over the years has decreased drastically. This loss is mainly due to over-fishing and climate change. Since this species was declared one of particular concern, the dozens of herring runs across Massachusetts are now monitored by either the Division of Marine Fisheries or the local government. Here in Brewster, there is a herring warden whose responsibility is enforcing the rules and regulations regarding removing herring from the stream, keeping the run operable and free from obstructions, and educating the public on the importance of this species, among other duties.



Seagulls gladly welcome the herring run each year. Photo of Stony Brook Grist Mill by Lissy Perna.



A child observes herring in the Orleans herring run, one of 23 monitored runs on Cape Cod. Photo by Lissy Perna.