

# MaineOutdoors

## A good year for salmon

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**O**liver Cox chooses his words carefully when describing the steady parade of Atlantic salmon that have been returning to the Penobscot River thus far this season.

Cox, a biologist for the Department of Marine Resources' Bureau of Sea-Run Fisheries and Habitat, doesn't say that there are too many fish returning. Or if he does, he quickly corrects himself.

But he does admit that trapping, tagging and transferring a record number of fish has presented some logistical challenges.



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"We're having to deal with a different aspect of managing [the fish trap at the Veazie Dam]," Cox said. "How to handle that many fish. It's real easy to do our jobs when you're dealing with 40, 50 fish [in a day]. Now we realize we can actually handle 90 to 100 fish quite well with the equipment we have."

And when the daily fish totals rise even higher?

Cox and his crew smile, celebrate the healthy returns ... and scramble to get assistance.

"We've had to add trucks [to transport the fish upriver]," Cox said. "We've had a truck and a driver from [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Fisheries for many days now and we've been pulling in some volunteer help."

As of Thursday afternoon, 2,276 salmon had been captured at Veazie. An allotment of 560 were taken to the Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery in Orland. Most of the others have been trucked and transported upriver, where they'd be able to swim more freely and reach spawning habitat.

Never in the 34 years of the Veazie Dam's fishway operation have even 1,500 fish returned by June 23.

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On Thursday, just the latest busy day in what has been a wild couple of weeks, 116 more fish returned to the trap.

Cox said normally his crew would be using two trucks to transport fish at this time of year and would release other salmon into the head pond above the Veazie Dam, but his crew is operating under a new set of guidelines this season.

"We have an agreement with the [U.S.] Fish & Wildlife Service because of some of the work going on at [the upriver] Great Works Dam to try not to release fish to the head pond," Cox said. "So in order to do that we needed a third truck."

Since trips to the Orland hatchery are less common and all three trucks are headed up the river with each load, a routine has developed.

"We can have one [truck] on the road going up, one on its way back and one being loaded, so we can take as many trips to the trap as needed," Cox said.

A single truck can carry as many as 18 fish, Cox said, so a single trap-tending session can last quite awhile.

"What we consider a 'tend' is we'll go out and clear that trap of every fish," Cox said. This morning there were 60 fish in there. That was four trips out. Then we lower the floor back down, open the fishway back up and let that go for a couple of hours and go back out. They got another 60 fish this afternoon."

And while Cox is pleased by the run, the biologist was cautious in his assessment of it.

Times have changed, Cox said, since the 1980s and '90s, when fewer than half of a season's run would have made it to Veazie before July. For the past three years, the bulk of the run has taken place earlier than in past years.

"The median catch date used to be around July 4. Now it's around June 21," Cox said. "Last year it was even earlier."

Cox surmised that a rubber dam atop the existing dam structure has allowed dam

keepers to control the river more effectively even during earlier, high-water periods.

"If the river was just free-flowing across the dam there are competing flows for the fish," he said. "So when they're able to raise the rubber dam up, they're reducing the spill on the Eddington side" and providing a fish-attracting higher flow on the Veazie side, where the fishway is.

There's no way of knowing what this year's final salmon tally will be, but one thing's certain: With 2,276 fish already in the bank, 2011 will go down as one of the best years in recent memory.

A year ago, just 1,316 salmon were captured at the Veazie Dam throughout the season. The highest total on record was the 4,137 captured in 1986. Recent trap totals: 2000: 534 fish; 2001: 786; 2002: 784; 2003: 1,114; 2004: 1,324; 2005: 985; 2006: 1,045; 2007: 916; 2008: 2,115; 2009: 1,958; 2010: 1,316.