

# Encounters with the Wild Penobscot River

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## Seasonal Works of the Penobscot River

by Sally Gilbert

The growth and recession of a green tide that indicates seasonal change draws me to explore the banks of the Penobscot River. There is a rhythmic cycle here, which echoes the changeability of the river. If the promise of the Penobscot River Restoration Project is fulfilled and the Veazie Dam is removed, the riverbank where the impoundment presently is will appear as the area below the dam: where vegetation and wildflowers are interspersed with till and bedrock outcroppings.

Eddington Bend is my home spot, on the east side of the river. The Bend marks the southwest corner of Eddington; it is characterized by a sharp bend in the river and marked by the head of tide. It is summer; my preferred time of year to walk along the shoreline. At the south end of my yard a path leads to the riverbank. An old apple tree bows over the path, sheltering wild strawberry plants and thick tangles of dogwood shrubs.

Where the path emerges on the riverbank the Veazie dam is visible upriver. A patch of Blue-eyed grass that has held fast from year to year blooms to the left of the path just below the high watermark. The shoreline is passable for most of the year---spring is the only time when a walk may be uninvited. The high water in spring can make the shoreline treacherous as the water reaches up amongst ash and maple trees, creating a giant strainer that catches debris floating downstream. As a result, flooding

leaves a line of tangled driftwood and debris below the canopy where the river crested. Walking upriver one passes a small sandy beach edged by rushes, pickerelweed, arrowhead and water hemlock. Much of the shoreline is dominated by the lush greens of grasses, sedges, dogbane and bedstraw concealing a gravelly, rocky shore that is only revealed after ice-out in the spring. Some of the wildflowers are so commonly seen that a person's attention neglects them. Dogbane or "Indian hemp" (*Apocynum cannabinum*) is a small bushy plant with smooth opposite leaves and erect clusters of tiny greenish white flowers. The common names apply to the plants toxicity (*Apocynum* means "away dog") and its usefulness as cordage. Bedstraw (*Galium sp.*) has a bushy appearance with short lanceolate leaves and clusters of tiny white flowers.



*Pickerelweed*



*Trout lily*

On the east side of the river below the dam, the shore slopes gently towards the high water mark, and then rises steeply up a sandy wooded slope dominated by ash and maple. Patches of trout lilies create swathes of yellow beneath the trees in late spring. Sentinel like, the occasional white pine towers above the canopy. Sometimes a bald eagle roosts in the pines, searching for fish that congregate in the pools below the dam. A walk along the riverbank requires navigation around short scrubby ash and maples that have been tormented by ice in winter. Joe pye weed, blue vervain, cardinal flower, self-heal and milkweeds paint splashes of red, pink and violet amongst the greens of vetch, grasses and Indian hemp in summer. The brilliant red of cardinal flower gleams from the shoreline, and is reflected with equal intensity from the water. Looking carefully, Allegheny monkey flower can be seen very near the waterline. A variation of this member of the Figwort family is a species of special concern in Maine (*Mimulus ringens* var. *colophilus*). The pungent smell of wild mint wafts up. It is abundant here, carpeting areas where other plants failed to maintain a foothold during ice out in the spring. When the mint is highly abundant, it can be harvested to use as an ingredient in mint jelly. Come fall, the brilliant summer flowers will be gone, and their colors replaced by purple stemmed aster, with flowers of pastel lavender bordering pale yellow centers.

The sound of water rushing over stones comes from the mouth of an unnamed rocky brook that feeds the river. After a hard rain, the brook overflows and I habitually get my feet wet attempting to cross it. This brook is shadowed by ash, alder and maple, beneath which is a diverse plant community. Joe Pye weed grows next to boneset. An old folk remedy of boneset was to use the leaves wrapped in bandages to help set broken bones. Colonists believed this because the leaves of the plant are fused at the base, as to make the stem appear to grow through the leaves.



*Galium* sp.



*Joe pye weed*

Delicate ground nut vines twine their way around the stems of Joe Pye Weed. The twining vine of ground nut models pale lilac colored flowers and produces seeds fed upon by songbirds. This member of the pea family has edible tubers that can be harvested for soups or stews. Hog peanut, in the same family, also grows abundantly beneath the canopy. The orange flowers of spotted jewelweed bob in the breeze, in proximity to poison ivy. It is rumored that the juice of jewelweed is a remedy to stop the itch of poison ivy. Jewelweed is an annual that attracts hummingbird visitation. Poison ivy sports berries which will turn white into the fall season, and will be gobbled by birds in the winter. The foliage of poison ivy will turn a crimson red come fall. Solomon's seal has fruiting bunches of white berries flecked with crimson. The spike like clusters of swamp candles (*Lysimachia terrestris*) add red and yellow accents to the assemblage. Every plant here has consumptive value to wildlife, and provides an aesthetic experience throughout spring, summer or fall.



*Cardinal flower*



*The Veazie dam upriver*

At the base of the dam, I either have the choice of climbing up a very steep bank into the woods beneath the power lines to follow a trail to the road home, or I can return down the riverbank. If I stay close to the water, I may see something I overlooked on the first half of my walk.

Every winter, the ice builds up along the shore and banks, sometimes two to three feet thick. Every spring the ice on the Penobscot River thaws and begins its ascent downriver; scouring the banks of vegetation, and distressing the stunted ash and maples that persist near the shore line. After ice out, there are only the muted grays and blues of gravel and rock. There is hardly any sign of the lush vegetation of summer save an occasional rhizome of Blue Flag or a battered shrub. Despite this bleakness, the river still beckons and the regular visitor is rewarded with the unexpected discovery of cardinal flower growing where there was rock and sand the season before, or the delight of watching a hummingbird feed on the nectar of jewel weed in summer.