



Springtime on the Kennebec

Eighty miles down Route 95, the Kennebec River offers a hint of what may happen on the Penobscot River with implementation of the Penobscot River Restoration Project.

The Edwards Dam was breached in July, 1999, and sea-run fisheries have been rebounding in the eight years since. Although the details of the Kennebec and Penobscot River restoration efforts are different, the parallels are striking. Both projects aim to restore the same species of sea-run fish. Both involve the removal of dams that have been in place for over 150 years on large Maine rivers. The dams and rivers are of similar size and both drain northern and central Maine. In at least one place, the water route between the two watersheds involves only a short portage. Pleasant Lake in Stetson is at the headwaters of the Sebasticook River, which flows to the Kennebec. Two miles east Harvey's Pond in Levant is at the headwaters of Souadabscook Stream, which flows to the Penobscot. The fisheries recovery that has been realized on the Kennebec offers a hint of the potential that exists on the Penobscot. Here are a series of seasonal snapshots:

March-April

The annual spawning run of smelts is about to begin. These small, silvery, slender fish spawn near the head of tide in the Kennebec and its tributaries. If there is still ice on the Kennebec, smelt camps from Woolwich and Topsham to Gardiner become popular destinations. Two seasonal migrations of shore-bound anglers meet the smelts on their spawning grounds. In downtown Augusta, riverside parking lots and other access spots see a steady procession of anglers jigging for smelts with spinning rods. After dark, anglers with dipnets wade the spawning areas looking to dip up a bucket of smelts. No matter how they are caught, a mess of smelts rolled in corn meal and fried is a seasonal sacrament in many Maine homes. Fish eating birds and wildlife don't mind a mess of smelts, either. One of the best ways to find the spawning areas is to look for concentrations of bald eagles, for whom the smelt run is a welcome event after a long winter.

At about the same time as the smelt run, the annual upstream migration of juvenile eels begin. All North American eels spawn in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda. The helpless juveniles then drift northward on the Gulf Stream, and enter East Coast rivers as they become able to swim upstream. Early migrants are clear and nearly invisible, known as glass eels. Later in the season, they darken and become known as elvers. The juveniles migrate upriver to habitat in rivers, lakes, and ponds, where they will live for many years before migrating back to the sea to spawn.

May

May marks the start of the great herring runs. Three species of herring spawn in the Kennebec and Penobscot—alewives, blueback herring, and shad. Alewives and blueback herring are nearly indistinguishable by sight—both are silvery herring whose adults average about 10 inches and run upstream to spawn in large schools—frequently in the millions. Alewives spawn in lakes and ponds and tend to run a bit earlier, starting in early May. Blueback herring spawn in rivers and streams and run a bit later, typically in late May and June.

By early May, huge schools of alewives enter the Kennebec. The run has estimated at several million already, with the potential to grow much larger. The locations of the schools are marked by clouds of fish-eating birds—eagles, ospreys, cormorants, herons, gulls—that find them a ready source of food early in the breeding season. In tributaries like Cobbossee Stream in Gardiner or the Sebasticook River in Winslow, the alewives are literally so numerous they push each other out of the water. A few weeks behind the alewives, the blueback herring arrive.

Two groups of fishermen meet over the herring runs on the Kennebec. Commercial fishermen know that alewives are a prime spring lobster bait, and small groups of commercial fishermen set up operations to harvest them. Recreational anglers target the striped bass who chase the herring up the rivers. Commercial or recreational, they can't help but marvel at the spectacle in the water at their feet—vast shoals of ocean fish in the river, pursued from below by stripers with gaping mouths—some as large as 50 pounds. Overhead circle squadrons of birds—eagles, ospreys, gulls, and cormorants. The bounty of Maine's rivers is never more evident.

June

In the long days of June, the river is full of life. The blueback herring are spawning, the alewives have mostly completed their spawning, but are beginning to drop back to the sea. They are joined by the third species of herring, American shad. Shad are larger fish, averaging 3-5 pounds, but frequently growing larger. Like the blueback herring, they spawn in the river, typically in eddy areas. On the Kennebec, one of the main shad-spawning areas is at the mouth of the Sebasticook River in Winslow. Just upstream of the Sebasticook is a public park, and in the eddy in front of the park schools of shad can be seen milling about in late June, preparing to spawn.

A few knowledgeable anglers target the shad, known as “poor man's salmon” for silvery sides and leaping fight. Far more anglers continue to target the striped bass, who will remain in freshwater as long as they can find schools of bait. In late May and June, the herring are joined by Atlantic salmon—only a few on the Kennebec, but many more will be expected on the Penobscot.

Later in the month, the two strangest sea-run fish make their appearance. Two species of sturgeon spawn in the Kennebec and other New England rivers. These ancient creatures—with shovel-like heads and sides studded with bony plates—are among the largest freshwater fish. Shortnose sturgeon may be as large as 4 feet; Atlantic sturgeon may be up to 12 feet long and weigh over 500 pounds. Sturgeon are noted for their odd breaching behavior, where they rocket out of the water and crash back down into it, often rolling 365 degrees as they do so.

By mid-June, anglers on the river are joined by kayakers and canoeists, some of them playing on the rapids that were uncovered by the removal of Edwards Dam. These paddlers are often startled by the enormous splashes made by the sturgeon as they marvel at the Kennebec's renewed bird and fish life.

Only the beginning: The renewed life on the Kennebec is only the beginning of the restoration potential there. Fish passage above Waterville will not be available until the spring of 2006, and re-opening of additional habitat should lead to growing runs of fish, especially shad. The restoration potential on the Penobscot River, especially for salmon, is even greater.