

# *Encounters with the Wild Penobscot River*

*January 2007*

## ***A WINTER RESIDENT OF THE PENOBSCOT RIVER*** ***Sally Gilbert***



The Veazie Dam from Eddington.  
*Photo by Sally Gilbert*

This time of year in central Maine, much wildlife has left the area for warmer regions. The colorful foliage of the fall months is gone, leaving silhouettes of denuded tree branches against a lead sky. Migratory birds have passed south. It is long past the experimental fishing season for Atlantic salmon and the riverbanks of the Penobscot are lonely of anglers. Even fish have migrated with the seasons in the Penobscot River. Spawning adult Atlantic salmon have come and gone. Striped bass have moved south to warmer waters. Juveniles of alewives, Atlantic salmon or sea lamprey are still residents of the rivers tributaries. However, there is one species of inshore coastal fish that migrates upriver this late in the year: tomcod.

In November when tomcod moved upriver to spawn, the warm wet weather fed the waters of the Penobscot River until it neared flood stage; the grey water swelled with curling white foam as it rushed downriver. Where I was once able to walk along the riverbank, passage was barred, with water straining between the shrubs and eddying amongst the maples. Now it is January. The height of the river has receded, and the shoreline is navigable.

As I walked up the riverbank on the Eddington side, towards the dam, I examined fresh animal tracks left behind in the snow that fell the night before: red fox, white footed mouse, and the tracks and slide of a river otter. Not far below the Veazie Dam is a lean-to constructed by salmon fishermen. Fresh snow coats the black tarp of the roof, and its sides offer some protection from the wind blowing off the river. It is the perfect place to sit and absorb the sounds of the river: the roar of the dam and the ethereal chinking of pan ice forming along the riverbank. It is also an appropriate spot to imagine life continuing beneath the surface of the surging waters of the river this time of year.

A relative of the Atlantic cod, tomcod are present in river estuaries throughout the Northeast, in particular, habitats that are susceptible to human disturbance. The decline in health of salt marsh habitat types in the Northeast due to global warming and human sources of disturbance has not

been the only challenge to the survival of this species. Barriers to spawning habitat up rivers such as dams also pose a challenge. In the Penobscot River, the Veazie Dam prevents this fish from reaching further spawning habitat. Tomcod, as well as shortnose sturgeon (*Acipenser brevirostrum*), Atlantic sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus*), rainbow smelt (*Osmerus mordax*), and large striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*), are sea run fish species that do not use fish ladders. Removal of the Veazie Dam and Great Works Dam as part of the Penobscot River Restoration Project will restore access to an additional twelve miles of spawning habitat for all five species of fish.

With restoration of access to historic habitat, tomcod may once again become a target for anglers braving cold temperatures. Currently tomcod are not abundant enough in Maine rivers or along the coast to support a commercial fishery like there was in the 1800's (merchants around Boston used to market them as "London Trout"); nonetheless they are fished for from docks and bridges by anglers, and are often caught by smelt fishermen in autumn. This hardy winter



Pan ice on the river. *Photo by Sally Gilbert*

resident deserves to swim past this place where I sit on the riverbank, to access spawning habitat. And maybe anglers here deserve to sample a "London trout" to see if the quality of tomcod flesh really tastes like trout.

**© 2007 Penobscot River Restoration Trust. All Rights Reserved.**

**Email:** [info@penobscotriver.org](mailto:info@penobscotriver.org) **Web site:** [www.penobscotriver.org](http://www.penobscotriver.org) **Tel.** (207) 232-9969