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Feb 20 2009 **Could minnow sink Mills dredging plan?** 

Written by Edward F. Maroney

Bridle shiner is state species of special concern

Without seeing the words on the page, "bridle shiner" sounds like the aftermath of a happy event gone awry. Now it appears the presence of the bridle shiner may give a black eye to town plans to scrub nitrogen from wastewater by dredging the Mill Pond in Marstons Mills.



NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION DEPT. IMAGE SHINE ON – The bridle shiner may darken the prospects for dredging Mill Pond in Marstons Mills.

During its review of state plans to rework the nearby intersection of routes 28 and 149, the conservation commission learned that the project was reviewed for its impact on the bridle shiner, a minnow on the state's Natural Heritage special concern list.

Although the shiner didn't dim prospects for redoing the intersection, Conservation Administrator Rob Gatewood told the commission that it could interfere with town plans to reduce costly sewerage construction by instead dredging the pond and using it to help denitrify wastewater on its way to Nantucket Sound.

"Seeing that species gave us a jolt," he said. "We just applied for dredging. If this agency takes a hard line, it would make it very difficult."

In an interview, Gatewood read excerpts from a state finding that populations of bridle shiners "are in decline through a combination of loss of physical habitat, water quality degradation, and potentially introduced predators. Habitat is lost through sediment and chemical runoff into the water and disturbance of crucial vegetation."

The state's Web site defines special concern species as "native species which have been documented by biological research or inventory to have suffered a decline that could threaten the species if allowed to continue unchecked, or which occur in such small numbers or with such restricted distribution or specialized habitat requirements that they could easily become threatened within Massachusetts." Gatewood said the Mill Pond finding was "an important light shone on this area, especially as it could affect future project of interests."

The Pond, he said, "figures to really play a role in nutrient abatement in the Three Bays. A significant amount of the nitrogen headed into North Bay can be held permanently in the sediments of the Mill Pond. "Natural habitats like ponds and wetlands are very good at latching on to this nitrogen. They can actually strip it back to the air."

That can't happen at Mill Pond, however, unless it's dredged. Gatewood said its water level is knee-deep, and there's probably eight feet of sediment below that. "The profile of the pond isn't even close in terms of being optimal in that reduction equation," he said.

With the town eventually under a state mandate to reduce nutrients in Three Bays, Gatewood said, "you're gonna do that by sewerage or by sequestering those nutrients prior to their release into the bay." The cost savings to the town of going with the natural rather than built solution could be substantial.

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Barnstable has just applied to the state for permission to dredge Mill Pond, and the Commonwealth has 30 days to respond.
“Now we’re holding our breath because dredging and fish habitat for this little critter might not fit hand in glove,” Gatewood said. “My only hope by the time we get through with Natural Heritage is that we don’t have the shiner.”

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