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Herring harvest halted for three years

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One can only hope they'll return.

On Nov. 9, the same day cod fishing north of Boston was shut down for two years, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries slapped a three-year moratorium on the harvest, possession and sale of river herring.

That means more than two dozen Cape Cod runs, have been closed until January 2009.

"We hope this gives them a little breather to see if we start to see a recovery. This isn't just a Massachusetts problem, other states have seen a drop in populations," says Phil Brady, senior Marine Fisheries biologist for the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife. "We're trying to be a little proactive."

Cod and other ocean fish have been imperiled for some time, but river herring were in pretty good shape until just a couple of years ago.

"We've seen a steady quite dramatic decline in a lot of runs, including ones we've had counters on and anecdotal information from towns," Brady notes. "Over the past several years there has been a sharp drop. There's always fluctuation, but it's been more dramatic than usual."

Excellent examples of that can be drawn from the volunteer work of Alewives Anonymous, a group based in the Rochester-Mattapoisett area in Southeastern Massachusetts. River herring represent two species; the blue back herring and alewife, with alewives being more common.

Herring in the Mattapoisett River Run in 1989 tallied 40,000. Thanks to clearing and cleaning in the river, that number leapt to 130,000 by 2000. But then things went awry.

"It seems to be a combination of things," Brady says. "A number of different things have come together that caused concern. In 2000-2001 we had a severe drought and we lost the class of several years, especially on the Cape, when they were not able to get out of the ponds. There is also increased predation from cormorants; the seal



No more herring on ice until 2009.

Staff photo by Merrily Lunsford

population is high on Cape and the striped bass population is up. And there's the combo of fishing and poaching."

By 2002, the numbers in Mattapoisett were down to 50,000. In 2003 the tally was halved to 24,795. The 2004 count fell to about 5,000, a drop of more than 95 percent in five years.

Last year, the numbers finally bounced, to 8,000, but that's less than 10 percent of the total from 2000.

The story is pretty much the same all around. The drought dropped the water levels in the streams to the point where the herring couldn't get in or out of the ponds. A whole class was lost.

"Herring need access to a freshwater pond," Brady says.

That pond doesn't have to be very large; it could be a cranberry bog where the herring spawn in the canals.

"Herring can live 12 to 13 years, but it's rare to find one over 8," Brady says. "The juveniles return to the ocean in the fall in the year they spawned. Then they spend three to five years at sea. They're not like Pacific salmon; they can spawn a number of times."

The gulls will still harvest herring, as will foxes, raccoons, etc. But if people don't, maybe the population will rebound. The turn-around time is relatively quick.

"What we're hoping to accomplish is to increase the spawning herring that are able to get to the ponds," Brady says. "The females have a lot of eggs and the more females you get up there the faster return of numbers."

In Massachusetts and especially on the Cape, most herring runs are managed by towns, but the state has the authority to impose the moratorium. There are about 40 herring runs on the Cape and more than 100 in Massachusetts.

"The towns generally are very good in keeping the runs clean," Brady notes.

In some rivers, the herring harvest could be large; 50,000-70,000 fish in the Agawam River in Wareham, similar numbers in Bourne and at the Stony Brook run in Brewster. The bigger the pond at the end, the more herring that can be supported.

The Division of Marine Fisheries has been monitoring herring runs with volunteer counters for some time but most runs are not tabulated.

Major Cape Cod herring runs

Barnstable: Rushy Marsh Pond, Marstons Mills River, Lake Elizabeth/Red Lilly Pond, Skunknett River, Wequaquet Lake, Mill Pond.

Bourne: Red Brook.

Brewster: Cobbs Pond, Stoney Brook.

Chatham: Frost Fish Creek, Stillwater Pond/Lover's Lake, Muddy Creek (too salty now).

Dennis: Weir Creek, Swan Pond River, Quivett Creek, Sesuit Creek.

Eastham: Herring Brook, Herring River.

Falmouth: Cedar Lake Ditch, Wild Harbor River, Herring Brook, Oyster Pond, Salt Pond, Siders Pond, Coonamessett River, Flax Pond, Mill Pond, Childs River.

Harwich: Herring River, Andrews River, Skinequit Pond.

Mashpee: Quashnet River, Mashpee River, Santuit River.

Orleans: Pilgrim Lake, Rock Harbor Creek.

Sandwich: Mill Creek.

Truro: Pilgrim Lake, Pamet River.

Wellfleet: Herring River.

Yarmouth: Mill Creek, Parker's River, Bass River, White's Brook.