

## *An Open Letter ~ Year-end Review for 2023*

In this quiet week, as we process 2023 and turn the page to a new year, I wanted to offer a brief year-end review.

The good news: we have made great progress this year. Progress in the sense that we have been successful in our efforts to keep the herring migration passageway open into Slough Pond; we have kept its story alive, raised public awareness of our concerns, and maintained a respectful working relationship with the Town. Early on, we were concerned that decisions with such far-reaching consequences for the herring and its habitat were being made by only two or three people without substantial study. That has changed.

As one warden told me, "In all my years of work I have never heard anyone say we need less habitat."

You will recall that there was a pending vote on the permanent closure of this passage in February. Due to concerns raised at the time, the Alewife Committee decided to monitor the passage in 2023 instead. In April, the adult herring came in through the passage (as they have for decades), spawned, and migrated out successfully. Their offspring, in the thousands, were able to mature in the pond through the summer and fall months. Some maintenance of the passage was required, due more to its neglect for several years than lack of water depth. We believe the remaining fry who had not had a chance to out-migrate in the early fall, due to obstacles in the passageway, left this month after the timely efforts of the AmeriCorps crew (on their second visit) and some welcome rain. (All the details of the ups and downs of the year are on the website under Journal entries.) Brewster's Natural Resources Advisory Commission, under the leadership of Chair Kimberley Crocker-Pearson, has been instrumental in the headway we have been able to make this year, keeping an eye on the broader environmental issues at stake and supporting citizen science collaboration. It is my hope this will continue in 2024.

The alewife is a beautiful fish. A keystone species. As we enter a new year, the alewives still face some obstacles in Brewster. We have not had a commitment from the Town to keep the passage open. What we do have is a targeted two year study on the nursery habitat of the five headwater ponds of Stony Brook Watershed- and Slough is one- undertaken by a MA Division of Marine Fisheries' biologist (the "River Herring Spawning and Nursery Habitat Assessment"). These five headwater ponds are critical to the health of the herring population and a consideration in the million dollar restoration of the herring ladder which will begin this year. There are other new and comprehensive pond studies underway for the next two to three years which will include Slough Pond: Cape Cod Ponds Network's, under the Cape Cod Commission and the Association for the Preservation of Cape Cod, the Town of Brewster's Pond Management Plan, under the supervision of the NRAC, and Harwich Conservation Trust's Six Ponds Resource Management Initiative, which includes Walker's Pond. These initiatives will take time. In the interim, action is often required. We are still advocating for the protection of the Walker's/Slough passageway, its full restoration in fact, and will continue to do so throughout 2024, as we document another migratory year and raise public awareness of the issue on our website.

The design above reflects the core of our work this year. (Note the alewife fry, on the left, schooling past in Slough Pond this fall.) I think we can all agree "management" of an "ecosystem" should be based on sound principles of stewardship that protect biodiversity in a network of habitats. This worldview is foundational to a conservation ethic. You can read the entire National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) report ("Atlantic Coast Habitat Conservation Plan for River Herring"), from which the quote was taken, under the Resources page. In fact, I have added a LOT of material I have gathered over these several months and it makes for fascinating reading. As I wrote to our Town Manager Peter Lombardi:

"I am relieved that Curt Orvis, the well-respected fish passage engineer (retired from US Fish & Wildlife Service) for our Stony Brook fish ladder restoration project in 2024, refers the *five* headwater

ponds in the Stony Brook Watershed; Slough being one. Brad Chase, a well-respected biologist with the state's Division of Marine Fisheries, who advises the Town on herring management, will be working on one of the upcoming pond studies (including a focus on the Slough Pond nursery) for the next two years. His study was initiated under your Natural Resources Advisory Commission as one of three options he recommended.

Curt and Brad bring a depth of experience and a broad perspective to the decision making process critical to protecting the biodiversity of the habitat that supports herring migration. And I cannot sing enough praises for Kimberley Crocker-Pearson as NRAC Chair. I am in awe of her vast knowledge, energy, and commitment. Kari Hoffmann's spirited engagement, patience, and initiative go well beyond her role as liaison to the Alewife Committee and Select Board member. And this is only one of many projects and committees they are involved with."

Over the year, patient diplomacy, and respectful attention to others' perspectives, has served to deepen my understanding of the ecological and political issues involved in herring management. As well, my connection to the pond and its biodiversity has only been strengthened this year through my citizen science project. Not only has my understanding been enriched through research- seeking answers, evidence, and arguments- but so has my sense of community, in meeting so many wonderful people through networking and coalition building. We are all unwavering in our commitment to protecting this fragile ecosystem we, along with its wildlife, call home. I am reminded of the beauty of the herring struggling up the fish ladder every spring with such strength and focus. We may be observers only of this spring ritual, of life renewing itself before our eyes, but it invites us in. Their migration can be seen with the eyes of a child, for its wonder and magic, or those of an adult, knowing the adversity they overcome, or perhaps both. It never ceases to move me. As John Hay put it so simply, and eloquently, "The alewives showed me where to start, now we are on a run together."

Thanks to each and every one of you for your support and involvement this year. It is deeply appreciated by me and I am certain we each make a difference.

Wishing everyone a happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year.

-Janice