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Passage to spawning grounds

Suffolk to enable herring to bypass impediments

BY MARK HARRINGTON
mark.harrington@newsday.com

A more than century-old impediment to a natural breeding area for river herring traveling from the Peconic River is about to be circumvented with construction of a $1 million fish passage this winter, in time for the spring spawning season.

When complete, the fishway will provide access to more than 90 acres of fresh water that has been blocked by a dam and spillway on Little River for 150 years.

"The potential positive impact on the population is quite significant," Byron Young, a retired biologist for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, told Newsday.

Young has led an effort to hand-net and carry buckets of the fish over the dam for 13 years.

Before Young, Jim Miller of Miller Environmental had led the effort for a decade.

Tens of thousands of the fish otherwise remain in a pool at the foot of the dam, where they attempt to scale the fierce spillway waters and often fall prey to osprey, egrets and herons.

The new passage, a project by DEC, the Peconic Estuary Program, Suffolk County and Southampton Town, will provide a series of steps up Little River and through Woodhill Dam.

Funding also is coming from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The dam has blocked the natural passage of river herring, also known as alewives, into Wildwood Lake and Cranberry Bog for decades.

The project is located across from the Suffolk County Center in Riverhead, at the border of Southampton Town.

The fish ladder has been on the drawing board for years, part of an effort by the Peconic Estuary to restore habitat for wildlife on the waterway.

The group's executive director Joyce Novak called the project a "great ecological benefit to the whole Peconic system."

Opening up the Little River passage could more than double the spawning and maturation habitat for alewives and American eels, restoring more than 90 acres of fresh water on Wildwood Lake, Cranberry Bog and connecting ponds.

Young has long advocated for the fish passage, urging public officials to "return the fish to a part of the system that our ancestors locked up 150 years ago."

The passage includes a series of steps and resting pools that will bypass the existing culvert and pass through the existing dam, which forms a large pond to the south of the structure.

A separate fishway with specially designed substrate will be mounted alongside to help eels through the passage.

Biologists will install a video camera at the end of the passage to count the number of fish that make it through each spring.

Young said monitoring has shown an estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 fish travel up Little River each year to spawn, some returning multiple times each year.

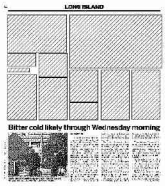
He said it may take time for fish to learn to use the new passage.

Similar passages already are in place less than a mile away in Riverhead, and another is under construction at Swan Lake in Patchogue.

Young said he hopes the work, which was originally scheduled to start in November but was delayed by supply issues, will be finished by the start of the run in March. The height of the spawning run for alewives is in April.

Either way, Young said, he intends to continue his research work, identifying and measuring alewives during the run, working with local researchers at Suffolk County Community College and Hofstra University.

"How the fish react in that pool is going to be completely different," said Young.


LONG ISLAND
Bitter cold likely through Wednesday morning

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CHUCK FADELY

Retired fisheries biologist Byron Young checks an alewife fish at a dam on the Little River in Riverhead; fisheries officials in Suffolk are building a passage to fresh water, where these fish spawn.