Celebrate spring with an alewife adventure!

Maine's annual spring alewife migration is inspiring. We created a map to help you find locations to witness this natural wonder.

We recommend using a mapping program like Google Maps, with the local information included here. In many instances you can see a fish ladder or dam in Google Maps, satellite view.

Alewives are anadromous (sea-run) fish that spend the majority of their lives at sea but return to freshwater to spawn. Alewives (also known as river herring) are guided by their sense of smell to migrate upstream from the ocean to rivers, streams, ponds and lakes to spawn. Runs generally occur between May 15 to June 15 depending on water temps and river flows.

Pilgrims were taught by Native Americans to put a fish in the ground as fertilizer when planting corn. Those fish were very likely alewives. Back then nearly every stream would have been swarming with alewives just as the planting season arrived. When dams were built to power the industrial revolution alewife runs were decimated. Today because of many substantial efforts to remove dams and install fish ladders, alewives are returning to Maine rivers by the millions. Rebounding numbers of alewives mean more food for the creatures that eat them—striped bass, bluefish, tuna, cod, haddock, halibut, American eel, rainbow trout, brown trout, landlocked salmon, smallmouth bass, pickerel, pike, white and yellow perch, seabirds, bald eagles, osprey, great blue heron, cormorants, seals, whales, otter, mink, fox, raccoon, fisher, and turtles.

A single female alewife can lay 60,000-100,000 eggs, but as few as three may survive to adulthood. Adults make their way back to the ocean after spawning, and many return the following spring to spawn again.

Commercial harvesting rights are held by towns where there are sustainable runs of alewives. The harvest can generate substantial income for a town, and it is often used for the maintenance of fishways and dams. Harvested alewives are sold for lobster bait. To get a permit the town must show that a run is sustainable by doing annual fish counts and taking scale samples to age fish. If a site has a harvest the word harvest, is listed here as with the day and time.

Maine Alewife Trail Map

2019

Harvested alewives are sold for lobster bait. To get a permit the town must show that a run is sustainable by doing annual fish counts and taking scale samples to age fish. If a site has a harvest the word harvest, is listed here as with the day and time.
Mousam River Kennebunk

Alewives and shad can’t make their way past the first dam in the Mousam River, located next to Route 1 in Kennebunk, but in the spring you can see them moving below the Kebo Dam by walking down to the river from the park adjacent to Route 1. Bring your underwater camera!

Presumpscot River Mill Brook Highland Lake Westbrook

The Presumpscot Regional Land Trust’s Mill Brook Preserve provides a trail system along Mill Brook stream, to see alewives migrating upstream to Highland Lake. It can be difficult to see alewives underwater so use polarized sun glasses and search for places like回for that concentrate the fish. Viewing is possible from a bridge on Duck Pond Road. The best spots are in Mill Brook labeled on the map at https://prrlt.org/mill-brook-preserve.

Nequasset Stream Nequasset Lake Woolwich

Nequasset Stream is just north of Bath. It is home to a historic run of alewives into Nequasset Lake. The Nequasset Fish ladder was restored in 2014. With active harvesting operation at the place visitors can at times, purchase smoked alewives. Take U.S. Hwy 110 to George Wright Road to Hummingbird Drive or enter Hummingbird Drive, Woolwich, ME in your GPS system. Hummingbird Drive is a short, narrow dirt road marked at the entrance by two concrete columns but limited parking at the dam. You may park along George Wright Road the river is tidal up to the dam so visit at high tide. Kennebec Estuary Land Trust volunteers count fish. kennibecnecesary.org/ fish-counting. Harvest is Thursday through Sunday, near high tide.

Androscoggin River Brunswick

The Sebasticook River’s hydropower dam located about 8 miles north of Brunswick. The dam has a fishway where the alewives can be viewed. There is a small trail along West Gardiner. The Alewife by Douglas Watts.

Cobossecontee Stream Pleasant Pond Gardiner

This fish migration is blocked by a small, privately owned dam about one mile upstream from where the stream flows into the Kennebec. It is feasible to view the alewives just below the dam, using the trail on the Harrington Avenue side of the stream. The Maine Department of Marine Resources has stocked alewives from other locations to Pleasant Pond above the dam and a small run does return to the base of the dam each year. Before dams, this stream hosted sizable runs of alewives making their way to the lakes and ponds that feed the stream. Read the book Alewives by Douglas Lefferts for many interesting alewife tales and check out “Upstream” on Facebook to learn about restoring Cobossecontee’s fish passage.

Sebasticook River Pattee Pond Brook

A small run of alewives goes to Pattee Pond to spawn. The pond and brook are natural and have no dams or fishways, but alewives can be observed near where the brook enters the Sebasticook and goes under Garland Road. For directions see the next entry. Continue down Falls Road to where it crosses Pattee Pond Brook. There is a small turnout for parking.

Sebasticook River Dam Benton

The Sebasticook’s alewife run is Maine’s largest. The fish lift at the Benton Falls hydropower dam lets fish reach Sebasticook Lake and other ponds north of the dam. A commercial harvester at the dam typically occurs every day of the week after 250,000 have passed through the fishway. Alewives congregate in large numbers below the dam but the public cannot descend to the river from the dam access off Clinton Ave (Route 101) downstream from the Route 139 bridge. The best viewing is from the opposite side of the river but you will still be able to see them. From the Clinton Ave side use the Rt 139 bridge to cross the river, turn right onto Falls Road and then right onto Brimstone Hill Road where harvesters access the river. Bring binoculars to observe the harvest and eagles but stay clear of heavy equipment and trucks.

Sebasticook River Sebasticook Lake Newport

This is a large run with great viewing. At the Sebasticook Lake dam, a fish ladder provides fish access to this large lake. A small parking lot on North Street next to the ladder provides convenient viewing of the alewives ascending the ladder and moving into the lake. Fish congregate by the thousands below the dam as they await their turn to go up the fish ladder.

Damariscotta River Damariscotta Mills

The historic fish ladder along this river has been restored and provides a fantastic spot to watch this large alewife run. The website https://damariscottamills.org/ has good background information about alewives and the fish ladder restoration, and good directions to the observation site. The Ladder Restoration Festival typically takes place on the last Saturday in May. Damariscotta Mills is located a few miles north of the town of Damariscotta. There you are heading north on Route 1 take the Damariscotta exit to business Route 1 go straight at the 4 way stop just past the Congregational Church. Take Route 215 north for approximately 16 miles. Look for a parking area just past the Austin Road on the left. Off the next left onto the fish farm parking lot. From the fish house, follow the path behind the building; the harvesting area is ahead on the left and the fish ladder makes a right turn. The harvest takes place 3 days/week, Monday through Wednesday. Since the site is tidal, the harvest occurs for 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon with times tide dependent.

Bagaduce River Mill Brook Pierce Pond Bangor

This small run of alewives near the Penobscot River has an opening between the concrete bridge and the railroad bridge. From the confluence of the Penobscot River, the alewives travel up the Penobscot over Golden Hill Road to the dam near the end of the stream. Unfortunately, this is a difficult to reach location and requires a bit of a hike (about ½ mile) through woods. From Bennnoch Road in Stillwater turn left onto Kildonan Rd, then left on Poplar St, then at Old Town Landing Rd turn right on Woodard Ave. There is a parking lot at the Beechwoood Ave to the area of the dam. Most of these are gravel roads and road signs may not be present. There are numerous logging roads that may or may not be accessible in May which could get you closer to the dam. The fish ladder and fishway are visible on Google map, satellite view. Great navigation skills may be required, and a GPS would be helpful.

Penobscot River Pushaw Stream Pushaw Lake W. Old Town

This large run of alewives migrates up the Penobscot River past Bangor and Orono to Pushaw Stream and Lake. Fish congregate below the fishway at the low dam near the end of the town. It is difficult to reach location and requires a bit of a hike (about ½ mile) through woods. Fish can be seen traveling into the lake. Fish congregate by the thousands below the dam as they await their turn to go up the fish ladder.

Somes Stream Somes Pond Sebasticook River

Alewives travel out of Somes Harbor and into Somes Pond (also called Somesville Mill Pond) in Mount Desert each year. After a 2005 restoration of the fishway on the stream, alewives are again being traveled into the pond. Parking is located at the Historical Society Museum, where there is an interpretive sign explaining the fish ladders. FMI: www.downeastfisherastrail.org

East Machias River Gardiner Lake East Machias

Alewives travel out of Machias Bay into the river to the dam at the outlet of Gardiner Lake. The dam has a fishway where the alewives can be viewed. There is also a unique harvest here. The fishway enters the lake next to a small beach. Since the fishway doesn’t have a pen, nets are snout up around the beach to trap the alewives and once enough are enclosed, the nets are pulled to the beach. From Highway 1 take Chausse Mill road to the dam. A parking lot and boat ramp is located just past the dam. This is a medium size run.

Sedgesunkedund Stream Fields Pond Orono

Several dams were removed along Sedgesunked Stream in Brewer and Orono, allowing fish to pass up into Fields Pond. There is a small public park off the West Side of W. Oldtown Rd. A kiosk visible near the top of Fields Pond. This is a very small run. The alewives might be seen as they go up a rock-fall fishway that runs through natural rapids. There is a short, pleasant trail that runs along side of the stream a few hundred yards down to a country store from the top of the rapids.

Blackman Stream Cheno Pond at the Maine Forest and Logging Museum

The Maine Forest and Logging Museum collaborated with the Atlantic Salmon Federation to install a fish ladder at the original Leonard’s Mills dam site. There are 10 rises and rocks that visible fish to pass over the dam. Visitors can view the fishway from the logging museum property. There is a small admission fee for anyone over 12. See www.maineforestandloggingmuseum.org/river-restoration-fish-ladder-for-directions.

Penobscot River Pushaw Stream Pushaw Lake Old Town

This large run of alewives migrates up the Penobscot River past Bangor and Orono to Pushaw Stream and Lake. Fish congregate below the fishway at the low dam near the end of the town. It is difficult to reach location and requires a bit of a hike (about ½ mile) through woods. Fish can be seen traveling into the lake. Fish congregate by the thousands below the dam as they await their turn to go up the fish ladder.

Somes Stream Somes Pond Sebasticook River

Alewives travel out of Somes Harbor and into Somes Pond (also called Somesville Mill Pond) in Mount Desert each year. After a 2005 restoration of the fishway on the stream, alewives are again being traveled into the pond. Parking is located at the Historical Society Museum, where there is an interpretive sign explaining the fish ladders. FMI: www.downeastfisherastrail.org

East Machias River Gardiner Lake East Machias

Alewives travel out of Machias Bay into the river to the dam at the outlet of Gardiner Lake. The dam has a fishway where the alewives can be viewed. There is also a unique harvest here. The fishway enters the lake next to a small beach. Since the fishway doesn’t have a pen, nets are snout up around the beach to trap the alewives and once enough are enclosed, the nets are pulled to the beach. From Highway 1 take Chausse Mill road to the dam. A parking lot and boat ramp is located just past the dam. This is a medium size run.

Orland River Alamoosook Lake Orrington

The Orland River hosts a large run of alewives that meet their first barrier at the head of tide near Orland. From Route 1 take Route 175S, as the road turns south onto Carver Rd. Turn left on Pierce Pond Road and then stay left on Mill Creek Road to the boat ramp.

Disclaimer: Information is provided here with no guarantees of accuracy. Any actions you take are strictly at your own risk. Please be mindful if crossing private property. But we’d like to hear from you. Please contact mainerivers.org with recommendations or corrections.