

Reserve study tracks fish in Mousam River estuary



Steve Bodnar photo From left, John Burrows, president of Maine Rivers, an organization that helps revitalize and protect state rivers, looks on as Jeremy Miller, a research associate at Wells Reserve, and Jacob Aman, also of the reserve, set up a fyke net for a fish assessment study Thursday, May 21, in the Mousam River estuary in the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge. Ellen McCann Labbe, an education associate with the Wells Reserve, looks on at right.

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WELLS — Jake Aman and Jeremy Miller descended to the muddy bottom of a channel in the Mousam River estuary Thursday, May 21, while a research team looked on from above.

At the channel base, the pair posted mesh netting to trap fish along the waterway, in turn creating the first of three study sites being used to evaluate the presence of migratory fish species and make assessments regarding natural habitat restoration.

"We're essentially here to see what fish are here and what could be done to restore original habitats," said Miller, a research associate with the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve, the entity organizing the study.

Miller said the study, in part, was established to raise awareness about the value of the natural estuary waterways in relation to the habitats of fish that spawn there.

Freshwater born blueback herring, alewives and American shad, and saltwater-born river eels, are prime migratory species of interest in the study, said Aman, an environmental educator with Wells Reserve through the Maine Conservation Corps.

The research team returned to its study site locations late last Thursday night and early Friday morning to weigh, measure and release fish caught by the mesh bag, called fyke netting.

Aman called the study a "snapshot" and indicated that continual research on the area would be the best way to identify trends.

He said historical analysis is also part of the project to determine how fish habitats once had been in the waterways. Thirteen dams have been constructed on the Mousam River since the area was first settled, Aman said, adding that researchers want to know what affect this has had on the area.

The fish species migrate between freshwater and saltwater and use the estuary channels as a means to get to spawning locations, Aman said.

While data collected hadn't been fully analyzed by Tuesday, Aman said there wasn't an overwhelming amount of migratory fish collected at the site, which wasn't necessarily surprising.

Green crabs, not native to the area and characterized as "exotic" or "invasive," were identified in the largest numbers, he said.

John Burrows, president of Maine Rivers, an organization established to help insure the protection and preservation of state rivers, said studies on the Mousam River have been few and far between, especially on how to best manage area waterways.

Maine Rivers helped fund the study. The Mousam and Kennebunk Rivers Alliance, a group promoting the health of the river systems, has also partnered on the study.

"We want to educate people about the river," Burrows said. "We want to get people to understand connection between wildlife, all while getting a better understanding of the ecosystem."

Some of the findings will be presented along with other data on estuary waterways and area rivers during a 9 a.m. conference at the Wells Reserve on Friday, May 29. The conference will be centered on discussion about the Mousam and Kennebunk Rivers. Registration is at 8:15 a.m. and the conference is scheduled until 3 p.m.