



<http://www.cumauriceriver.org>

Alewife

By Jane Galetto

Have you noticed the fisherman jigging their pole tips on local rivers from mid-April to early June? The bridges are often jammed with people, buckets and lines.

It is the spring spawn when alewife herring breed, traveling up rivers in search of fresher waters to lay their eggs. Anadromous fish live most of their lives in saltwater, but juveniles need the fresher water of our tidal estuaries to survive their early days.

The fish are used as a table item and are especially popular in Scandinavian countries. But in our region they are primarily used as a bait-fish to catch the sportier much-prized striped bass. The fishermen on the bridges jig for herring, while the bank fishermen are normally pursuing the more elusive striper.

Herring is one of North America's oldest documented fisheries, dating back over 350 years.

The alewife's range is from North Carolina to Newfoundland. The National Marine Fisheries Service lists the alewife and blueback river herring as a *Species of Concern*. Historically alewife existed south to South Carolina. The blueback herring's range extends to Florida. Their decline is linked to dams and other impediments that keep adults from getting access to the head of tide, and to habitat degradation, fishing, bycatch, and striped bass predation.

In an effort to restore herring's numbers, fisheries management personnel have either installed fish ladders or removed water control structures that would otherwise impede the fish from reaching breeding areas. When you're out and about on the Maurice River, check out the fish ladder on the face of the Union Lake Dam in Millville, and think of those mighty little fish making a final ascent before perpetuating their species and its future.