

A Fisherman's Paradise: A History of Inland Fish Conservation on Mount Desert Island

By Erik Reardon

In 2005, the Somes-Meynell Wildlife Sanctuary led an effort to rebuild four eighteenth-century fishways and restore 1,000 acres of anadromous fish habitat on Mount Desert Island. The fishways historically provided passage around a number of milldams within the Somes Pond-Long Pond watershed, but over the years, they had fallen into disrepair and eventually blocked upstream passage entirely. Without functioning fishways, an ecosystem that once supported as many as 200,000 alewives saw only 360 fish return to spawn in 2005.¹ Anadromous fish, alewives among them, migrate from the sea to freshwater systems in order to spawn the next generation. Prior to the widespread installation of dams, alewives swarmed nearly every river in New England in fantastic numbers. Despite these dramatic declines throughout the region, alewives have proven to be incredibly resilient in the face of obstacles that have stood in the way of their inland migrations for centuries. Repairs to existing fishways in Somesville, coupled with moderate stocking, resulted in a stark reversal of the previous decline. The watershed now hosts tens of thousands of alewives every spring as they migrate inland with the assistance of well-functioning fishways. Despite these gains, there is still a long way to go. These numbers fall far short of historic populations; some river systems in Maine once hosted alewife runs that numbered in the millions. Contemporary river conservation efforts throughout New England seek to restore fish habitat with the goal of not only fostering greater biodiversity, but also reintegrating species that were once abundant within local fishing economies. There is still work to be done, though, as only thirty towns in the state of Maine are currently eligible to harvest alewives as bait for coastal fisheries, particularly lobster.²

New England's environmental history has long been defined by a delicate tightrope walk between exploitation and conservation.³

Many thanks to Tim Garrity, Bruce Connery, and Natalie Springuel for allowing me the opportunity to explore the environmental history of this unique landscape. Thanks also to Richard Judd and Joe Miller for reading early drafts of this article.

Freshwater fisheries were particularly susceptible to human impacts given the relative ease with which this resource could be accessed, especially compared with marine fisheries, and problems associated with habitat obstruction of migratory species. Many residents of New England are familiar with such stories of environmental decline. Without discounting these trends, it is equally important to highlight historical moments in which New Englanders worked to prevent environmental destruction. There is no doubt that this particular restoration program stands as an important example of collaboration between local stakeholders and state and federal agencies, but this episode also highlights Mount Desert Island's unique position within a broader tradition of inland fish conservation that stretches back to the Early Republic. These contemporary restoration efforts are deeply connected to a conservation ethic that historically motivated many of New England's fishing communities to defend fisheries from threats associated with dams, pollution, and over-exploitation.

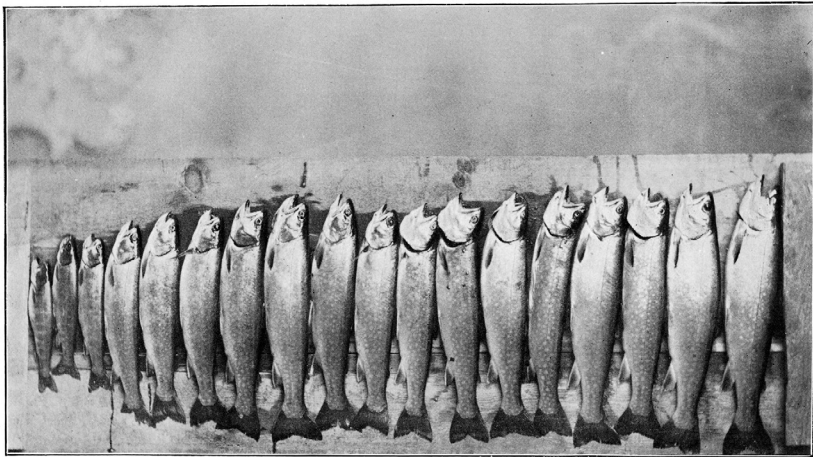
Diadromous Fish: Past and Present

Throughout the nineteenth century, freshwater fishing supplied agricultural communities with an important source of nutrition and a valued article of exchange within the rural economy. Though agriculture stood at the foundation of economic life in New England at the turn of the nineteenth century, farmers supplemented activity in the fields with hunting, timber harvesting, household manufactures, and the seasonal harvest of anadromous fish. Rural communities most often set their sights on once-abundant schools of salmon, shad, and alewives. Because these and other species were overwhelmingly regarded as a public good, coalitions of farsighted fishermen sought to chart a course that would ensure the sustainability of healthy freshwater fisheries. This early conservation ethic was born from the recognition that inland fish resources made substantial contributions to household subsistence. Freshwater fisheries served a variety of functions within New England's pre-industrial economy. They were incorporated into informal community systems of barter and exchange, integrated into more formal networks of regional commerce, or simply preserved for future household consumption. Migratory fish represented such a ubiquitous article of the rural

diet that, with the arrival of spring, nearly every household could expect a fair share, provided either as part of a cooperative company agreement or by lone fishermen utilizing waters located on their own property or within the boundary of a respective town. James M. Parker, a Union soldier from Mount Desert Island, wrote to his family from his station at Fort Alexander near Washington, D.C., that he sorely missed his favorite dish of sauce and eels.⁴

Alewife fisheries, being so abundant prior to the proliferation of milldams and rampant pollution of inland waters, in particular drew the attention of conservation-minded fishermen. Alewives served a variety of functions within local economies throughout New England. They were smoked and salted for local consumption, diverted to regional markets for consumption, and utilized as bait within the coastal cod fishery. They were also highly prized as one of the earliest fertilizers by Native Americans and, later, by the waves of European immigrants who settled throughout the region.⁵

Given these broad applications, rural communities took note of any action that could potentially compromise the delicate ecological balances that sustained these fish runs. In this case, communities consistently sought to rein in the environmental impact of small milldams, or at least mitigate their effect on fish runs. The latter concern speaks directly to the experiences of alewife fishers and



A DAY'S CATCH OF TROUT AT ECHO LAKE AVERAGE WEIGHT TWO POUNDS.

"A Day's Catch of Trout at Echo Lake, Average Weight Two Pounds," in Sherman, Guide to Bar Harbor Maine.

community leaders on Mount Desert Island during the early nineteenth century. Amidst the proliferation of small milldams, fishermen on Mount Desert Island that harvested this anadromous species attempted to mitigate the potential devastating consequences for seasonal fish runs.

By the late eighteenth century, rural manufacturing and coastal fisheries increasingly drove the island's economy. Millers constructed dams throughout Mount Desert Island in order to harness the energy potential of the island's inland waters. Four dams within the Mill Pond watershed alone powered saw, grist, and woolen mills. However, the frequent damming of streams and brooks that empty into the island's many lakes and ponds provoked a reaction from those more invested in the local fishing economy. Fishermen were rightly concerned about the future of anadromous fish runs with so many unchecked obstructions.

In 1821, a committee claiming to be "for and in behalf of Mount Desert" that included prominent Mount Desert Island inhabitants David Wasgatt, Kendall Kittredge, and John Somes Jr., petitioned the state legislature for regulations designed to prevent the collapse of alewife fisheries on the island. The petition declared that milldams and other obstructions had persistently blocked access to critical alewife spawning habitat. They requested that the legislature pass a law providing special protections for these alewife streams. Luckily for these townfolk, state legislatures often proved willing to accommodate such seemingly reasonable requests prior to the rise of large, export-oriented manufacturing structures in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, the state legislature issued a statute that limited fishing pressure on alewife streams to two days per week and restricted fishing near the mouths of brooks or streams where alewives were known to travel to reach spawning grounds. In addition, the statute required mill owners to allow passage around, through, or over their dams during seasonal fish runs. Fish wardens would then inspect these dams to ensure compliance and issue penalties of fifty dollars for violations. Though there is no evidence to suggest this statute was effective in clearing the way for upstream migration or reversing declines in fish stocks, it still highlights the important position of inland fishing within the island's local economy. Efforts to manage river fisheries in this way were not unique to Mount

Desert Island, but they nevertheless emphasize early recognitions that effective conservation programs were necessary to prevent both over-exploitation and callous obstruction of vital habitat.

In fact, this episode fits perfectly into established interpretations of the history of New England's freshwater fisheries management. During the early nineteenth century, state legislatures embraced a new approach that decentralized fisheries policy and placed greater control in the hands of selectmen and town officials. River fisheries already often operated within a community context that fostered this trend towards local control.⁶ Several towns throughout the region petitioned for further protections as they pertained to smaller brooks, streams, lakes, and ponds. In some cases, town officials fought for local autonomy over waters within town borders, and alternatively, more specific regulations geared towards the perceived needs of diverse freshwater environments. The move towards town control underscored an ideology that prioritized local knowledge about fish population dynamics and freshwater ecology.⁷ Some communities managed to convince their state representatives of the necessity of their requests, as evidenced by the statutes passed in regards to fish streams on Mount Desert Island. The passage of these regulations ultimately reflected a willingness to accept local solutions in an attempt to address decreasing populations of migratory fish.

In addition to the value placed on alewives and other anadromous fish species for local and regional consumption, coastal communities also recognized the contributions of these species in relation to stable and productive ecosystems. As a result, coastal fishers were attuned to the many connections between river and coastal ecology. In 1834, residents from Georgetown, an island further down the coast, said that the coastal cod fishery "depends entirely" on the presence of alewives.⁸ Alewives lured schools of cod close to shore where they could be caught by coastal fishers without the significant expense and danger of operating offshore. This fact was especially significant for Mount Desert Island. During the mid-eighteenth century, seemingly inexhaustible stocks of cod drew settlers to the region. With economic activity on the island so deeply connected to the nearshore cod fishery, virtually every family owned a small farm and fishing boat. Cod fishers recognized that their fortunes were intimately tied to forage fish, like alewives.⁹ In this sense,

alewives occupied an important position within the marine food chain and served as a bridge between fresh and saltwater ecosystems. These communities, in virtue of generations of work in this unique environment, well understood the interconnections among discrete components of the coastal habitat.

Between 1870 and 1880, Mount Desert Island underwent a remarkable transformation from rural outpost of local fishing, milling, and lumbering communities to one of Maine's premier tourist destinations. However, local freshwater fishing traditions persisted well into the twentieth century and continued to make distinct contributions to the household economy.

Local Fishing Traditions Survive

Historically, Mount Desert Island's lakes, ponds, brooks, and streams hosted some thirty-one species of freshwater fish.¹⁰ During the mid-to-late nineteenth century, two of those species received overwhelming attention from locals and tourists alike: landlocked salmon and brook trout. Mount Desert Island is blessed with numerous cold, deep, and well-oxygenated waters that supported strong freshwater fisheries, with a particular emphasis on landlocked salmon and trout, including Long Pond, Echo Lake, Jordan Pond, and Eagle Lake. This fact was well-advertised, and by the late nineteenth century, Mount Desert Island increasingly attracted affluent visitors from throughout the region as tourism grew as a vital element of the island's economy. Even amidst these dramatic social and economic changes, regional newspapers also described the persistence of local fishing traditions well into the twentieth century. For many townsfolk, fishing in local ponds and lakes made distinct contributions to the household economy. In many cases, fishing nearby waters represented a necessity, given certain environmental constraints and economic realities.

Nineteenth-century sources invariably described the unique challenges that accompanied settlement along Maine's coast. Again, residents of Georgetown wrote in 1834 that "they and their fathers have from necessity been compelled to seek employment other than that of agriculture as their soil would not repay the expense of very general cultivation, they have been forced in a great measure to seek other means of subsistence."¹¹ Though perhaps not quite the desert



TROUT AND SALMON CAUGHT AT LONG POND.
MAY 16, 1896. LARGEST TROUT, 4 3-4 LBS. SMALLEST, 1 LB.

"Trout and Salmon Caught at Long Pond. May 16, 1898," in Sherman, Guide to Bar Harbor Maine.

that Samuel de Champlain noted in 1604, much of the landscape was simply not conducive to farming. In the place of agriculture, milling, fishing, and lumbering defined economic life on Mount Desert Island.¹² Less-than-productive soils led inhabitants to pursue coastal and off-shore fisheries, just as local brooks and streams powered saw and grist mills.

The *New York Tribune* wrote in 1857 that "farming is not practiced on an extensive scale, apparently scarcely enough for home consumption. People say fishing is easier and pays better—a poor comment on the land when the hard life on board a little fishing smack on Newfoundland banks is found preferable."¹³ However, those who did fashion a living from the soil found additional sources of income and subsistence to overcome the challenges associated with coastal agriculture. *The Springfield Republican* reported that though it is a challenge to "have to make all their money in a few

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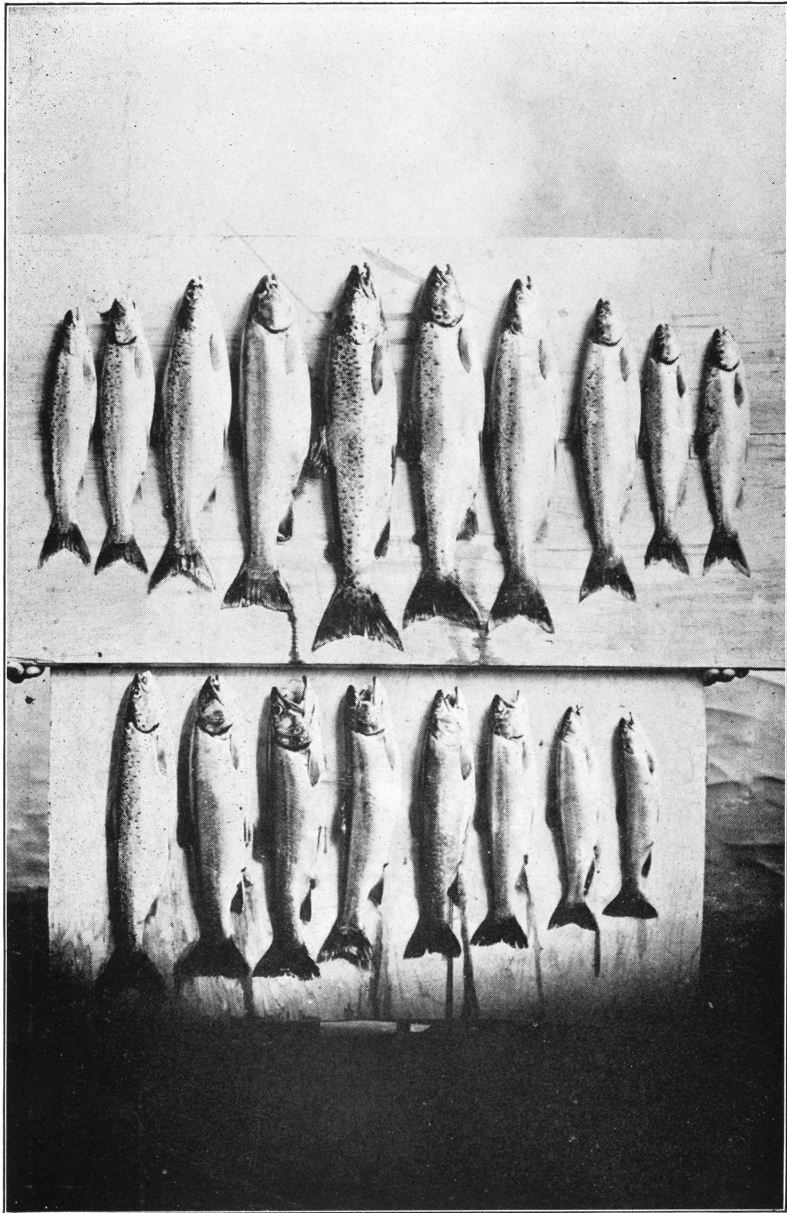
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Advertisement for McEachern & Stanley, dealers in all kinds of fish, salmon, black bass, brook trout. *Richardson et al.*, *Do You Know*, 13.

months, ... farmers live well, plenty of farm products, berries and native trout and salmon.¹⁴ According to this account, local farmers supplemented returns associated with annual harvests with trout and landlocked salmon fishing on the island's lakes and ponds.

However, with a growing contingent of rusticators descending on the island every summer to revel in what an 1890 travel guide to Bar Harbor described as a "fisherman's paradise," fishing pressure on the island's lakes, ponds, and streams must have increased accordingly and most likely headed towards over-exploitation.¹⁵ One New York reporter wrote in 1874 that two individuals pulled five hundred trout from Jordan Pond in "a short day's fishing." In addition, the author claimed to have taken thirty pounds of trout from Eagle Lake in a single day.¹⁶ With the understanding that fish stories are notorious for exaggeration and outright fabrication, these reports should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. However, this story highlights the necessity of rigorous stocking efforts, given the tremendous fishing pressure associated with the seasonal arrival of rusticators. In 1886, twenty thousand salmon were stocked in Eagle Lake. Four years later, in 1890, reports indicated that those fish had grown to between four and six pounds. The fish were described as "large enough and smart enough to give the angler a great deal of fun and a good deal of work catching them."¹⁷ Visitors throughout the island hired boats and guides in an attempt to maximize their chance to catch a trophy fish. A similar travel guide from 1900 advertised a local fish dealer, McEachern & Stanley, that sold salmon and brook trout to visitors who desired a taste of the island's freshwater fish without ever putting a line in the water.¹⁸



TROUT AND SALMON FROM LONG POND

"Trout and Salmon from Long Pond," in Bar Harbor Publicity Committee, Maine's Great Coast Resort Bar Harbor the Gateway to the Lafayette National Park (1919), Maine History Documents, Paper 64, <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/64>, 23.

With such high demand for trout and salmon, W.M. Robert, Edward Rodick, and Charles R. Clark formed a company in 1895 to build a fish hatchery in order to stock the celebrated fish in Jordan Pond, Long Pond, Eagle Lake, and Echo Lake. They were said to have been “met with such hearty cooperation from a large number of cottagers who are lovers of trout and salmon fishing.”¹⁹ This document reveals a surprising degree of consensus amongst locals and rusticators surrounding the benefits of fisheries conservation and the necessity of regular stocking to accommodate the increased fishing pressure that accompanied the tourist boom. After 1920, state agencies took over stocking efforts and annually deposited thousands of trout and salmon fry in the same waters.²⁰ Without these early stocking efforts, it is likely the fisheries associated with these lakes and ponds would have been over-exploited and ultimately exhausted.

Before long, Mount Desert Island acquired a reputation as a fisherman’s paradise partly due to the plentiful opportunities to fish for trout and salmon. In 1895, officials from the Maine Inland Fisheries and Game Commission visited Mount Desert Island and fished Long Pond. They caught two trout and three salmon “of good size,” and the catch inspired the commissioners to declare that there was no better fishing in the entire state than on Mount Desert Island.²¹ Subsequent travel documents published to advertise the island’s natural beauty to tourists throughout the region invariably included descriptions of freshwater fishing so as to lure tourists to this unique landscape. This reputation spread partly as a result of conservation and propagation programs that began early in the nineteenth century. Without the intermittent stocking undertaken by community leaders in the 1860s and then pursued more scientifically by state agencies in the 1920s, fishing pressure from both locals and tourists would have long overwhelmed the island’s freshwater fisheries.

Conclusion

Today, Mount Desert Island is a unique landscape and a celebrated destination for freshwater fishing enthusiasts, but those landscapes are the product of over one hundred years of careful attention to the resources that sustained both rural livelihoods

and a burgeoning tourist economy. Whether they are aware of it or not, those who pursue contemporary conservation and restoration efforts are building on ecological traditions that began generations ago. Given the recent push to restore anadromous species to their historic habitat, it is particularly remarkable to think that residents of Mount Desert Island expressed concern for freshwater fisheries as far back as the early nineteenth century. The restoration of such large numbers of alewives has implications for rivers and streams throughout the nation well beyond economic considerations or the revival of any single species. The ecological benefits associated with strong populations of anadromous fish reverberate throughout an entire ecosystem. Anadromous fish provide a temporary abundance that is more or less predictable to any number of predators farther up the food chain.²² In the past, when hundreds of thousands of alewives filled the Mill Pond-Long Pond watershed, seals, ospreys, and eagles gathered in search of an easy meal. Groundfish were just as opportunistic, hugging the coastline during seasonal fish runs.²³ Lastly, state biologists noted that large stocks of landlocked salmon in Long Pond were historically supported by abundant alewife runs, as the juvenile fish were preyed upon by the larger salmon.²⁴ The return of over thirty thousand alewives to the Mill Pond-Long Pond watershed in 2014 has been an undeniable success story, given the depleted state of the fishery only a decade ago.²⁵ The fact that Mount Desert Island's freshwater fisheries continue to attract interest from conservationists and sportsmen alike is a testament to historical commitments to resource conservation that, then and now, contribute to the island's sense of place.

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Erik Reardon recently received his PhD in history from the University of Maine, where he studied grassroots conservation initiatives of the nineteenth century. His interest in rivers and fly-fishing inspired him to explore New England's historical commitments to inland fish conservation. He currently lives on the banks of the Penobscot River in Orono.

¹ Craig Idlebrook, "Fish Ladders Return to Somesville," *The Working*

- Waterfront Archives, April 1, 2007, <http://www.workingwaterfrontarchives.org/2007/04/01/fish-ladders-return-to-somesville>.
- ² “Somesville Passage Restoration Project,” Somes-Meynell Wildlife Sanctuary, http://www.somesmeynell.org/?page_id=125.
- ³ Richard Judd, *Second Nature: An Environmental History of New England* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 179.
- ⁴ James M. Parker to Letitia Parker, January 22, 1863, James M. Parker Letters, Mount Desert Island Historical Society.
- ⁵ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012), 58.
- ⁶ Judd, *Second Nature*, 185.
- ⁷ Matthew McKenzie, *Clearing the Coastline: The Nineteenth-Century Ecological & Cultural Transformation of Cape Cod* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2010), 42–43.
- ⁸ Remonstrance of the town of Georgetown, against the petition of Greenleaf White for a dam across the Kennebec River, February 11, 1834, Maine State Archives, Box 107, Chapter 134.
- ⁹ Natalie Springuel, William B. Leavenworth, and Karen Alexander, “From Wealth to Poverty: The Rise and Fall of Cod around Mount Desert Island,” *Chebacco* 16 (2015): 68.
- ¹⁰ Jennifer Stone, Bao C. Le, and John R. Moring, “Freshwater Fishes of Acadia National Park, Mount Desert Island, Maine,” *Northeast Naturalist* 8, no. 3 (2001): 315.
- ¹¹ Remonstrance, Maine State Archives.
- ¹² David Hackett Fischer, “Landscapes We Have Lost: Environment and History on Mount Desert Island,” *Chebacco* 16 (2015): 45.
- ¹³ “From Mount Desert Island: Correspondence of the New York Tribune,” *New York Tribune*, July 25, 1857, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.
- ¹⁴ “Harvest on Mount Desert: Begins with Arrival of Fashionable Summer Folks and Ends with Their Departure,” *Springfield Republican*, September 14, 1913, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.
- ¹⁵ W.H. Sherman, *Guide to Bar Harbor Maine* (1890), Maine History Documents, Paper 42, <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/42>, 58.
- ¹⁶ “Mount Desert Island, the Cause of the Typhoid Fever There Last Year,” *New York Tribune*, June 25, 1874, America’s Historical Newspaper Database.
- ¹⁷ Sherman, *Guide to Bar Harbor Maine*, 56.
- ¹⁸ Eleanor A. Richardson, Charles M. Sanger, and James H. Richardson Jr., *Do You Know Mount Desert Island and its Four Harbors?* (1900), Maine

History Documents, Paper 96, <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/96>, 13.

¹⁹ “Company To Be Formed To Stock Local Lakes,” *Bar Harbor Record*, September 25, 1895. America’s Historical Newspaper Database.

²⁰ “Island Lake Fishing Very Good: Sport Best in Years, Big Fish Brought in, Hadley Tells of Stocking Lakes and Ponds,” *Bar Harbor Times*, May 23, 1928, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

²¹ “New Laws: Important Laws Passed Concerning Eagle Lake and Deer Killing,” *Bar Harbor Record*, June 10, 1896, America’s Historical Newspapers Database.

²² Mary F. Wilson and Karl C. Halupka, “Anadromous Fish as Keystone Species in Vertebrate Communities,” *Conservation Biology* 9, no. 3 (June 1995): 494.

²³ Idlebrook, “Fish Ladders Return to Somesville.”

²⁴ U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, “Long Pond,” survey of Long Pond, August 1942, http://www.state.me.us/ifw/fishing/lakesurvey_maps/hancock/long_pond.pdf.

²⁵ “Number of Alewives Entering Mill Pond Compared to Long Pond 2005–2014,” Somes-Meynell Wildlife Sanctuary, http://www.somesmeynell.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Chart-2005_20142.pdf.