

River Herring

The alewife and blueback herring are the two species of fish in coastal Massachusetts collectively referred to as “river herring.” Both fish species look very similar and are anadromous – meaning they are hatched from eggs in freshwater, spend the greater part of their lives in the ocean, and return to freshwater to spawn.

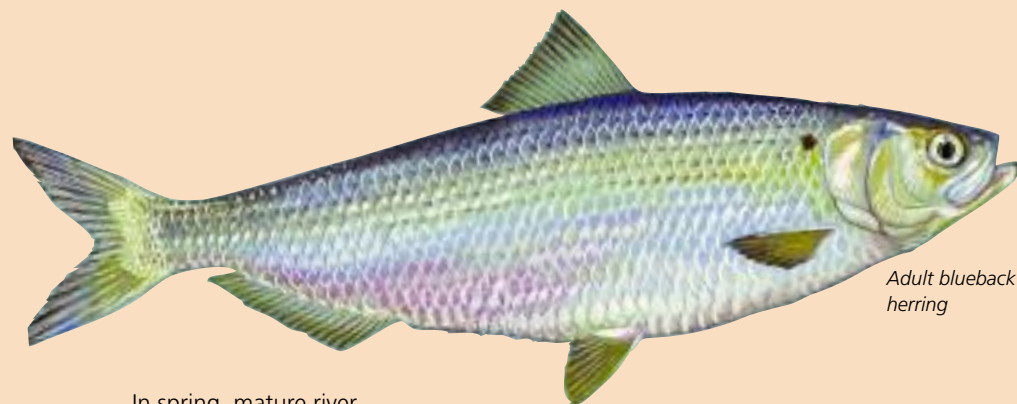
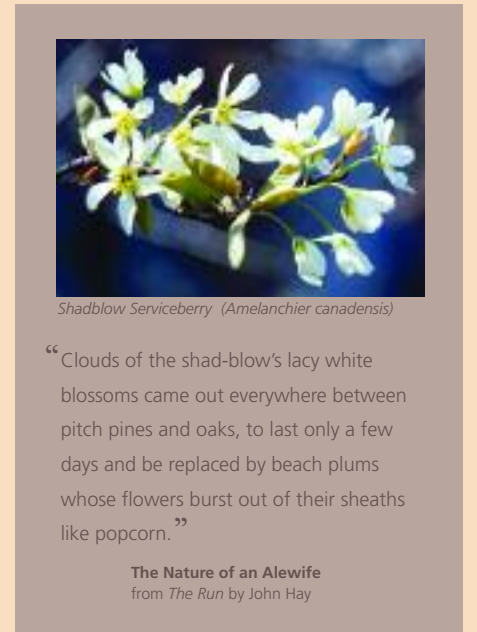
The herring return from the ocean around the same time that early spring blossoms start to appear in April. The “shad-blow” flower has this name because it blooms when fish begin to run upstream.

River herring are an important part of a healthy coastal and river ecosystem as they are eaten by larger fish and animals in the foodweb. The waterways the herring swim to reach their spawning grounds are called “herring runs.” Many of them have structures such as fish ladders or weir-pools to help the fish get over dams and other obstructions.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the fish were so plentiful they were

often used for fertilizer. Salted herring was stored in barrels and sent to markets in New York and Boston for further export to the West Indies.

In recent years, the herring population has declined: partly because water levels in the spawning areas were lowered by drought, but also because of poor water quality and the by-catch of adults by ocean fishing boats. Now they are protected by law.



In spring, mature river herring migrate to freshwater rivers to spawn, or lay their eggs, and then return to the ocean. In Massachusetts waters, alewives spawn from late March to mid-May, while blueback herring spawn from late April through June.

In summer, the newly-hatched juveniles use rivers and estuary waters as nursery areas until the fall, when they move out to the ocean. The immature fish stay near the shore until they reach sexual maturity.

