

## ***The Herring Helpers***

Rochester, Marion and Mattapoissett Massachusetts

Updated December 12, 2025

Alewives Anonymous was founded in November of 1984 by William David Watling, Town of Rochester Herring Inspector at that time.

The Incorporators were:

Gibbs Bray	Marion
Hoyle DeMoranville	Rochester
Arthur Lionberger	Rochester
Elmont Locke	Rochester
William Watling	Rochester

They incorporated as Alewives Anonymous, Inc., to encourage, promote, and support efforts to preserve and increase the alewife fishery resources in the Mattapoissett River and Sippican River in the towns of Rochester, Marion, and Mattapoissett Massachusetts.

The goals of Alewives Anonymous, Inc. are:

To educate the general public as to the importance of the alewife fishery resources and as to general environmental conditions of the Mattapoissett River and Sippican River.

To support scientific research directed towards preserving and increasing the alewife and other anadromous fish resources. (Anadromous fish are fish which migrate up rivers from the ocean to spawn in fresh water.)

To receive contributions & grants, and to raise money by the sale of goods; all contributions, income and proceeds to be applied to the exempt purposes of this Organization as described in the Internal Revenue Code Sec. 501(c)(3) as now in force or hereafter amended.

In recognition of the efforts made toward achieving these goals, on April 29, 1999, at the Annual Meeting of The Coalition for Buzzards Bay (name changed to Buzzards Bay Coalition, May 2011), Alewives Anonymous, Inc. was presented the Guardian Award by Mark Rasmussen, Executive Director.

On Earth Day, April 22, 1993, Paul Keough, Acting Regional Administration, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 1, presented the Environmental Merit Award to Alewives Anonymous, Inc. founder/organizer and then President William D. Watling, "in recognition of Demonstrated Commitment and Significant Contributions to the Environment".

Sportsmen, fishermen and environmentally concerned individuals and organizations are invited to become members to support the on-going activities by means of annual dues (\$10.00) and/or directly participating in the various projects. The Board of Directors meets monthly (except July, August and December) and interested persons are invited to attend. The Annual Meeting is held on the last Sunday in April and features a quahog chowder supper, a recap of the past year's activities, election of Board of Directors members and usually a relevant program presented by a guest speaker.

Alewives Anonymous, Inc. has spear-headed projects such as the dredging of a section on the Mattapoissett River from the outflow of Snipatuit Pond to Snipatuit Road, replacing the culverts at Snipatuit Road, and the construction of a permanent fish ladder at the Herring Weir in Mattapoissett.

The organization has, over the years (and continues to do so) cleared the Mattapoissett and Sippican Rivers of blow downs, brush, debris and obstructions, utilizing volunteer help to do so with equipment (canoes, power chain saws, brush cutters, hedge trimmers, winches and various hand tools) provided by the organization.

President Arthur Benner extends an invitation to all sports fishermen and others to assist the organization in maintaining open passage in the two rivers. This will ease the herring's journey, thereby increasing the number of fish able to make it to the spawning grounds in the two ponds.



Alewives, or herring, are a main food fish for many oceanic fish, whales and shore birds such as the endangered rosette terns. Lobstermen utilize herring as bait in their lobster pots when available. Herring, being smoked or salted, were a staple of the early settlers of our region. Current day human consumption of river herring is mainly the roe (eggs).

The towns of Rochester, Marion and Mattapoisett control and share the alewife fishery resource from the Mattapoisett River and Sippican River jointly through the Tri-Town River Committee. Policy is established at an annual meeting with the Herring Inspectors from the three towns. This is one of only a few herring fisheries in Massachusetts that is shared by multiple towns.

There are two fish ladders located in the Mattapoisett River, which flows from Rochester to Mattapoisett Harbor/Buzzards Bay.

The first one the herring encounter during their Spring migration is in Mattapoisett at the Herring Weir, Route 6 and River Road. This a Denil type ladder of concrete construction that facilitates the herring's transition from the ocean salt water into the fresh water of the river, an elevation difference of about four feet.





**Ladder at Mattapoisett Herring Weir, Route 6.**

The other ladder is in Rochester, approximately twelve miles upstream from the first ladder, at the headwaters of the Mattapoisett River where the herring reach their destination and make the final transition from the river into Snipatuit Pond (710 +/- acres) where they spawn. This ladder is a traditional concrete weir and pool fishway constructed by Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries for the herring to climb the two to three feet in elevation difference between the river and pond.



**Ladder at the outlet of Snipatuit Pond**

There are also two fish ladders on the Sippican River, which flows from Rochester to Marion, joining the Weweantic River before reaching Buzzards Bay.

The first one that the herring encounter is in Rochester at Hathaway's Pond dam (a 22 acre +/- man made pond), a former mill site, approximately three and a half miles from the tidal waters of the Weweantic River. The ladder in use for many years that predates the 1960s was a traditional weir and pool fishway for the herring to climb the four feet elevation difference between the river and pond, the final thirty feet being an enclosed 'tunnel' under a road way. This ladder was replaced in 2013 through a project led by property owner Beaton, Inc. and designed by E A Engineering with a ten foot section of aluminum Alaskan steepass ladder provided by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. The ladder, installed in one of the dam's spillways, was operational for the Spring migration of herring starting in 2014.





**Hathaway Pond Fish Ladder**

The second fish ladder, also in Rochester, is approximately two more miles upstream where the herring reach their destination and make the final transition from the Sippican River into Leonard's Pond (a 54 acre +/- man made pond) where they spawn. The original wooden Denil ladder built in 1993 by Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries using materials donated by Alewives Anonymous, Inc. was replaced in 2010 through a project led by the Town of Rochester, designed by Tibbetts Engineering Corp. and installed by Marine Tech Inc. with two ten foot sections of aluminum Alaskan steepspass ladder, also provided by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. After several changes and adjustments, the ladder was operational for the Spring migration of herring starting in 2013. It facilitates the herring's transition from the river into the pond, an elevation difference of about four feet.





**Leonard Pond Fish Ladder**



**Leonard Pond Alaskan Steep Pass Ladder, 2011**

Both rivers have a herring population comprised of the alewives and the blue back species, (collectively referred to as river herring). The majority of herring in each of these rivers is alewives. The alewives spawn in the quiet waters of the ponds whereas the blue backs spawn in the moving waters of the rivers.

Under ideal conditions, river herring have a life expectancy of ten to twelve years. They mature in three to four years and are then ready to make the migration to fresh water to spawn. River herring (unlike salmon that die after returning to their birth river and spawn) return to the ocean after spawning and have the potential to repeat the cycle six or eight times during their lifetime.

An adult herring is ten to twelve inches long. A female will lay approximately 50,000 to 100,000 eggs. Only two or three of these will mature to adults.

In 1883, the weirs on the Mattapoissett River produced an income of \$3,214.00 while the school costs were \$3,516.00 at that time. Wouldn't it be great if the sale of herring could support our current school costs?

Historical data from the Marion Town Reports provides the following harvest data:

1906 – 626,000 fish were caught

1907 – 465,000 fish were caught

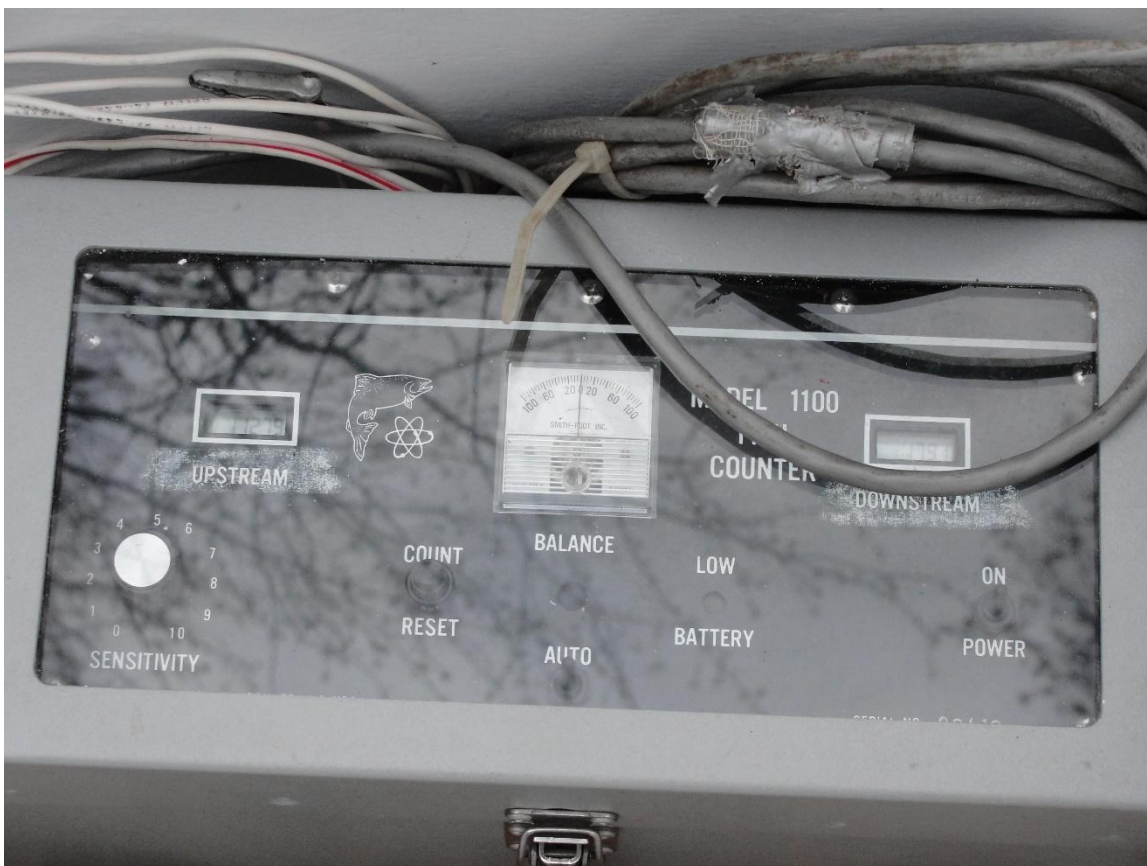
The quantity of fish harvested has declined steadily since the early part of the twentieth century.

Alewives Anonymous, Inc. has two Smith-Root model 1100 series electronic fish counters to tally the number of herring entering Snipatuit Pond and Leonard's Pond.





**Smith-Root Model 1100 Electronic Fish Counter**



**Smith-Root Model 1100 Electronic Fish Counter**





Wire Tunnel and Counting Tunnel ready for Installation, Snipatuit Pond

Month/Year: April/May 2011		ALEWIVES ANONYMOUS INC.						Page No. 3			
Location: SNIPATUIT POND, MATTAPOISETT RIVER		Electronic Fish Counting									
DAY / DATE	TIME	COUNT DOWN			COUNT UP			TEMP.		WEATHER	NOTES
		Reading	Amount	Total	Reading	Amount	Total	Water	Air		
THUR 21	17:40	10,800	38	10,838	1,750	21	1,771	56	50	PT CLOUDS HIGH WIND SCREEN CLOGGED	
FRI 22	05:45	10,830	30	10,860	1,754	4	1,758	50	32	CLEAR CALM	"
"	17:25	10,856	26	10,882	1,754	0	1,754	56	52	HIGH THIN CLOUDS LT WIND	WATER 811 FROM TOP
SAT 23	06:10	10,860	4	10,864	1,755	1	1,756	54	43	CLOUDY CALM	SAW 4 DEER ON THE WAY BY
"	16:45	10,862	2	10,864	1,755	0	1,755	52	50	CLOUDY RAIN LT WIND	
SUN 24	05:55	10,864	2	10,866	1,755	0	1,755	52	50	FOG / MIST CALM	SCREEN CLEAR
"	17:45	10,870	6	10,876	1,755	0	1,755	56	68	OVERCAST LT BREEZE	" "
MON 25	05:50	10,872	2	10,874	1,755	0	1,755	56	53	PT. CLOUDY LT BREEZE	
"	17:25	10,886	14	10,900	1,755	0	1,755	62	64	CLOUDY LT WIND	
TUE 26	05:50	10,918	32	10,950	1,758	3	1,761	58	53	OVERCAST / FOG CALM	
"	17:25	10,965	47	11,012	1,759	1	1,760	60	68	THIN CLOUDS SUNNY LT WIND	
WED 27	06:00	11,026	61	11,087	1,763	4	1,767	60	60	LT RAIN LT BREEZE	
"	17:25	11,064	38	11,102	1,763	0	1,763	62	64	OVERCAST LT BREEZE	
THUR 28	05:55	11,087	23	11,110	1,766	3	1,769	63	64	LT RAIN WINDY	FISH GOING BACK
"	17:25	11,130	43	11,173	1,770	4	1,774	64	64	LT RAIN WINDY	
FRI 29	07:00	11,143	13	11,156	1,772	2	1,774	62	56	FOG CALM	WATER 9" FISH LIFT
"	17:25	11,204	61	11,265	1,787	15	1,788	66	70	MISTY CLEAR LT WIND	
SAT 30	06:20	11,279	75	11,354	1,791	4	1,787		54	CLOUDY LT BREEZE	

Data Recording Sheet



Over the years, due to constant cleaning of the rivers and limiting the number of fish caught at the Mattapoissett Herring Weir, the number of herring entering the spawning areas had increased from 40,000 in 1989, the first year of electronic counting, to over 130,000 in 2000. The limits in place prior to the 2006 Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries moratorium were (1) not permitting any taking of herring at the Mattapoissett Herring Weir until at least 50,000 fish had entered Snipatuit Pond to spawn, (2) and then limiting the catch to 50 bushels per season and (3) catching on Saturdays only.

In 1996 Alewives Anonymous established an objective of 500,000 herring entering Snipatuit Pond to spawn within eight years (by 2004). It appeared that objective might be realized if the increases in the herring population continued as they were through 2000. Unfortunately, that goal was not reached as a series of steep declines occurred after 2000.

A moratorium against the taking or possession of herring from the Mattapoissett River and the Sippican River, as well as many other rivers in Massachusetts, has been in effect since 2006 per the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. The counting effort will provide the necessary information to manage a future harvest in the Mattapoissett River, however, continued improvements in the counts are needed to support a sustainable fishery plan and to justify an opening. Once the herring population reaches a point where a sustainable harvest plan can be formulated, filed with Division of Marine Fisheries, and approved, harvesting could be resumed.

The President of Alewives Anonymous, Inc. is:

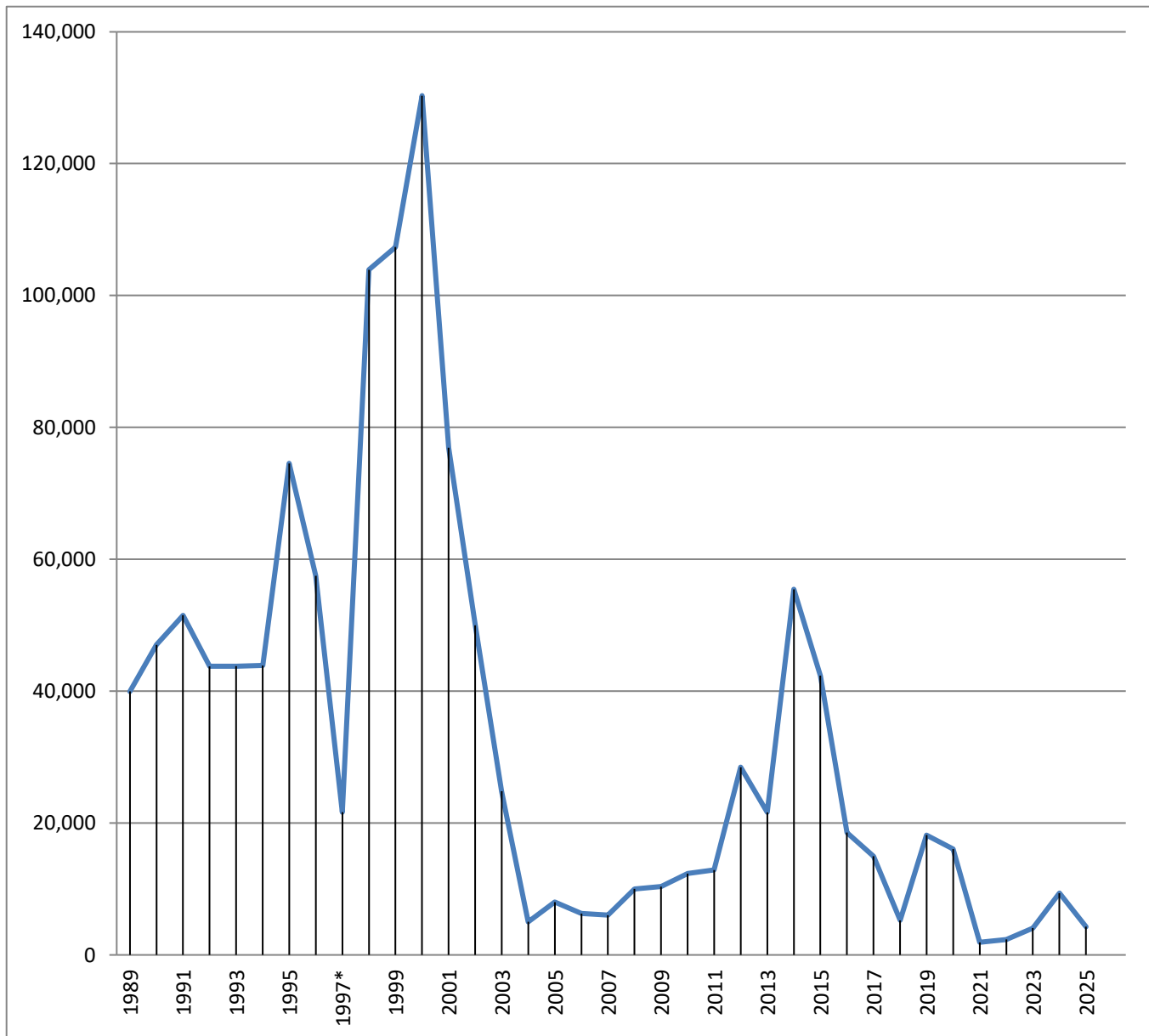
**Arthur F. Benner**  
**(508) 763-2024**  
**artbenner@comcast.net**

Feel free to contact President Benner for further information here:

**Alewives Anonymous, Inc.**  
**Post Office Box 42**  
**Rochester MA 02770**

A summary of the herring migrations year by year follows:

**Graph of the Mattapoissett River herring population.**



Notes: 1989 First year of electronic counting  
 1990 Dredging of river from Snipatuit Pond to Snipatuit Road  
 1997\* Incomplete count due to weather  
 1998 Herring ladder at Rte. 6 Mattapoissett completed  
 2006 First year of Massachusetts ban on catching herring



## Count History of the Mattapoissett River at Snipatuit Pond in Rochester

2025

Location: SNIPATUIT POND  
MATTAPoisETT RIVER



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Electronic Fish Counting

HISTORY:	COUNT DOWN		COUNT UP		NOTES
1988 Total	679		8,822		First year of electronic counting. Counter not in full season.
1989 Total	7,421		39,938		Counter not in full season.
1990 Total	13,884		47,023		Dredging done in Summer of 1990. Snipatuit Pond to Snipatuit Road
1991 Total	5,196		51,486		First full year with dredging completed
1992 Total	2,734		43,768		
1993 Total	3,637		43,788		
1994 Total	4,946		43,890		
1995 Total	8,021		74,533		4 years after dredging (other runs had a good year)
1996 Total	10,858		57,500		
1997 Total	2,145		21,624		Incomplete count. Severe weather most of count season, West bay open.
1998 Total	28,335		103,889		Herring ladder at Mattapoissett completed in June 1997
1999 Total	48,885		107,351		
2000 Total	40,580		130,296		
2001 Total	26,051		76,894		Incomplete count. Severe weather/water problems. West bay open
2002 Total	24,003		49,984		Counting equip, weather/water OK. Visual observation confirm decrease
2003 Total	1,882		24,795		Counting equip, weather/water OK. Visual observation confirm decrease
2004 Total	1,464		5,000		Recorded count; 2,645. Observation confirmed decrease. West bay open
2005 Total	1,105		8,000		Recorded count; 6,417 plus estimate Late install due to ice, cold weather
2006 Total	1,706		6,258		Several days est; low water and air in the tunnel. 1st year ban on catching
2007 Total	1,637		6,011		2nd year of ban on catching or possession of herring
2008 Total	3,862		9,987		Several days estimated due to electronic counter failure. 3rd year of ban.
2009 Total	3,042		10,356		4th year of ban. Ban on catching extended 3 more years through 2011.
2010 Total	7,223		12,319		Late install, rain events, West bay open thru April, est. 2,000 fish missed
2011 Total	2,825		12,857		6th year of ban. Counting conditions ideal.
2012 Total	10,313		28,447		7th year of ban. Very low water Mar. and Apr. Counting conditions good
2013 Total	3,688		21,613		8th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2014 Total	5,792		55,429		Late install, cold. 9th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2015 Total	3,036		42,332		Late install, cold. 10th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2016 Total	1,623		18,540		11th year of ban. Very few herring observed. Counting conditions good
2017 Total	1,297		14,938		12th year of ban. Not many herring observed. Counting conditions good
2018 Total	478		5,241		13th year of ban. Few herring observed. Counting conditions good
2019 Total	1,772		18,156		14th year of ban. A nice recovery from 2018 lows. Counting conditions good
2020 Total	1,404		16,049		15th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2021 Total	391		1,886		16th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2022 Total	782		2,332		17th year of ban. Counting conditions good
2023 Total	4,846		4,050		18th year of ban(yob). Counting conditions good
2024 Total	902		9,353		19 (yob). 3 weeks of very high water early in the season allowed some fish to bypass counter
2025 Total	520		4,254		20 (yob) May have been herring early before counter was installed. Counting condition good

## Count History of the Sippican River at Leonard's Pond

2025

Location: LEONARD'S POND  
SIPPICAN RIVER



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Electronic Fish Counting

SUMMARY:	COUNT DOWN	COUNT UP
April 2025 Totals	33	13
May 2025 Totals	1,683	1,524
June 2025 Totals	-	-
2025 TOTAL	1,716	1,537

HISTORY:	COUNT DOWN	COUNT UP	NOTES
1995 Total	306	326	1995 - 1998 were previously recorded in the wrong column. They have been corrected as of 1/29/05
1996 Total	465	680	
1997 Total	560	610	
1998 Total	876	671	
1999 Total	70	358	May 9, Counter Failure
2000 Total	609	957	June 17, Counter Failure
2001 Total	659	558	High water all counting season
2002 Total	258	359	High water all counting season
2003 Total			Counter not installed. Issues with the dam.
2004 Total			Counter not installed. Issues with the dam.
2005 Total			Counter not installed. Issues with the dam.
2006 Total	69	89	High water most of counting season
2007 - 2012			Counter not installed for various reasons; ladder and counter.
2013 Total	38	14	New Alaskan steep pass ladder. Counter repairs. Probably no herring in 13
2014 Total	26	31	Probably no herring for 2014
2015 Total			Counter did not function
2016 Total	556	1,126	Counter function questionable. Low water in June
2017 Total	389	115	Counter tested correctly. Some periods of high water. No herring seen in the river
2018 Total	146	96	Counter tested correctly. No herring seen in the river
2019 Total			Counter malfunction. Failed to display counts
2020 Total	726	813	Counting conditions good most of the season, very low water in June.
2021 Total	68	57	Counting conditions good most of the season, very low water in beginning of June.
2022 Total			Counter not installed
2023 Total	145	65	April 9 counts questionable, excluded from Summary/History totals. Down, 293; Up, 401
2024 Total	34	45	All daily counts, both down and up, are very low. None are believed to be herring.
2025 Total	1,716	1,537	Most counts are very low, unlikely herring. May 6 & 25 counts are questionable