



Spring newsletter, May 2026

Zero is a Number, Too by *Jen Goebel, OPET President*

If you've been to Trunk River recently, you've probably seen people either sitting by the river or looking over the bridge for river herring. We are the counters, the crazy, dedicated people who sign up to cover counting shifts daily in April and May from 7 am to 9 pm as a citizen-science effort to monitor the health of our herring run. We often return home, cold and windblown, to sadly enter "zero" into the data spreadsheet, but occasionally we get rewarded with a fish or two, and sometimes we hit the jackpot with hundreds of alewives frenetically swimming upstream! While disappointing, the zero counts are still important data to the fisheries biologists who estimate the sizes of all of the herring runs on Cape Cod each year.

The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (Mass DMF) manages river herring counts at 18 sites on Cape Cod. Trunk River was added to this state-wide effort in 2022. The Association to Preserve Cape Cod (APCC) hosts a web-based dashboard that shows the data from each of the runs. The Trunk River run is a bit different from many others in that the fish are most likely to run after dark, with the majority of herring being counted between 8 and 9 pm. This may be due to the shallow, exposed nature of the run, with the fish using the cover of night as protection. Unfortunately, Mass DMF currently limits counts to between 7 am and 9 pm. We suspect our counts would be higher if we added later hours, but that is not currently in the protocol. In fact, this year, Mass DMF extended the hours from 7 pm to 9 pm specifically for our run.

The number of fish counted, and therefore the run estimates, have varied since Mass DMF started using our data, with a low estimate of about 13,000 in 2022, and a high of around 57,000 in 2024. Last year, 2025, was a low year, with an estimate of a little over 26,000. The largest runs on Cape Cod can number over 150,000 fish. What we may lack in numbers, we make up in volunteer hours! We have the most consistent counters, averaging nine 10-minute counts a day, and have done more than 400 counts so far this year, more than any other site.



APCC Restoration Ecologist Mike Palmer and OPET herring count coordinator Matt O'Connor install a gauge to measure water temperature at Trunk River.



Matt O'Connor, Brad Chase, Mass Division of Marine Fisheries, and David McGlinchey, Massachusetts Rivers Alliance, discuss herring and Phragmites control on the banks of Trunk River. Photos: Chris Brothers.

Seeing these sturdy little fish struggle through the narrow and shallow passage, sometimes getting stranded on the rocky sides but flipping themselves back into the water, and continuing on is a lesson in resilience. Some are unlucky, and end up in the beaks of hungry gulls or Ospreys, but many of them make it each year, with the females producing 60,000 to 100,000 eggs each season. Only two or three in 80,000 will make it back to the ocean, where they will grow until it's time for them to return to spawn. Alewives, which is the type of river herring we have in Oyster Pond, can live to about nine years old and spawn multiple times.

While our run is relatively healthy, the recent encroachment of the common reed, Phragmites, into the river and along its banks may be reducing the depth of the river, and making the journey more difficult. We recently met with Mass DMF's Brad Chase and Mass Rivers Alliance's David McGlinchey to develop a management plan for Trunk River, including removing, or at least containing, this invasive plant from the river and Oyster Pond. Thank you for supporting these efforts.



STEAM Fair Award Winner

Falmouth High School student Joaquim Verslycke received the OPET sponsored award at the Falmouth Public Schools 48th annual STEAM Fair in March for his project entitled, “Why Do We Conserve? A Quantitative Analysis of Conserved Forest Land.” Joaquim measured carbon sequestration rates in a 48 acre woodland in Falmouth demonstrating significant conservation benefits from protecting a small forest parcel. Joaquim hopes to continue this work with mentoring from scientists at the Woodwell Climate Research Center.

Joaquim Verslycke. Photo: Patricia Pinto da Silva.

Species Spotlight: American Herring Gull by Chris Brothers, Administrator

The word “gull” has two origins. The first: a 15th century Celtic word “gwylan” referring to a shorebird is probably the source for the birds we today call gulls. But the other etymology is more fun: from the Middle English “golle” meaning “gullet” or “swallow,” hence the idea “gullible” as someone who will swallow (or believe) anything. That’s certainly true of this opportunistic gull which will eat almost anything from herring to larger fish, crabs, clams and other shellfish that they drop on to rocks, blacktop, and unfortunately sometimes cars to crack open, to eggs, chicks, and even adults of other birds, insects, small mammals, and of course French fries!



A wind-blown Herring Gull waits for a herring meal at Trunk River. Photo: Chris Brothers.

Herring Gulls are a four cycle bird, meaning it takes them four years to reach adulthood and obtain their breeding plumage, gray wings and snowy white heads and chests. As juvenile birds, they are a mottled brown. Gulls often loaf about (that is actually the scientific term!) on the beach in mixed flocks of different species and ages and can be a challenge to identify. Herring Gulls can be picked out by their pinkish legs at all ages, and by the red spot on their yellow beak as adults. This spot is a target at which young birds instinctually peck to encourage their parents to regurgitate food. With two to three months of practice before leaving the shallow nest, the one to three chicks get better and better at hitting this target. Dutch scientist Nikolaas Tinbergen decoded this behavior, described in his book *The Herring Gull's World*. His research on Herring Gulls led to the field of ethology, the study of animal behavior, and earned him a Nobel Prize in 1973.

In the 1800s, many gull species declined in population as they and their eggs were hunted for food or for the millinery trade, when it was fashionable for women to wear plumes and even whole birds on their hats. In the mid-20th century, fueled by the food we disposed of in open garbage dumps, some gull populations rapidly increased to the point where they threatened other island nesting birds, such as terns and plovers. With the closing of the these dumps, many gull populations decreased to more historically appropriate levels, but then went in to a steep decline. According to the American Breeding Bird Survey, Herring Gulls have decreased 82% since the late 1960s. Rising sea levels from climate change, plastic entanglement, overfishing and changes in fishing practices, oil spills, pesticides, and disease have all contributed to this decline. Herring Gulls are now listed as Common Birds in Steep Decline.

THANK YOU FOR RENEWING YOUR MEMBERSHIP NOW Renewing your membership allows OPET to continue our work to protect Oyster Pond and its watershed. It is through your generosity that we are able to continue to monitor, maintain, and advocate for Oyster Pond, Trunk River, and our nearly 30 acres of conservation land and hiking trails. To renew, please use the enclosed envelope or go to www.opet.org.

Sincerely,

Jen Goebel, President

Chris Brothers, Administrator