

Checkup for hatchery fish



IN THE FIELD
Jennifer Smith

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Armed with nets, rubber boots and electrified wands that pack a 300-volt wallop, a team from the state Department of Environmental Conservation waded into the Connetquot River on a recent summer day to check up on the fish.

It had been seven months since the historic fish hatchery here at the Oakdale state park was shut down because of a persistent virus in trout. The DEC feared that the disease — infectious pancreatic necrosis, or IPN — found in the hatchery could spread to wild fish in other Long Island streams.

“We’re coming back to see if the disease is still in the river, and assist [state] parks in developing a management plan to allow them to reopen their hatchery,” said Charles Guthrie, the DEC’s regional freshwater fisheries manager.

To do that, Guthrie employed a technique known as electrofishing: shocking fish with an electrical charge to stun them so they can be collected and counted.

The seven-person team unloaded their equipment by the horse trail at Collins Crossing, about a half-mile below Veterans Memorial Highway. A generator on a small floating barge supplied the juice. DEC wildlife technician Erik Latremore pulled the barge while three biologists in waders “shocked” the



PHOTO BY ED BETZ

New York State DEC workers collect fish samples from the Connetquot River in Oakdale. Trout in the river were hit by a virus in 2006. The DEC is checking to see if the disease is still in the water.

knee-deep water with electrodes tethered by retractable cords. Rubber boots and gloves protected workers from the charge.

Behind those holding the wands, other workers followed with nets, slinging small trout, pickerel and mud minnows into a holding tank on the barge.

Green skeins of water starwort, a native plant, waved in the current and clung to the team member’s waders. “Good fish habitat,” noted aquatic biologist Heidi O’Riordan.

The Connetquot has been

stocked with sport fish since the 19th century. The survey will help the DEC determine how many more fish the river can support in the future. Samples from trout also will tell scientists whether the virus persists in waters above the hatchery.

“The goal is to know clearly, and with as much certainty as possible, what we need to do to be able to raise fish disease-free,” said John Kowalchuk, deputy regional director for Long Island state parks.

First detected at the hatch-

ery in late 2006, the virus can kill young fish but poses no known risk to humans. IPN has the potential to infect wild species because it lingers dormant for years in fish who survive it.

For now, the Connetquot River is being stocked with healthy adult trout from the Cold Spring Harbor fish hatchery, mostly before special weekend fishing events. “We’ve cut back,” on the number of fish being stocked, Kowalchuk said. “We want to reduce the density of the popula-

tion in the stream” because the disease spreads more quickly among fish in proximity.

Upstream from the hatchery, the generator rumbled. Guthrie, O’Riordan and Philip Hulbert, the DEC’s superintendent of fish culture, traced their wands through the shallows in search of fish. The stunned specimens were placed in buckets of water onshore. By the end, the team would pluck more than 200 fish from about 900 feet of river upstream from the hatchery, as well as from stretches below more favored by fishermen.

“This is your classic Long Island trout stream that hasn’t been monkeyed with too much,” said Guthrie. A cool 57 degrees, the groundwater-fed river flowed clear over rotting logs, past mossy, tufted islands and stands of sweet pepperbush and high bush blueberry.

Most of the day’s catch was tossed back in the river after counting. But the trout, mostly four to seven inches long, were put on ice and sent to an upstate laboratory for tests.

Results are expected back this month. A big concern is whether the virus persists above the hatchery, whose ponds are fed by the river.

“If the fish above the hatchery are diseased, the disease is going to go right into the hatchery,” Guthrie said. “What we’re hoping is that the population’s not dense enough to maintain the disease up here.”

Watch electrofishing at a Long Island state park
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THE MONTH OF AUGUST

You can see

This month, many a blue crab will appear in pots lifted from our estuarine waters, rudely lifted from their hurly-burly lives under the water’s surface. Blue crabs are common from Cape Cod to the Caribbean. Locally, they live all along the South Shore — at Captree State Park and Tanner Park in Copiague and at the public docks operated by Babylon Town and in West Sayville and Patchogue. Crabs live one to three years.

— JOE HABERSTROH

Female crabs mate just once in their lives, according to the Blue Crab Archives, a nonprofit Web site. Depending on the age of the crab, it will eat plankton, tiny invertebrates in the sand, fish, plants, mollusks and other blue crabs. As adults, crabs can be eaten by striped bass, sharks, turtles and wading birds. If cornered, crabs can give up a claw or leg to survive and regenerate the limb. Males have blue claws. Females do, too, but the tips are red.

Out and about

■ **MANOR MEANDER.** 9 a.m. Aug. 7. A 4-mile walk from the Trails Information Center in Manorville (quarter-mile north of LIE Exit 70) to Wading River-Manor Rd. and back. Free. Information, Vincent, 631-209-0030.

■ **KEEP UP AT JONES.** 10 a.m. Aug. 8. Walk on boardwalk, then lunch. Free. Use Field 4, walk through tunnel, meet at flagpole near concession area. \$8 parking fee per car. Informa-

tion, Terrie, 631-885-4543.

■ **SEE VIEWS.** 9 a.m. Aug. 12, at Point Woods, 4½ miles of trails to the bluffs overlooking the Atlantic. Free. Meet on Camp Hero Road, a right turn off Route 27 in Montauk, about a mile east of Deep Hollow Ranch. Information, Larry Raymond, 631-668-3432

■ **GONE TO RUIN.** 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Aug. 16, an “Explore the Ruins” walk exploring history of the Muttontown Preserve, including ruins of an estate once owned by King Zog of Albania.

Preserve is on Muttontown Lane, south of Route 25A, in East Norwich. Enrollment limited, \$5, to preregister, Information, 516-571-8500.

■ **NINE MILES.** 7:45 a.m. Aug. 30. A 9-mile hike from Smithtown Landing along the Nissequogue River to beaches and bluffs of Sunken Meadow, and back. Free. Meet at the Smithtown Landing Golf Course, 495 Landing Ave.; meet at the river side of lot. Information, Shari, 516-721-0223.

— LAURA MANN