CONSERVATION

CONNECTICUT FISH AND WILDLIFE

I'm Not Dead Yet

The last hurrah for wild Connecticut River–strain Atlantic salmon.

By Steve Culton

Rowan Lytle caught what was believed to be the last wild Connecticut River Atlantic salmon in 2014 (bottom), but last fall, biologists found five more wild fish and redds in the Farmington branch (top).

CHRISTIAN LYTLE

Rowan Lytle couldn't believe his luck.

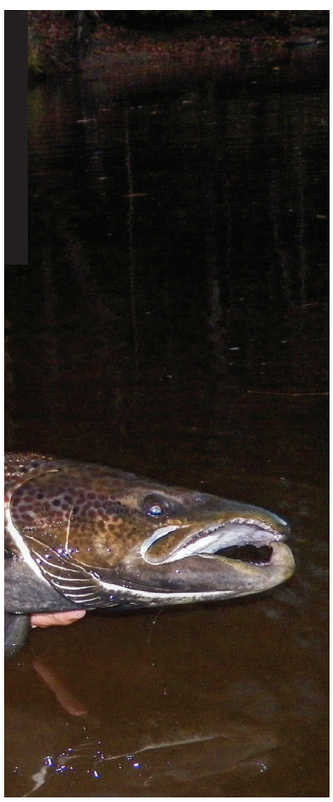
It was late October 2014. He was fishing with his father on the upper reaches of Connecticut's Salmon River, a tributary of the Connecticut River. Lytle was excited to see his dry caddis pattern slip beneath the surface, although he recalls, "There was nothing remarkable about the rise. He sipped it ever so gently."

After the fish's first leap, Lytle assumed he had hooked a trophy brown trout. After the second, he suspected it might be something infinitely more wondrous. By the third, he knew he had won the Salmonidae lottery.

His prize was a kype-jawed male Atlantic salmon well over 30 inches long. The fish was likely stocked as a fry. It had survived the long odds of migration, traveling down the Salmon and Connecticut Rivers, making its way through the treacherous mixer of Long Island Sound, into the wilds of the North Atlantic, and back again.

Now it was the salmon's turn to get lucky. Lytle's father pointed its nose into the current, and both anglers watched it swim off into the inky depths.

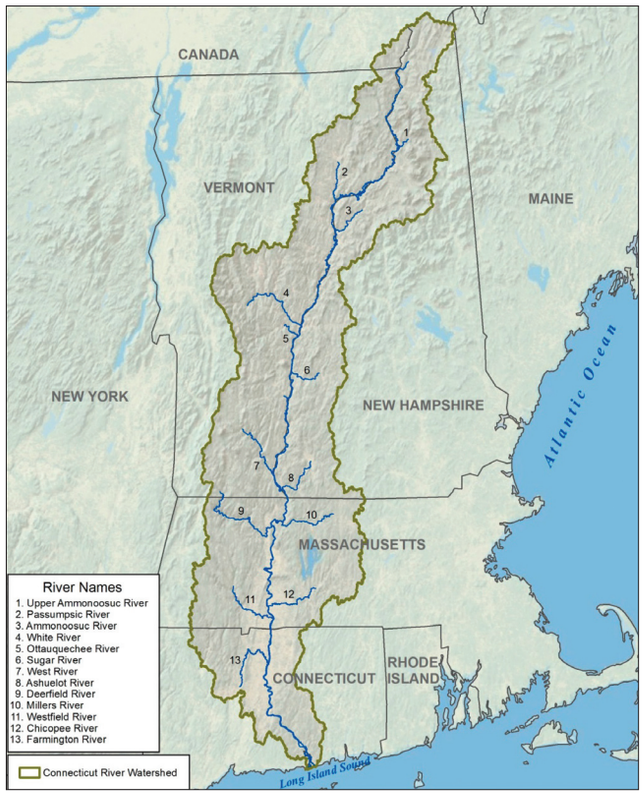
That's about as happy an ending as can be written for that fish. In 2014, only one other Atlantic salmon, a male, was observed passing through the Salmon River's Leesville Dam fishway. Without a female to spawn with, it became, like Lytle's fish, a lonely statistical aberration—and a footnote to a failed restoration project.



A Return from Extinction?

"So, you know that this is not a great sign that salmon are coming back. It's actually their last gasp," said Steve Gephard, Supervising Fisheries Biologist for the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP). Gephard was referring to the discovery of Atlantic salmon redds in the Farmington River, another Connecticut tributary, in the fall of 2015.

It was the first documented Atlantic salmon spawning event on the Farmington in hundreds of years. The news sent an electric buzz through the conservation and fishing communities. But to place it in context, it's necessary to examine what led to the demise of Connecticut River Atlantic salmon—as well as the ambitious attempt by federal and state governments—to restore wild fish to their natal waters.



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Though various state and federal agencies attempted to reestablish wild Atlantic salmon (bottom) in the Connecticut River system (top) over 35 years, returning numbers were never strong.

No single event "did in" Connecticut River Atlantic salmon. But it surely started with the thousands of dams built in colonial times along the state's namesake waterway and tributaries. Lethal industrial pollution followed. By the early 1800s, southern New England's once prodigious salmon runs had vanished.

Fast-forward to 1965. The Anadromous Fish Conservation Act is passed, and federal and state governments join forces in an effort to reestablish a sustainable population of Connecticut River Atlantic salmon. The first stocked fry to reappear

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as an adult shows up in 1974. In 1981, 529 fish return. But by the early 1990s, the numbers have sunk to discouragingly low levels. No one can pinpoint the reasons, but experts cite the usual suspects: warming oceans, acidic water, desalinization from melting ice caps, precipitous declines in food biomass, too many predators. Tropical Storm Irene delivers the coup de grâce in 2011 when she wipes out the project's prime incubator, the White River National Fish Hatchery in Bethel, Vermont. In 2012, the federal government pulls the plug on the project.

Which brings us to the heady—or not, depending on whom you talk to—events of the fall of 2015. Gephard points out that the only reason the spawning took place is because the salmon—three males and two females—were allowed to pass through the Rainbow Dam fishway in Windsor, Connecticut.

"For the last 35 years, as the adults were coming back from the ocean, we'd capture them at fish ladders so we could spawn them. From a genetics point of view, that's how we built up this special Connecticut River strain," Gephard said.

The DEEP then delivered their precious cargo to the Richard Cronin National Salmon Station in Sunderland, Massachusetts. After spawning, any survivors would be reconditioned, and turned into breeders.

Then came the federal budget cuts, and the Cronin facility was no longer in the Atlantic salmon business. The situation left the DEEP with no other practical option than to let nature take its course.

"Starting in 2014, the fish would come through the Rainbow fishway. We'd count them, and if we could catch them, we'd tag and release them," says Gephard. "In 2014, we passed some fish through Rainbow and did a redd survey and didn't find anything. We just assumed that the fish we passed didn't survive or didn't find each other. In 2015, we passed these five fish. We went looking for them again and found their redds. Our reaction was, 'Isn't this cool, these fish spawned.' But it doesn't mean anything for the future."

Gephard elaborates. "If you saw an albino deer, you'd say, 'That's really cool.' But that doesn't mean the woods are going to be taken over by albino deer. I put the salmon spawning in that category. It's a naturalistic observation that's pretty cool, but it has no bearing on public policy or the fate of Atlantic salmon in the Connecticut River basin."

TOP: NPS / BOTTOM: CONNECTICUT DEEP

In the fall of 2015, just a few years after the last stocking of Atlantic salmon in the Connecticut River, five wild fish (left) passed through the Rainbow Dam fishway and migrated up the Farmington River (top)

Class Reunion

You still have a decent chance of catching an Atlantic salmon in Connecticut. It's just that it's going to be well under a foot long or a former hatchery-penned broodstock fish. I hook juvenile salmon in the Trout Management Area of the Farmington River all the time. Like their parents, they're suckers for a soft-hackled fly swung on a greased line. Those fish are stocked as fry, part of the DEEP's legacy program.

"We still want to maintain Atlantic salmon in certain areas of the state," explains Gephard. For anglers in search of a bigger salmon experience, the state stocks the Naugatuck and Shetucket Rivers with broodstock salmon each fall. While those fish are fun to catch, they arguably lack the romance and majesty associated with hooking a wild adult salmon fresh from the sea.

Ultimately, the Connecticut River Atlantic salmon restoration program was terminated for two reasons: dismal ocean survival rates and federal budget cuts. Both factors remain unchanged. The salmon returning in 2017 will be from the last substantial group of fry that was stocked as part of the program.

So, what of the wild Farmington River Atlantic salmon class of 2016? Gephard says, "If those fry do come back as adults, they'll do so in 2020. There were two females that spawned; each may put out seven thousand eggs. But you'd be lucky if a quarter of those survived to fry."

Neal Hagstrom, another DEEP fisheries biologist, offers a further cautionary note: "It's a numbers game. And they don't have numbers on their side."

Nonetheless, says Hagstrom, "Hopefully, they've moved on to bigger and better things."

Steve Culton is an outdoor writer, guide, speaker, and fly tier. You can see more of his work at www.currentseams.com.