



## Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

## Alewife *Alosa pseudoharengus*

State Status: **None**  
Federal Status: **None**

**SPECIES DESCRIPTION:** The Alewife is a member of the herring family, very similar in appearance to the Blueback Herring, but the diameter of an Alewife's eye is greater than the length of the snout, and Alewives have a pale peritoneum with small spots that is never dusky to black. The back and upper sides tend to be greenish. Adults typically range from 10 to 12 inches in length. Young-of-the-year return to the sea before they are 4 inches long. Alewives are anadromous; they spend most of their adult life in coastal marine waters and return to freshwaters to spawn. During their spring spawning runs, schools of Alewives swim upstream, spawn numerous times over several days, and swim downstream, often passing other schools on their way up to the spawning grounds. Spawning occurs in sluggish backwaters of rivers and in ponds. Although the annual spawning migrations are physiologically stressful, most adults survive and are able to repeat the process in subsequent years. After hatching, juveniles form large schools and slowly work their way downstream to the sea. In freshwater, young Alewives feed primarily on zooplankton; after reaching marine waters, Alewives feed on zooplankton, small fishes, and crustaceans. They become sexually mature after three years and frequently live to nine years.

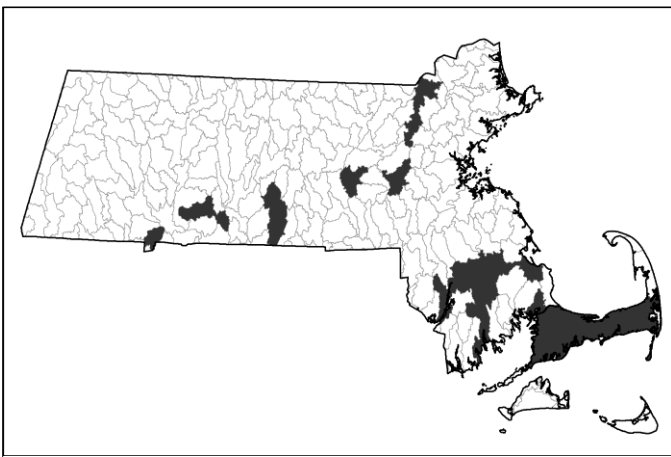
**DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE:** Alewives are now found in most coastal rivers in Massachusetts. Colonial accounts mention their extreme abundance. Alewives are still common in some areas, but they have been eliminated or reduced in others. Entirely landlocked populations have been established through introductions in some inland waters, including Congamond, Singletary, and Webster lakes, and South Pond, Brookfield.

**HABITAT DESCRIPTION:** Alewives spawn in a wide range of lentic or slow-moving lotic aquatic environments. Anadromous populations require relatively easy access to the ponds in which they spawn.

**THREATS:** Like other river herrings, Alewife populations have been reduced or eliminated in some areas by damming, pollution, and development. Fishways, in place on many Alewife streams for hundreds of years, must continue to be maintained. Alewives are harvested commercially while at sea, and are also dipnetted during their spawning runs under town permits in Massachusetts; hence over-fishing must always remain a concern.

### REFERENCE:

This species description was adapted, with permission, from: Karsten E. Hartel, David B. Halliwell, and Alan E. Launer. 2002. *Inland Fishes of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.



Data from DFW Fisheries Surveys and Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology

Updated 2015

*A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan*

**Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife**

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