

Yeazie trap count for Atlantic salmon at an impressive 1,600

Although spring long, many avid anglers and conservationists have kept their regular vigils — either in person or via the Internet — as an important number has steadily risen.

Some sit for a couple hours a day at the Yeazie Salmon Club, playing cribbage and waiting for a state fisheries official to post the newest number on the tote board atop the Yeazie Dam.

Others go to the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission Web site, or to the site operated by Yeazie Fly shop owner Gay-land Hatchey, to get the same information.

That magic number, you may have already guessed, is the “trap count,” which announces exactly how many Atlantic

salmon have returned to the fish trap at the Yeazie Dam. And this morning I’m happy to report that the number is still sky-high, and continues to rise.



JOHN HOLYOKE

As of Friday afternoon, a few more than 1,600 fish had returned. (The exact number wasn’t readily available, as biologists were still trying to figure out if a minor counting error had occurred.) It really doesn’t matter.

Whether we’ve had 1,602 or 1,605 fish return to the Penobscot River since the trap was opened in mid-May, the total is

still impressive.

How impressive? Just ask biologist Oliver Cox, who works for the Bureau of Sea-Run Fisheries & Habitat

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BIOLOGIST NORM DUBE

(formerly the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission).

“This is the fastest we’ve gotten to 1,600 since the trap was installed at Yeazie,” Cox said on Friday.

That trap was activated in

1978. Cox and colleague Norm Dube said.

Dube and Cox were quick to point out that even though the Penobscot has enjoyed a fantastic early run of fish, past experience has shown that a salmon run can shut down quickly.

“We’re still at that point where we don’t know how good the total run will be,” Dube said. “If we get a week of this kind of hot weather they might just drop right off the face of the earth.”

Water can warm up to the point that salmon don’t consider it particularly attractive, and the number of fish that are out in the gulf, considering a run upstream may have dwindled.

“I think what we can say is that to this point of the season,

we’ve had a great run,” Cox said. “What tomorrow brings, we can’t say for sure. We hope for more of the same. But to predict the end of the run is a difficult thing. There’s been some years when it’s started out really nice and then it’s just crashed and gone flat. It’s going to depend on water temperatures and a lot of things.”

Still, there have been years when the run has been sustained well into the first month of summer, and Cox said biologists aren’t sure whether that will be the case this year or not, as it’s not possible to know when the peak of the run is taking place until after the entire run is over.

Consider 1986, for instance. Dube and Cox point at 1986 as the top year of the Yeazie trap era, as a total of 4,137 salmon returned to the trap. In addition, anglers were allowed to catch and kill salmon that year, and when you add in those fish that were taken home by fishermen, a total of 4,529 fish are listed as having returned to the river.

In 1986, the 1,600th salmon didn’t return to the Yeazie Dam until July 1, but during early July nearly 100 fish were taken from the trap on some days.

According to Hatchey’s Web site, on June 27 a year ago, just 489 salmon had returned to the Yeazie trap. Last year fewer than 1,000 salmon returned to the trap during the seasons when it is tended.

Dube said a possible reason for this year’s returning fish might be a stocking in smolts that took place two years ago.

Those young salmon — about 160,000 to 170,000 of them — were not stocked as far upstream as they had been in past years.

“Probably a third of the [500,000 to 550,000] fish were stocked in Bradley just below the Great Works Dam, so they only had to go over the Yeazie Dam before they hit the estuary,” Dube said. “It depends on the flow in the spring when the smolts are moving out, but that spring we had sustained flows that weren’t terribly high going over the dams, allowing some good emigration.”

This year, all of the brood stock needed at Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery were transferred to the Orland facility by June 16, and most fish that arrive at the Yeazie Dam now are being loaded into trucks and relocated up the Penobscot.

“We bring them above Great Works [Dam] and Milford [Dam], and we put them in up in Costigan,” Dube said.

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