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Ladder gives migratory fish boost into Hards Lake

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[Long Island](#)'s first permanent fish ladder made its official debut yesterday at Southaven County Park in Brookhaven, where a dam has long prevented migratory fish from swimming up the Carmans River to spawn.

Installed just north of Sunrise Highway, the ladder is a gently sloping metal chute that slows the flow of water, allowing alewives and other fish to swim up into Hards Lake from the river below. It took nearly seven years and almost \$200,000 to complete the project, a collaborative effort by the state transportation and environmental conservation departments, sportfishing and environmental conservation groups and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

As local and state officials made speeches, the potential travelers swam quietly near the foot of the 6-foot-high dam. The fish passage is designed so that alewives enter the chute, turn right and swim up a 10-foot section to a landing. They then make a switchback turn and head up the final, 20-foot section.

Alewives spawn in fresh water in early spring, then move out into oceans and estuaries to live their adult lives. Once plentiful, these river herring have declined due to overfishing, worsening water quality and the blockage of their spawning grounds by dams, roads and other development. They have been declared a species of special concern by the National Marine Fisheries Service, and coastal fisheries managers are weighing whether to ban their harvest altogether.

Alewives serve as food for ospreys and the big predator fish beloved by anglers, including tuna and striped bass. "If we can restore the alewife populations, there is real hope for all the other fish in the environment," said DEC regional fisheries manager Charles Guthrie.

The Carmans River has the biggest and most consistent alewife run on Long Island. Thousands gather each year to spawn as best they can in the brackish waters of the lower tidal reaches, said Jake Kritzer, a marine ecologist and fisheries biologist with the Environmental Defense Fund.

The gentle waters of Hards Lake could give the population a much-needed boost.

"My guess is if you get them upstream, you could be looking at tens of thousands in the next five or six years," Kritzer said.

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