



Herring sheriffs of Buzzard's Bay

*Story and photos
by Deborah Stone*

It's a dream job for local herring lovers, but a smooth touch is required, dealing with finicky fishermen

Most people who stop by the herring run on the Agawam River in Wareham, Massachusetts are there for bait. To hear some fishermen tell it, striped bass turn up their noses at anything less than a good lively herring. It's worth all the hassle, they say, of getting a permit and standing in line for an hour or more on the few days in April and May when this town's designated Herring Agents dole out eight or twelve fish to a customer.

Because I am neither fisherman nor herring lover, I found myself at the herring run at 6:45 on a Saturday morning for an entirely different reason. I was curious about what it means to hold such an unlikely town office as Herring Agent and

what kind of person is drawn to the job.

When I arrived, a line of about fifty buckets had already formed in front of the agents' gray-shingled shed. The fishermen, and a few women and kids, were milling around the sandy parking area just off Cranberry Highway. Herring agents Jack Dixon and George Funnell were quietly mixing with the crowd, answering questions and making small talk. The parking lot was full, mostly with pickups with various gerry-rigged "live wells" designed to keep the herring in good shape en route to a fishing spot. One man explained that when he gets to his fishing spot, he submerges the herring in a laundry basket, but I had the feeling that there

are as many systems for keeping the herring alive as there are fishermen.

A little before seven, Dixon and Funnell pulled up their waders, gathered a couple of nets, and opened the trap door to the stair case that descends from the tiny shed to the cement platform beside the stream. The crowd coalesced into a line of blue denim legs beside white plastic buckets. A few people – myself included – gathered at the chain link fence beside the stream to get a close-up view of the operation.

Working in well-practiced tandem, Dixon and Funnell set mesh gates and lowered a wire mesh holding pen into the wide pool where the stream flattens out at the bottom of a steep drop. The main fish ladder – man-made to enable fish to

Jack Dixon and George Funnell, shown at left, preside over the allotment of river herring at the fish ladder shown at right on the Agawam River in Wareham, Mass.

swim upstream to their spawning grounds – runs through a tunnel beside the dam. When enough fish have collected in the pool, Dixon and Funnell wade right in, scooping up herring with long-handled nets and placing them in the pen.

Then Funnell, the spring chicken of the pair at 64, began an hour of running up and down the stairs, carrying empty pails to senior statesman Dixon, age 76, who dipped each bucket enough to fill it about half way. There was nothing imprecise about it, however. Dixon doled out exactly 12 fish per pail, 12 being the number the agents had deemed appropriate for the volume of that day's run. Funnell ran the laden buckets upstairs to their owners, punched the permit of the next person in line, and ran two more buckets back down to Dixon. So it went for an hour. By 8 a.m. they had given out 55 dozen fish on that first draw of the day.



At last, the herring agents got a break until the next draw at eleven. "This run has been in operation since 1632," Dixon told me, pointing to a sign with historical facts and dates. "We didn't work the first two years," he added, deadpan.

Actually, he was only a few hundred years off, for Dixon had worked as a fisheries manager for the state of Massachusetts for 35 years before Wareham's town manager asked him if he wanted to be Herring Agent. That was in 2000. Dixon knew he couldn't do the job alone, so he asked Funnell to join him.

Curious about the division of

responsibilities, I asked if one is the official agent or whether they consider themselves to be co-agents. "Neither one's boss, we're equal bosses," Dixon replied. "He wantin' to do something I don't want to do – fine, he can do it."

I was beginning to understand how these men do this job which I've been told is very delicate. It's called humor.

Before I immersed myself in southeast Massachusetts herring ways, I had thought everybody and his kid brother would be clamoring for the job, but Wareham Selectman Mary Jane Pillsbury set me straight.

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Herring runs increasingly closed or restricted

Coastal herring fisheries, a human tradition in the Northeast for centuries, have come under increasing pressure to limit or even eliminate the taking of fish because of decreasing size of spring herring runs in recent years.

Connecticut has outlawed the taking of migrating herring from any salt or fresh water source for the past couple of years and that ban is not likely to change any time soon, according to Steve Gebhard, a Connecticut fisheries biologist. Other states, including Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New York are "increasingly concerned" about diminished herring runs and may resort to closing the fishery, according to Gebhard.

"I can't explain the reason for it, although some

people theorize that it may be related to the resurgence of striped bass, but that may be an oversimplification of a complex situation," said Gebhard.

There are approximately 100 different herring runs in Massachusetts, and many of them limit the amount of herring that can be taken through the use of local laws and designated herring agents, such as the two described in this story.

The Cape Cod town of Harwich has closed its local herring run on the Herring River until 2006 because of concerns about the diminished numbers of fish observed each spring. Local officials said that in addition to larger biological causes, fresh water bodies which are traditional homes for spawning herring have suffered from low water levels due to several years of dry conditions. Almost every town on Cape Cod has at least one tidal stream that supports a herring run.

She told me that the town had a hard time keeping people in the job until Dixon and Funnell took over. Basically, the herring agent's job is to protect the herring population by limiting the annual take. That means the agent often finds himself in the position of saying No. That

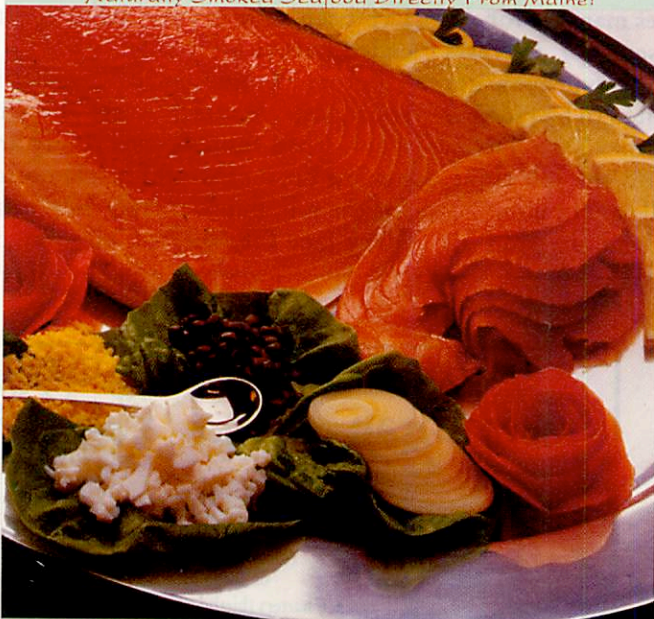
is, 'No, you can't have more than however-many we deem prudent to give out today.' Or, 'No, you may not catch your own, you have to let us fill your bucket.' Such control doesn't go down easily in a place where generations of kids grew up learning to catch herring with nets

or, sometimes, with their bare hands. Moreover, part of the agent's job is to go after poachers.

Knowing fish ways is not enough to be a good Herring Agent. This is a job for someone with people skills. As if to demonstrate the point, even as we were talking, a



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man plunked down his bucket right in front of the shed, obviously staking his spot at the head of the line for the 11 a.m. draw. "You can't leave your bucket here and go away," Dixon told him sternly. But he said it with a twinkle and a smile that conveyed something like, "I know you're a good guy, but just put up with these rules, OK?" The man took his bucket and a short while later returned. He placed his bucket, then third or fourth in line, and handed a box of donuts to the agents with a big smile. Instead of hard feelings, the incident produced a warm friendly rapport.

"Guys used to drop off their buckets at 12:30 in the morning and come back after work," explained Funnell. "One guy got kinda belligerent when Jack took his bucket out of line, so we made a new rule: You gotta stay here if you put your buckets here." He pointed to an official-looking metal sign on the front of the shed: "All buckets left in line must be attended."



Signs like this one, at the herring run in Bourne,, are becoming increasingly significant along the New England coast.

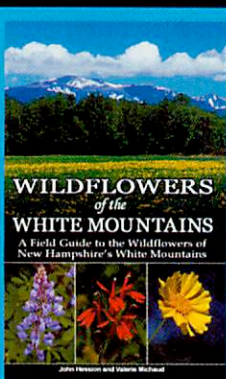
Photos: Elizabeth Hoan. Zilnaah@comcast.net

The "no unattended buckets" rule is a good example of the Herring Agents' discretion. The basic regulations for herring runs are set by the state and by the towns, but local Herring Agents have authority to make the rules of day-to-day operation. They decide everything from how best to catch the herring to how many fish they'll give out each

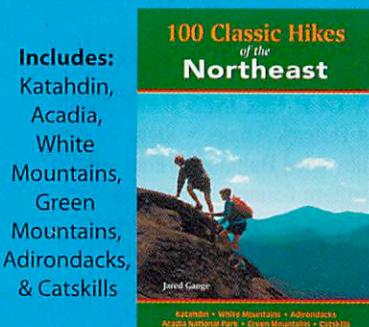
day. They devise ways to keep Wareham's five separate herring runs unobstructed, just as they discuss how to how to keep the human enthusiasts from getting unruly in the face of what many of them consider to be pesky regulations.

The wire mesh holding pen, for example, was Dixon's innovation. Previous agents chased the herring

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Uncountable numbers of herring can often be observed at active fish runs like this one at the head of the Santuit River on Cape Cod.



Photos: Lucy LaCasse, left, and Rolph Baker, right

around with nets, Funnell explained, which stressed out the fish. They'd get agitated and lose their scales from scraping up against each other or from abrasion in the nets. With the deep basket as holding pen, the fish go out stronger and are more likely to survive (albeit only long enough to become bait), they explained.

"We try to please everybody. But when you're dealing with the public, you can't please everybody,"

Funnell said. Nevertheless, from what I observed that Saturday morning, Dixon and Funnell come pretty close to pleasing everyone. "They're very nice people and very fair," Paul Cochrane of Foxboro, Mass., said, while waiting in line. "They've got it very well organized here. Some of the runs, people argue. Here, you



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know just what to expect and everybody gets along."

Dixon and Funnell obviously enjoy working together. They complement each other's personalities and abilities. Funnell is a retired police officer from Lunenburg Mass., while Dixon is the retired fisheries manager.

"With my knowledge of fish and his knowledge of law enforcement, we keep everybody under control," said Dixon.

There's no question whose side Dixon is on in any dispute. He's with the fish. He lives on the edge of Agawam Mill Pond, just above the herring run. The herring there are his friends and neighbors, he said. "They swim by and flip a fin at me." Fish spawn in the weedy areas at the edges of the pond, so whenever people put up a new house, Dixon explained, "you lose that area for the fish. Man has taken his toll on them." He fixed me with his eyes as if he just noticed something and added, "That 'man' means both men and women."

I'm reminded of the first words that I had heard this morning. On arriving, I walked over to say hello to the Herring Agents and thank them for agreeing to show me around. I had met them a few days before when I had helped my brother, David Stone, transport live herring to Buttonwood Park Zoo in New Bedford, all to give the four resident seals the thrill of their lives – chasing live fish around in their swimming tank. Dixon recognized me and asked how the seals had liked the fish. I told him how the crowd cheered and clapped each time a seal caught a herring.

"No one's rootin' for the fish," Dixon said, a tad ruefully.

"Cept you," the fisherman standing next to us said.

"Right," Dixon said, "nobody but the Herring Agent."

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River herring explained

The "river herring" best known to anglers are actually two closely related species: alewife and blueback herring. Both are anadromous, meaning they spend all their lives in the ocean but swim upstream into rivers and ponds to spawn.

The two species are difficult to distinguish. Herring experts rely on subtle differences in their scale patterns and differences in the color of internal body cavities to tell them apart. Both species reach an average length of 11 to 12 inches by the time they are seven or eight years old, though alewives, we are told, tend to be a smidgen longer than bluebacks at every age.

The most interesting feature of herring is their migration to and from spawning grounds. Most fish return to their natal spawning grounds to spawn. Both alewives and bluebacks spawn from April to mid-July, with bluebacks spawning 3 to 4 weeks later than alewives in the same watershed. According to Herring Agent Jack Dixon, alewives are lake spawners whereas bluebacks are river spawners. Asked which kind were prevalent on May 15, 2004, the day I visited, Dixon said there was a mixture: alewife "fallbacks" meaning they had already spawned in the pond and were returning to the ocean, and bluebacks that were just then swimming upstream to spawn in the river.

In New England, according to a bulletin of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, the newly hatched young stay in their home streams until fall, then migrate downriver to the ocean. River herring have high mortality rates at every stage of their life cycle. River herring were a precious staple food and a valuable fertilizer for Native Americans and for New England's early settlers. Thus, management of herring runs was one of the very first tasks of town government in coastal towns, and one might say, herring managers were America's first environmental policy enforcers. Today herring are used mainly for bait, but the spirit of the town Herring Agent goes all the way back to 1623 to the Plymouth Colony Fish Law for the protection of the alewife.

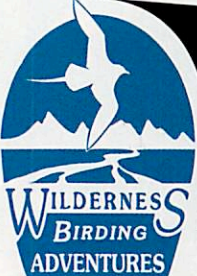
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