

Friends of Herring River



Aquatic and Terrestrial Wildlife

Degradation of water quality, loss of estuarine habitat, and the physical impediment imposed by the dike on Chequessett Neck Road are responsible for declines in native species of fish and other wildlife.

• Migratory Fish (river herring, eels, white perch)

In 1980 there was a large die-off of American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) in the Herring River due to high acidity and aluminum toxicity. In the 1980s, depletion of dissolved oxygen was responsible for fish kills involving river herring (*Alosa* spp., alewives and blueback herring).

Improved water quality and restored tidal exchange at the river mouth will allow increased access to spawning and nursery habitat for migratory fish. In addition, improved water quality and increased salinity will increase the extent and value of the Herring River as a habitat for all estuarine fish species.

• Diamondback Terrapins

The diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*) is an estuarine turtle, listed as “threatened” in Massachusetts. Diamondback terrapins that forage, mate and nest in the Herring River Estuary and its uplands are part of a larger Wellfleet population of diamondback terrapins. Herring River female terrapins tend to return to the same area each year to lay their eggs; however, their nesting and nursery habitat is limited upstream of the dike. Some of the females attempt to find suitable nesting habitat by crawling onto Chequessett Neck Road, and every year there is road mortality.

The removal of the dike will expand river access to terrapins for foraging, mating and nesting, and remove the threat of road mortality.

• Birds and Mammals

With tidal restoration, vegetation of the Herring River flood plain will gradually change from existing trees, shrubs and invasive non-native plants back to salt marsh, with a consequent shift in bird and mammal use. Songbirds will retreat to shrubby borders while waterfowl, herons and shorebirds will expand their use of the recovering marsh. Both small mammals like mice and rabbits, and larger species like deer and coyotes, will persist on marsh hummocks and edges, and even on the marsh proper during low tides.

Regarding the direct effect on individual animals, it’s important to understand that the planned incremental restoration of tidal exchange in Herring River will occur over years to decades, while the life spans of small animals range only from months to years. Nevertheless, long-term benefits will be substantial for local populations of estuarine-dependent fish, turtles, birds and mammals.