

## **Miracle in the Berkshires**

The Berkshire Trout Hatchery—the first and only hatchery in the National Fish Hatchery System run solely by volunteers—is a monument to grassroots conservation.

Tucked away among white pine and hemlock trees in the hills of western Massachusetts, the fish tanks at Berkshire Trout Hatchery look like alien spaceships on the hatchery's manicured lawn. Thick rays of sunlight evaporate beads of dew on their brown domes, illuminating scores of finger-length trout and Atlantic salmon that spend their early lives here.

The hatchery shares a common bond with the rare salmon, a symbol of survival and of healthy river systems; both have endured against long odds.

After 80 years of operation near the tiny hamlet of New Marlborough, the hatchery was closed in 1994 because of a lack of federal funding. The buildings decayed, weeds sprouted and it looked as though the community would lose its neighbor to neglect.

But in 1999, a group of about a dozen local seniors decided the hatchery was worth saving. They began clearing brush, removing trash and fixing the buildings. In August 2006, the volunteers—officially known as the Berkshire Hatchery Foundation—and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed a memorandum of understanding that authorized the group to operate the hatchery with guidance from the Service.

Today the Berkshire hatchery is the first and only hatchery in the National Fish Hatchery System run solely by volunteers and a monument to grassroots conservation.

“I've been coming here since I was a small child,” says volunteer Kathy Wasiuk. “This hatchery has been a part of the community for so long we didn't want to lose it. It's a living thing.”

## **An Improbable Journey**

The Berkshire hatchery was created when the family of John Sullivan Scully, a trout fisherman, entrusted their 148-acre retreat to the U.S. Government in 1914. For decades, the hatchery nurtured trout and smallmouth bass for restoration stocking. More recently, it has cultured Atlantic salmon as part of the Connecticut River Salmon Restoration Project.

In March 2008, about 20,000 of the silvery fish will be the hatchery's first class to graduate into the Connecticut and Farmington rivers as part of a combined local, state and federal effort to reintroduce the Atlantic salmon to its most southern range. Once released, the salmon begin an improbable journey. They must swim to the sea then elude predators and trawler nets as they make their way up to waters off Greenland, where they will feed. The survivors will return to their natal stream in the Connecticut River basin to

reproduce—if they can successfully navigate the ladders and lifts installed in dams along the river.

The 4-year-old returning adults complete the 4,000 mile round trip by migrating upstream during the spring and early summer to spawn in October and November. They may not eat for up to a year once re-entering fresh water. The Service estimates 132 salmon returned to spawn this July.

In addition to culturing salmon, the volunteers also produce thousands of trout that are donated to the state and used for educational programs and local fishing derbies. The hatchery staff receives technical guidance from Henry Bouchard, manager of the Service's Northeast Region's Pittsford National Fish Hatchery in Vermont.

Bouchard says the Service supplies the hatchery with fish food and salmon fry and pays to keep the heat and lights on. The volunteers pretty much do the rest.

“They feed the fish, clean the ponds and maintain grounds—including seven miles of trails,” says Bouchard, a native of Milford, Mass. “They keep the facility viable and producing fish for federal and state programs at a low cost to the Service. Public education and awareness form the core of their mission.”

### **Preserving ‘Something Special’**

Inside the main office, under the unblinking gaze of a menagerie of wildlife trophies (four white-tailed deer, an antelope and a pheasant), the members of the Berkshire Hatchery Foundation swap fish stories and discuss their upcoming fundraiser, the sixth annual Lobsterfest.

Their relaxed banter blends with the sound of gurgling water in the background. The hatchery is blessed with a pristine aquifer that supplies 200 gallons per minute of gravity-fed water to recharge the fish tanks.

It has been a busy spring. According to lead volunteer LeRoy Thorpe, the hatchery donated 75 rainbow trout to a local high school research program; held an open house on Earth Day; and donated 75 large rainbow and brown trout for the Great Barrington Fishing Derby and another fishing derby sponsored by the local chapter of the Isaak Walton League.

“When I first started volunteering up here, I did it to help try to preserve something special,” says Thorpe, a retired mill worker from nearby Monterey. “We’re here to pass along what we’ve learned and to teach people how valuable these resources are.”

Gene and Cathy Ford, who appear to be a decade or so younger than most of the other volunteers, are the latest additions to the hatchery staff. The Fords sold their home in Utah, climbed into their RV and returned to Cathy's native western Massachusetts, where they have settled into a life of transient bliss and hard labor.

“We’ve been clearing a lot of brush and doing some of the heavier work some of the older folks can’t do,” says Cathy, as she heads outside to greet a man and two children who are visiting the hatchery. She gives them a tour of the facility and later helps the children “catch and release” a few tadpoles and salamanders in one of the ponds.

Although the volunteers are relatively quiet about their contributions to the community, their work hasn’t gone unnoticed. Phil Gunzinger, the oldest volunteer at age 83, holds up a certificate of appreciation presented to the group last March by Assistant Director for Fisheries and Habitat Conservation Mamie Parker.

“It’s nice to be recognized for what we do,” Gunzinger says, “but we all love these fish and these waters. To me, this isn’t work at all.”

About two dozen young patients and staff from Gould Farm, a mental illness treatment facility that neighbors the hatchery, stop by during a hike. Bouchard chats with the group while the rest of the hatchery staff resumes their work. The fish won’t wait.

Wasiuk notes the enduring nature of the hatchery mirrors that of its caretakers, four of whom—including herself—even have beaten cancer.

“We’re all survivors,” she says.

-- *David Eisenhower, Washington DC*

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