

6-6-14 Fish Tales

My first week of sampling the Monponsett Ponds always begins with the anticipation of another summer season but never with so much confusion as this year's. I was given short notice by the lab as to a change in the method for testing for *E. coli*; the required test for fresh water beaches. I needed time to find out what was required by the Department of Public Health (DPH). The lab director referred to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in her phone message. Hmm...I wondered if she was referring to DEP's drinking water standards. Those would provide the guidance for drinking water. When it comes to the bathing beaches, I deal with DPH. While waiting for their answer, I needed to decide on which test to use, knowing that DEP's was twice as costly and not in my budget.

We can't make decisions based on price alone, though, when it comes to public safety. After calling the lab to confirm DEP's requirements, I decided to use the less pricey method we had used for many years, at least for that first week. I was pretty confident that tests for drinking water had become somehow confused with beach water tests. I was very confident that we did not need to achieve drinking water standards for our ponds. Heck; we'd be happy if we could just swim in them!

So, off I went with my wading boots, sample bottles and paperwork to my first beach, happy to have saved money for the town and for the beach associations, at least for one week and hopeful I had made the right decision.

The first two beaches are on the West Monponsett Pond. I was pleased to note the absence of algae. I didn't even make note of trash, my other frequent visitor at the beaches.

Moving on to the East Monponsett Pond, I took extra time to walk along the Holmes Street beach to count the encountered: dead fish. It was not a massive fish die-off but fifteen to twenty fish along seventy five of shore is noteworthy. They were small yellow perch and black crappie; dead about one day, I'd say, or, in some cases, less, was my guess.

Taking a left onto Annawon Ave, I next sampled for the beach association at the end of that road. Once again, the same small species of fish were seen in the same numbers, with one area of mystery, though. There were about ten fish fairly close together, much larger than the other dead ones and they had clearly died earlier, as evidenced by their more advanced state of deterioration. I could not identify them, either; not even with the help of my iPad. The long spiny dorsal fin did not look familiar to me and the scales were thicker. Some state departments were going to have help me with this one!

My third beach on West Monponsett Pond was at the Twin Lakes Condos and also had some dead yellow perch and black crappie.

Back at the office, pictures of the fish were sent with emails to DPH, both to report the die-off and to ask for assistance in identifying the mystery fish. Lots of emails later, it was concluded by people who know much more about fish and how they live and die than I will ever know, that scup and black sea bass, marine fish, had been deposited on a shore of our West

Monponsett Pond. They are an edible fish and were undersized. They should not have been taken in the first place. What a shame!

It is always frustrating when we want answers instead of confusion. When the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (DFW) site is considered for explanations on fish kills, the many reasons for “natural” can seem confusing and they seem secondary to the message of the importance of timeliness in reporting fish die-offs in case it is from pollution or poisoning. In that case, DEP is wanted ASAP to investigate.

For the people witnessing and living around the occurrence of fish kills, though, answers are wanted and they aren’t comforted by the list of natural reasons for lots of fish dying. If you visit the DFW site, look at their fact sheet on fish kills at

<http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/dfw/fish-wildlife-plants/fish/when-you-find-a-fish-kill.html>

As you go through the list of possible causes for the fish dying en masse, you will see that most do not apply to the end of May, such as the ice blocking light and causing plants to die and other situations resulting in low dissolved oxygen. In the end I could only conclude that the spawning season was the reason. I had reason to think of that again and again over the next week. The sky is full of small birds chasing away the crows and hawks. It is just about the time that foxes and coyotes are giving birth and hunting overtime to feed their young. Meanwhile, the fish were exhausting themselves over spawning grounds. It is indeed a wild time, this time of new life, and there is a toll to be paid for it. This one was paid in fish tails.

On my way back from gathering the water samples, I saw a blue heron walking along the shore, looking very happy with its buffet of yellow perch and black crappie for brunch.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Plympton and Halifax. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us