

On the Bright Side: 'Otsego bass' brought back to Otsego Lake

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ContributedFrom left, Kevin Thomas, Samantha Carey and Lyndon Watkins, all SUNY Cobleskill students working at the Biological Field Station in Cooperstown, display some lake whitefish, or Otsego bass, caught earlier this month.

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By Joe Mahoney Staff Writer

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The ongoing effort to improve the water quality of Otsego Lake has yielded a new dividend — the return of a once-popular fish that had disappeared over the past few decades.

The species is the lake whitefish (or *Coregonus clupeiformis*, for those preferring the Latin term), which has been known locally as "Otsego bass," said veteran biology professor Willard Harman, the director of the Biological Field Station, an arm of the State University College at Oneonta.

Harman, who has lived in the area since he was hired by the college in 1968, recalled that Otsego bass had been a popular item on local restaurant menus.

"It's a very good eating fish," he noted.

But its population began to dwindle after excess nutrient runoff into the lake from agriculture and other human activity harmed the water quality. The problems were compounded by the introduction of a non-native species of fish, the alewife, an aggressive zooplankton feeder, that was seen as a source of forage for lake trout.

The lake trout did fatten up on the alewife, but the large zooplankton were decimated.

The field station staff, Harman said, came up with a strategy — go after the alewife by stocking the lake with walleye. That was in 2000, and now the alewife, he said, has been "decimated" in the lake.

Even as recently as a few years ago, the Otsego bass had become a distant memory for sport fishermen. In a June 2012 column in The Daily Star, outdoors columnist Rick Brockway would lament that "the Otsego bass only exists in the history books."

Brockway concluded: "Otsego bass fishing is a tradition that died many years ago. It's just a thing of the past."

Harman had remembered that tradition, however, and with the quality of the lake water being the best it's been in the last 50 years, he saw an opportunity to bring back the Otsego bass.

The effort to increase the lake's supply of Otsego bass is now a joint project of the biological field station, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the State University at Cobleskill.

"We are trapping whitefish right now from the lake," he said. A group of students has been collecting eggs and milt from those fish so they can be raised at the field station and the Cobleskill college.

"We want to get them through the small stages, when there is a greater likelihood they could die off, and then return them to the lake," Harman said.

He added: "One of the things that is most impressive is the size of these things. They are averaging seven pounds."

The whitefish is a native species to the lake. In 1785, when William Cooper arrived in the settlement that would later be named for him, he noted that "unusual shoals of fish were seen moving in the clear waters of the Susquehanna."

The field station staff in Cooperstown now believes Cooper, who went on to become a county judge, a congressman and the father of author James Fenimore Cooper, was most likely referring to shad, a close relative of the Otsego bass.

Improved farming practices promoted by the Otsego County Conservation Association along with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the local Soil and Water Conservation Service has helped to curb the amount of nutrients running into the lake, Harman said.

"The last thing to bring things back into balance," he said, "is the Otsego bass population."