

AMERICAN EEL ARE
ENDANGERED AT LESS THAN
1% OF HISTORIC NUMBERS

Native populations of the American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) have drastically declined in Lake George from historic populations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that populations may still be present, but at less than one percent of historic numbers. It has been recommended that the American eel be placed on the Endangered Species list due to alterations to migration routes and loss of habitat, mainly caused by dams along the St. Lawrence and Richelieu Rivers that block historic migration routes.

American eel's are elongate and very flexible. They have no pelvic fin and their anal and dorsal fins are joined, forming one fin that runs around their body. The mouth is terminal, with a projecting lower jaw.

Eels are catadromous; they live most of their adult life in freshwater and return to the sea to spawn and die. The migratory nature of eels means that they can

AMERICAN EEL



American eels live most of their lives in freshwater. Eel are migratory, traveling thousands of miles upstream, overcoming natural barriers of small dams and waterfalls.

travel thousands of miles upstream, up and around waterfalls and small dams. They can even travel overland during rainy nights.

Larval eels that are located at sea are called leptocephali, they are transparent, ribbon-shaped and are poor swimmers. At age one, the leptocephali swim to shore along the coast of the United States and transform into elvers or glass eels. During this process, they gain their coloring and shrink in size. At this time females will migrate great distances upstream to mature, while males will stay closer to

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American Eel

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the coast. After 20-50 years in freshwater the eels transform again into silver eels and move back out to the spawning area, the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic ocean to spawn and then die. The mating behavior of the American eel has never been witnessed.

The diet of eels varies by size; the smaller eels eat insects such as mayflies and caddisflies, the larger eels will eat fish and crustaceans, such as the tessellated darter and the white sucker. They are most active at night, spending their days hiding under rocks and in the mud.

The decline of American eels in Lake George is probably due to alterations that have taken place in and near Lake Champlain; namely pollution and declining water quality and construction of hydroelectric dams. Eels enter Lake George by swimming up the St. Lawrence and Richelieu rivers into Lake Champlain, then up the LaChute River into Lake George. This is a difficult journey, but one that historically eels made successfully.

American eels are among the longest-lived fish species in North America. A female American eel held in captivity was recorded to be 88 years old prior to her death.



Decreased eel populations are attributed to pollution and declining water quality of Lake Champlain as well as to disruptions to migration routes.

The females are larger than the males, averaging three feet long while the males generally reach 1.5 feet long. The females, which have not yet reproduced, are what are caught in freshwater systems. The largest eel taken in New York State was seven pounds and 14 ounces, from Cayuga Lake in 1984. At maturity a female can lay between 10-20 million eggs.

For additional information on fishing regulations in New York State please visit the website of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (www.dec.ny.gov).

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