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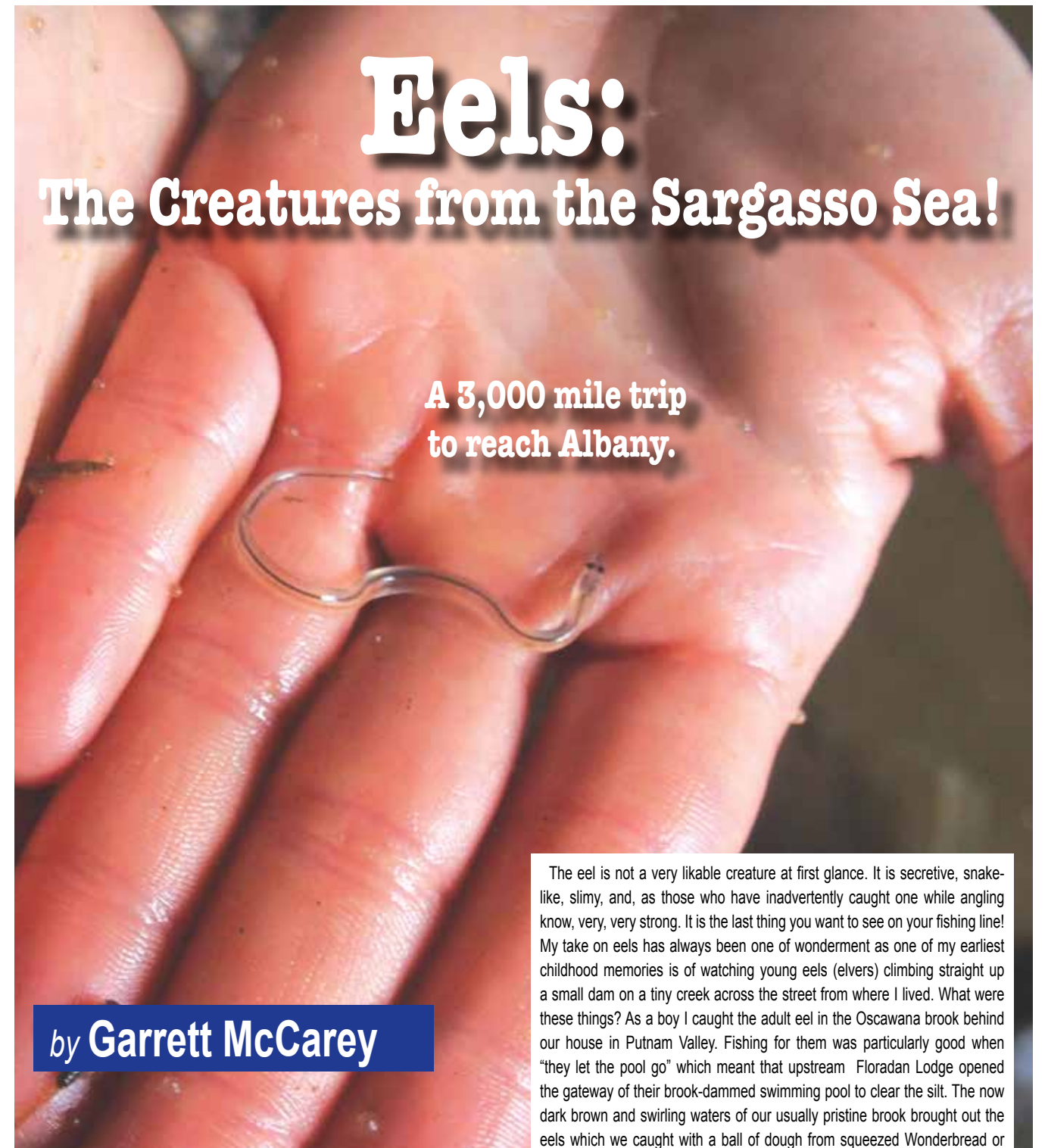
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Eels: The Creatures from the Sargasso Sea!

A 3,000 mile trip
to reach Albany.

by **Garrett McCarey**

The eel is not a very likable creature at first glance. It is secretive, snake-like, slimy, and, as those who have inadvertently caught one while angling know, very, very strong. It is the last thing you want to see on your fishing line! My take on eels has always been one of wonderment as one of my earliest childhood memories is of watching young eels (elvers) climbing straight up a small dam on a tiny creek across the street from where I lived. What were these things? As a boy I caught the adult eel in the Oscawana brook behind our house in Putnam Valley. Fishing for them was particularly good when "they let the pool go" which meant that upstream Floradan Lodge opened the gateway of their brook-dammed swimming pool to clear the silt. The now dark brown and swirling waters of our usually pristine brook brought out the eels which we caught with a ball of dough from squeezed Wonderbread or a nice fat night crawler. We skinned them and roasted them over an open fire, as we did with any fish we caught, unaware of their arduous journey or unlikely life history.

Which brings us back as to why we were standing in the tidal entrance of the ice cold Poestenkill in Troy, NY just a few miles south of Lock One, the terminus of the estuarine Hudson River.

A local fisherman who was scouting the kill for any sign of herrings saw the fyke net and asked "you catching bait?"

It was a cold late April day as my trusted companions, Molly, Samantha and Lilly, ages nine through twelve, and I waded through the 39 degree water of the Poestenkill to our fyke net. With help from Jeff Briggs, a volunteer from the Rensselaer Plateau Association, we emptied its cod end into the bucket. Nothing! Was it the late Spring or the recent rains? The herrings were not running yet so perhaps in a few days...

And what was our intended quarry? Eels, baby eels, little creatures with glassine bodies only two or three inches long. Eels that are in the home stretch of a miraculous journey of some 1500 miles!

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"Nope. Eels"
 "Whatcha doin' that for?"
 "To count 'em"

He gave us a puzzled look and headed home. His interest was in the run of herrings which he would use as bait for Striped Bass. The bass follow the herring upriver.

Yes, we were there to count eels.

The American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) is a diadromous fish, capable of living in both freshwater and seawater as are striped bass, shad and other herring

silver eels with bulging eyes, darkened backs and a silver sheen to their bellies and they head downstream.

James Prosek in his book "Eels...the world's most mysterious fish" describes a working eelman in the Delaware River where, under a new moon and after a good rain in September, thousands of silver eels begin their migration back to the sea and his year long work on his stone weir finally pays off on these two nights. And where are the eels headed? The Sargasso Sea. This is an area in the Atlantic Ocean between the Gulf Stream that includes the Bermuda Triangle. Known as the graveyard of lost ships this becalmed sea is covered with a mass

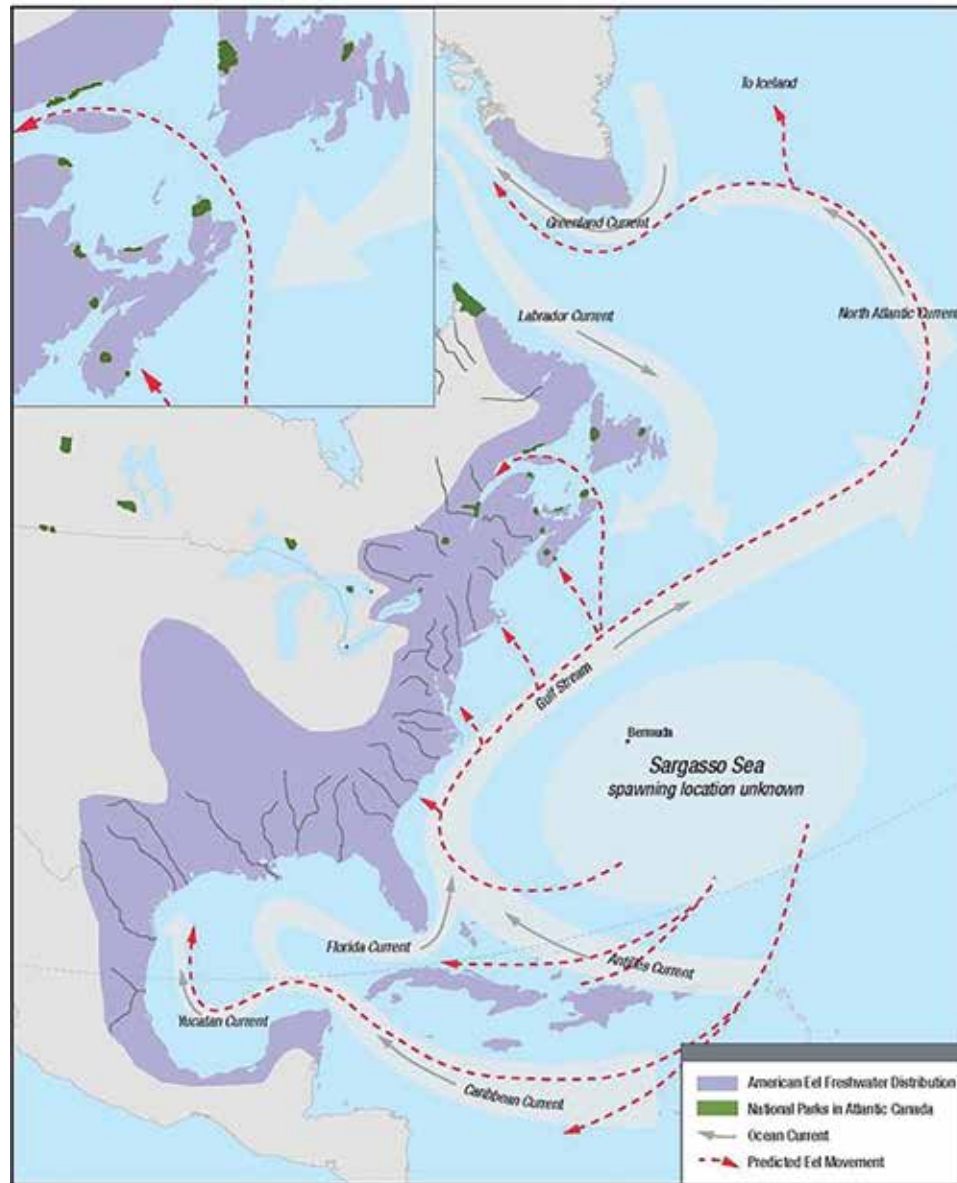
of algae, plastic and other flotsam. It is here, at depths of 1,300 to 2,300 feet that the eels, both the American and the European varieties, spawn. No one knows exactly where this happens or what triggers it. This has got to be some wild eel party!

The eel eggs hatch into little leaf-like transparent water creatures called leptocephali and after a year of drifting over the continental shelf they metamorphose into glass eels which then swim up the rivers and tributaries. This was what we were after!

We were working as citizen scientists through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and I was a volunteer working for NATURE Lab, a project of the Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, NY. I had heard of the Eel Project and thought it would be a great way for the community to learn about the Hudson River. There is no better classroom than the great outdoors where learning to become wet and dirty is an essential part of the syllabus. I contacted their Citizen Science group in the Hudson River Estuary Program and, much to my surprise, they thought that a week long trial run in the Poestenkill was a good idea as their most northern sampling station was in Ravena on the Hannacroix Creek about a half hour South of Albany. (They did a trial run in the Wynantskill near Troy in 2017 with no success.) The Eel Project began in 2008 with two sites and now has 14 sites sampling the Hudson River's tributaries by over 750 volunteers and students. Our team included students from Dan Capuano's Ecology class at Hudson Valley Community College, and students from RPI, Russell Sage and

Skidmore and the three girls from Brittonkill Elementary School that I enlisted by promising them a life changing experience.

After five days of sampling we caught two pigmented elvers about five inches long but no glass eels. It was still great fun, putting on waders or hip boots (Molly's leaked) and pulling up the net but we really needed to see this near mythical life form that we were pursuing. So I headed down to Hannacroix Creek where, at low tide, a half a dozen volunteers from the New Baltimore Conservancy converged.



species. It's the alewife that the fisherman was looking for as baitfish. The difference between these fish and the eel is that they are anadromous, living their adult lives in saltwater and returning to freshwater only to spawn, though some say there is a resident population of stripers in the river. The eel, on the other hand, lives its adult life in freshwater and returns to the sea to spawn. The adult eels are called brown or yellow eels and when sexually mature, the age is unclear but it could be eight to fifteen years, they become

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Among them was a visitor from England who wanted to replicate the Eel project in her home country as the European Eel's numbers have been decimated to ten per cent of its population. Unlike in America, eels are prized as culinary delicacies in Europe and East Asia and with the Asian eel population also severely compromised there is a huge and very profitable market for glass eels from Europe. Eelers can "rake in" \$1500 to \$2500 (£1100 to £1800) per pound. These eels are shipped to Asia and raised in aquaculture ponds as there is no known way of producing eel eggs in a laboratory. In the U.S. there are only two states, North Carolina and Maine, that allow elver and glass eel fishing. On Cape Cod authorities are on high alert for eel poachers coming down from Boston to earn a few grand in this illegal and lucrative market. This why the eel population in the tributaries need to be monitored.

The Hannacroix crew was ready for another catch as numerous as they had the day before. I was ready to see the elusive glass eel and, Holy Poseidon!, did I see them. It took the team two and a half hours to count 3,557 eels, a mass of slithering wormlike beasts. The eels were quite the hit and we showed them to anyone who might be remotely interested. And they were. These eels were deemed "cute", "amazing", "unbelievable." This was a far cry from the word association one would normally get from the word "eel." A small success. These are animals you would never see in your lifetime even in the largest and most well stocked aquariums of the world. And they are right here in our backyard.

On Friday our trial week was up and we were going to remove the net. Gracie and Aidan from DEC came up to do the deed. I felt we had failed, but wait! There were herring in the kill and the temperature had risen to 48 degrees. There was

more! Gracie pointed out that the fyke net was coated with herring eggs and, look around, the low tide exposed rocks and the creek bottom covered with them, millions of eggs in a layer an inch thick! I had never seen such a sight in my life. But the best thing of all – we caught a glass eel! One glass eel. We were ecstatic. We considered keeping the net in for another week but the students were in the midst of studying for finals and if we caught as many eels as they had downriver we would be severely short handed.

We took the little guy or gal up the kill past the Poestenkill Gorge and set it free above the dam near the cemetery. After such a long journey of so many thousands of miles we gave this traveler a bit of a break, it wouldn't have to climb the falls. It was home free.

The great news is that Aidan thought we should continue to sample next year, perhaps for the full extent of the run. That one little eel did the trick, I think. If we do sample we'll need all the help we can get. If you're interested in sampling in 2019 please get in touch with the NATURE Lab, believe me, you will not regret it and the "Creatures from the Sargasso Sea" will be better for it.

For information and data on the Eel Project go to WWW.DEC.NY.GOV and search for "eel project".

To become a volunteer eel counter on the Poestenkill go to MEDIASANCTUARY.ORG and click on NATURE Lab.

For further reading:

"Eels, an exploration, from New Zealand to the Sargasso, of the World's Most Mysterious Fish" by James Prosek; Harper/Collins

"Consider the Eel" by Richard Schweid; University of North Carolina Press.