Like all fish that move between the ocean and freshwater rivers, the Atlantic salmon has a complex life cycle. Adult Atlantic salmon begin returning to the Penobscot in April and May on their way to spawning grounds in the river. The eggs hatch into tiny alevins which stay in the gravel of the streambed. The alevins grow into fry, about 3-4 inches long. The fry continue to grow, developing dark, vertical bars along their sides as they turn into parr. Several years later, when they reach six inches or more in length, the parr begin getting ready to migrate to the ocean. They take on a silvery sheen, and their gills and other internal organs prepare for the transition to saltwater. How called smolts, the young salmon leave the streams where they were born and move down the Penobscot River, through Penobscot Bay to the Gulf of Maine. They spend one to three years in the Atlantic Ocean, eating small crustaceans and fish as they rapidly grow into adult salmon. After they mature, they must avoid predators including larger fish and marine mammals, and eventually travel thousands of miles through the ocean and back to the Penobscot to spawn, completing the cycle of life.