

The Quashnet and Moonakis River, Waquoit

You may have heard of the Moonakis River or the Quashnet River, but you may not know that they are the same river: it is called “Quashnet” in Mashpee where it is a beautiful restored trout stream; the same stream is called “Moonakis” after it crosses into Falmouth, flows under Route 28 and becomes an estuary. But the river doesn’t change. This is one of the few free-flowing rivers on the Upper Cape. Most are dammed, or diked, or diverted to provide water to cranberry bogs.

In fact, all of those disturbances happened on the lovely Quashnet/Moonakis, though restoration has given us back a running river and a recovering riverside environment. The Q/M River lies in one of the long, narrow valleys that run from the northern parts of Falmouth and Mashpee into Vineyard Sound; their inundated southern ends form the salt ponds like Green Pond and Bournes Pond. These valleys were cut at the end of the glacial period by the action of springs. They are chiefly notable because, by cutting down into the top of the water table, they allow groundwater to seep into the valley and run toward the sea, creating the only rivers the sandy Cape can boast of—these rivers are not fed by ponds, nor by mountain snowfields. The rivers on the Cape were attractive to the European settlers, not only for water and fish, but also for the water power that could be harnessed by damming them.

In 1832 a dam was built on the Moonakis River at Martin Road just north of the present-day Route 28, to power a gristmill. Later the dam was raised and an additional mill was built on it. The augmented dam flooded the valley of the Q/M River almost all the way north to where Route 151 is now, ending the once-notable fishing for sea-run Brook Trout, and the Herring run as well. The mills burned in 1894, and were not rebuilt because other sources of power had replaced water power. Instead, the dam was breached to draw down the mill pond and the floor of the valley was ditched, leveled, and converted to cranberry bogs. This stage of the valley’s life didn’t last long: the bogs were abandoned after they were flooded by salt water during Hurricane Carol in 1954, leaving the former river disjointed, shallow and silted, and the fish runs seemingly destroyed.

The transformation since that time has been remarkable. The deeply altered, sluggish, muddy river is again a quick, clear, trout-quality stream in the restored stretches. This did not happen by itself, of course. It is mostly due to the labor and perseverance of Fran Smith of Falmouth, who, working with many volunteers, Trout Unlimited, and the state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, has seen to it that the state acquired most of the river and its banks, and has personally planted, dug, built, and otherwise labored to bring the river back to life.

The river has re-excavated its former channel and runs cool, narrow, and, in many places, chest deep, shaded by native trees and shrubs. The ditches and dikes are still visible from the trails, but the river has mostly been freed from them. In the spring, Shadblow blooms just as the Herring begin to run. In early summer the Pine and Prairie Warblers sing and the returning sea-run Brook Trout attract catch-and-release fishermen. At all seasons people walk the old roads along the sides of the valley, enjoying the now-unusual sight of a running Cape Cod river, with all the values that it brings.

To visit the Quashnet/Moonakis River, park at Martin Road (off Route 28, just opposite Red Brook Road). Or for a different perspective, check out the Margaret Doutt Preserve on the estuarine portion of the river, south of Route 28. Access is on the east side of Moonakis Road. Trail and access maps of both these sites are available for download on the website of The 300 Committee at www.300committee.org.