

BLUEBACK BLUES

A sad acknowledgement the other day from state Division of Marine Fisheries Director Louis Daniel, who told a group of legislators meeting in Raleigh that while some species are making a comeback due to better management, the state's herring population remains greatly depleted.

Overfishing – both inland and off the coast – and environmental degradation along the rivers that drain into the Albemarle Sound led to a collapse of the population in the mid-1980s and a continued steady decline for the past couple of decades.

Since the mid-1990s the state has been tightening restrictions on taking river herring, the generic term for blueback herring and alewife, but it doesn't seem to be having much effect.

River herring have been heavily fished since the colonial era, when the fish were prized because their oily skin made them easier to salt and preserve. They were so abundant for so long that the fish shaped the culture along the Tar, Neuse, Chowan and Roanoke rivers, and as a 2007 fisheries report noted, the tradition of late-winter/early-spring fish fries along these waterways is threatened along with the species.

There's still enough fish in the rivers during the short January to April fishing season for the annual Herring Festival, held every Easter Monday in Jamesville in Martin County, an event where you can still take in some of the herring-zone folklore.

If you can't make the festival, you can get your fill of herring at the Cypress Grill, a rustic Jamesville spot right on the Roanoke River that specializes in breaded and deep-fried herring. They're served headless, but still have a tail, and are fried in a big kettle either briefly (sunny-side up) or "cremated."

They also sell salted fillets when the river isn't yielding enough fresh herring.

The restaurant is only open from mid-January to April, when the fish make their run. You can also find herring around then at River's Edge restaurant, which is just down river from the grill.



The blueback herring population has been steadily declining in North Carolina since the mid-1980s.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

KING ME

We're not very carnivalistic here in the Triangle. About as close as you can get is at Papa Mojo's Roadhouse – musician Mel Melton's place near the N.C. 54/55 intersection. While Mel does it right, the rest of this area is meh about Mardi Gras. We might break out a Meters or Wild Tchoupitoulas record or cook some gumbo, but, save some Hurricane drink specials at various places, you'd think it was just another Tuesday night.

It's important to remember that Carnival isn't just a day – it's a season. Fat Tuesday isn't until the 21st of this month, but this Saturday down in Louisiana, the parades kick off just after noon, when the Krewe of Bilge rolls through Slidell, which is just across the Pontchartrain causeway from the Big Easy. In the evening the first

parades in the View Carre – the Krewe du Vieux and the Krewe Delusion – commence.

We can't get to the parades, but we can eat cake – King Cake. King Cake with green and purple icing is a staple during carnival. It's also a ritual, and is so named because baked in each one is a little "King Baby." You get the piece with the King Baby, you buy the next cake.

Finding a King Cake around here is a little trickier than in New Orleans, where the bakeries are cranking them out.

You can get the real deal at Great Harvest Bread Company in Chapel Hill or La Farm Bakery in Cary (lafarmbakery.com). There are also passable versions available at Whole Foods and Harris Teeter. Of course you could also bake one yourself – just try to make sure you use a King Baby that won't break a tooth.



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