

ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



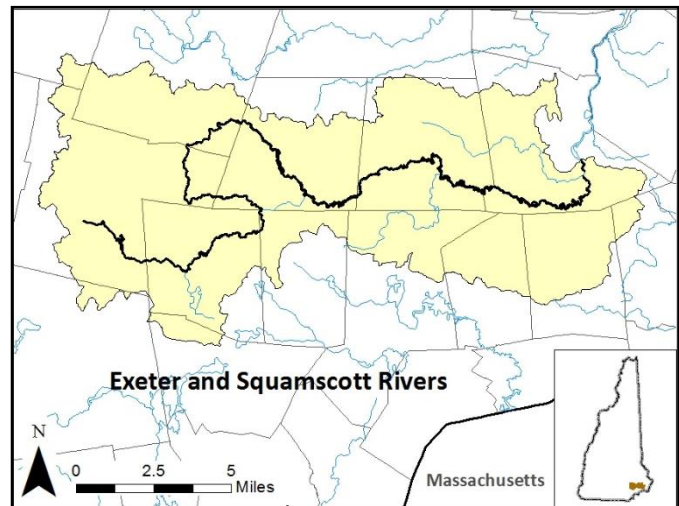
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The Exeter and Squamscott Rivers

The Exeter and Squamscott rivers are a single river system with two names. The Exeter River is the upstream, freshwater segment while the Squamscott River is the downstream, tidally influenced segment. The Exeter River begins in the town of Chester and flows east through the towns of Sandown, Raymond, Fremont and Brentwood to Exeter. In Exeter, the river becomes the Squamscott and continues northward through Stratham and Newfields before discharging into Great Bay. Together, the Exeter and Squamscott rivers drain approximately 125 square miles, including broad wetlands, forested riverbanks and gently flowing waters.



The river system plays an essential role in maintaining the overall health of the Great Bay National Estuarine Reserve, is home to a number of rare and endangered species and is an important scenic resource. For these reasons, the rivers have been recognized not only by the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program (RMPP), but also as part of the New Hampshire Resource Protection Project. The upper 33.3 miles of the Exeter River, from its headwaters to its confluence with Great Brook in Exeter, were designated into the RMPP in 1995, while the remaining 2.2 miles of the lower Exeter and the 6.3-mile Squamscott River were added in 2011.

Land use along the Exeter and Squamscott rivers is primarily rural. The upper reaches of the river corridor through Chester, Sandown and Danville contain scattered farms and single-family homes, and the riverbank is largely forested with interspersed areas of wetlands. Land around the lower reaches of the river supports more industrial and commercial uses. The river system serves as both a water supply to local municipalities and a significant resource for tourism and recreation. It also provides a wildlife corridor for fish and terrestrial animals.

History

The Exeter and Squamscott rivers have been used for millennia as a source of transportation, fish and shellfish. The Squamscott River is named for the native tribe from which the land was purchased by Reverend John Wheelwright in 1638. The Town of Exeter was founded at a natural waterfall that separated the freshwater Exeter River from the saltwater Squamscott, and the town served as the first capital of New Hampshire until 1788. The thick forests and deep waters of the Squamscott made it ideal for shipbuilding, and falls throughout the river system were well known Native American fishing sites that were later harnessed to power lumber and textile mills. Exeter's extensive Historic District is significant for its maritime history and early settlement, with 125 structures listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, many of which were built before or during the early 1700s. Several historic houses in Fremont are also eligible for national listing.

Wildlife, Habitat and Vegetation

The state-listed threatened pied-billed grebe and the state-listed species of concern bald eagle are two of the many iconic species that rely on the river and its corridor for food and shelter. Rare species to be found within the river include the state-listed endangered brook floater mussel and the state and federally endangered shortnose sturgeon. The river also serves as a key spawning route for anadromous fish species such as alewife, rainbow smelt and blueback herring, with fish ladders installed on the dams to facilitate their upstream transit. Other naturally reproducing species include small and large mouth bass, brown bullhead, chain pickerel, American eel, yellow perch and sunfish. The state-endangered Blanding's turtle has also been observed in the river corridor.

The wildlife habitat along the river corridor has been identified as a Conservation Focus Area by The Nature Conservancy. At least eleven species listed by the state as endangered are native to the Exeter and Squamscott river corridor, and the watershed hosts over 1,000 acres of Tier 1 wildlife habitat according to the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's Wildlife Action Plan. A total of 78 plant species have been identified in the river corridor, including nine endangered plants.



Recreation

The Town of Exeter owns conservation land and a public park adjacent to the river which provides opportunities for hiking, fishing, hunting, picnicking and team sports, as well as a boat ramp for river access. In Sandown and Fremont, an abandoned railroad bed owned by the State of New Hampshire provides multiple-use recreational opportunities. Walking, fishing, bird watching and picnicking are available for most of the length of the river, and several campsites are located adjacent to the riverbanks. In addition to conservation and public land, there are some private lands that allow hunting by permission. Swimming is permitted in designated areas, several of which are in Exeter.

The generally free-flowing nature of the river provides excellent flat and quick water boating opportunities for canoes and kayaks. Whitewater boating is limited to high water conditions. A 5-mile stretch above Fremont has been described in an Appalachian Mountain Club boating guide as "... the finest on the river for scenery ... and probably the best quick water in the Piscataqua Watershed." Public and informal launching areas found at parks and bridge crossings provide canoe and kayak access to the river. Areas of flat water are also suitable for rowing, and the Philips Exeter Academy boathouse abuts the Exeter town boat ramp. Motorized boating opportunities are generally limited to deeper areas of the Squamscott River.

Fishing

The diverse habitat and conditions of the Exeter and Squamscott rivers, including both cold and warm water fisheries, make it ideal for fishing, especially during the yearly spawning runs. Fly fishing is possible in some regions, with the Great Bay Chapter of Trout Unlimited providing instruction for youth in Exeter every year. Traditional rod-and-reel fish as well as game fish are available along most of the river. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department stocks the river with brown trout, eastern brook trout and rainbow trout. River herring and American eel are endemic to the river; however, the Great Dam in Exeter served as a barrier to upstream fish migration from its construction in 1914 to its removal in 2016. The removal of the dam has facilitated the spawning migration of these species and alewife, resulting in higher numbers of fish in the river.

For More Information

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program visit the [Rivers Management and Protection page](#) on the NHDES website or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; [\(603\) 271-2959](tel:6032712959); riversprogram@des.nh.gov.