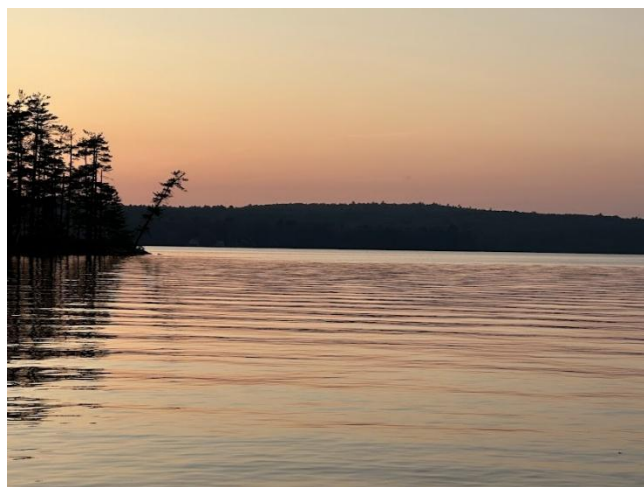


Damariscotta Lake

Anne and I have been summering at Damariscotta Lake for more than fifty years.

This glacial lake covers 4676 acres (6.85 sq miles) in Lincoln, Co, Maine. It runs 10 miles from the Town of Jefferson in the north to Damariscotta Mills in the Town of Nobleboro in the south. Davis Stream feeds into the lake from the north and the lake itself feeds into the Salt Bay and the Damariscotta River in the south. On the west side are the towns of Jefferson and Newcastle. On the east, the towns of Jefferson and Nobleboro. The lake has three sections: the Great Bay at the north leads into Muscongus Bay, and then Damariscotta Lake proper at the south. The average depth of the lake is 30 ft. and the maximum depth is 114 ft. At its widest point, in the Great Bay, the lake is 1.9 miles in width. It is 52 feet above sea level.



View of the Great Bay from our camp on the east side of the lake.

Archaeological excavations indicate that Native American tribes hunted, fished and foraged in the area. The earliest European settlement around the lake was at Damariscotta Mills, where several falls leading into Salt Bay provided power for grain and lumber mills. Dams built here in the eighteenth century began to raise the water level of the lake.

Fishing was also an important early industry at Damariscotta Mills, where sea-run alewives (*Alosa pseudoharengus*) make their annual spring run down to the sea. Between July 1st and November 30th every year the

alewives migrate up the falls and into the lake. This run is one of the largest in the state. According to the US Geological Survey, more than 100,000 alewives entered the lake in 1995. For nearly a century, however, the dams built for the mills kept the fish from climbing the falls, so a stone fish ladder was built in 1807. This fish run still exists today and was restored in 2007 (<https://damariscottamills.org/>). Since the 1700's Nobleboro and Newcastle have had the rights to harvest the fish during the fall season and sell them as lobster bait. All the profits from this harvest are used to manage and maintain the fish ladder. In the spring some limited harvesting of the fish is allowed by individuals for smoking and human consumption.

In the 1920's a dam was constructed at the falls at Damariscotta Mills to generate electric power. There is a 50 ft. drop at these falls. The Damariscotta Mills Dam is still being used today by the Kruger Energy Company, which maintains a power distribution plant on the Newcastle

and Nobleboro townline. The company generates electricity at the dam only during the winter months, when the alewives are not running.

Well into the nineteenth century most of the land surrounding Damariscotta Lake was devoted to farming and lumbering, except for Jefferson Village in the north and the industrial and residential areas around Damariscotta Mills in the south.

In 1871 the Knox and Lincoln Railroad Company opened a line running from Bath through Damariscotta Mills, Nobleboro, and Muscongus Bay to Rockland. This rail line provided easy access to the lake not only for business and industry but also for vacationers and tourists. The building of the railroad, in fact, was an important factor in the transformation of the lake into a resort area.

This rail service connected with steamboat lines which had been transporting people and goods around the lake since as early as 1837. In 1874 the legislature of the State of Maine gave the Damariscotta Steamboat Company the right to run steamboats on Damariscotta Lake and the company began to provide steamboat service from the Town of Jefferson down to the railroad station on Muscongus Bay. From here passengers could travel by train to the station in Damariscotta Mills and even book a ticket all the way to New York! There was also steamboat service from Jefferson to Nobleboro and Damariscotta.

There are 21.4 miles of shorefront around the lake, most of which is in private hands. There is only one public boat launch facility, with ample parking, located on the west side of the lake in Jefferson, off Route 213 just north of the Newcastle / Jefferson town line. A long sandy stretch of shorefront at the northeastern end of the lake along Rt 32 in Jefferson has been a popular swimming, boating and picnicking area since the nineteenth century. Crescent Beach was privately owned until the mid-twentieth century when 19 acres were sold to the State of Maine. This beach, now known as Damariscotta Lake State Park, provides swimming and picnicking facilities for the general public.

In the 1920s, just up the hill from Crescent Beach the owners built Beach Farm Inn which offered lunch with a lakeview from the porch. This restaurant closed around 1935.

In the early part of the 20th century there were a number of private fishing lodges around the lake. One of these, Sunset Lodge, located on East Pond Road toward the northeastern part of the lake in Jefferson, was founded in 1919 and offered a large main building with dining room and kitchen surrounded by a number of cabins. Sunset was still in operation in 2020.

Other inns catering to the tourist trade along the lake included Damariscotta Lake Farm, at the northwestern corner of the lake in Jefferson. In the 19th century the owners of this farm built a tavern on the site. In 1949 a number of small cottages were added along with a marina and boat launch. In the late 20th century this property was broken up and the cottages were sold as condos. The original farmhouse, built in 1828, is now a bed and breakfast.

A campground, named appropriately Townline Campsites, is located on East Pond Road on the Jefferson/Nobleboro townline. The 160-acre campground has 55 full-service sites for RV or tent campers.

Mill Pond Inn is a bed and breakfast on the lakefront in Nobleboro.

In 1922 WAVUS, a camp for young girls, was founded on the west side of the lake in Jefferson. In 1926 Camp Kieve for boys was founded nearby. Both camps are still running today.

Unfortunately, one cannot easily drive a full circuit around the lake, but it is possible to make a tour of most of the lake by turning off Route 1 onto East Pond Road in Nobleboro. After East Pond Road crosses the tracks of the Knox and Lincoln RR, there are occasional views of the lake on the left as one drives north on East Pond Road and gradually ascends Eugley Hill. East Pond Road makes a sharp left turn at the intersection of Upper East Pond Road, where there is a stop sign for traffic coming from East Pond Road. The road then crosses the townline between Nobleboro and Jefferson and continues on to the intersection with Rt. 32. To follow the lake, turn left onto Rt. 32 past Damariscotta State Park down into Jefferson Village, where the road crosses a bridge over Davis Stream at the head of the lake. Rt. 126 joins Rt. 32 in the village. From this stretch of road there are very broad views of the lake, which is on the left. When Rt. 32 turns off to the right, stay on Rt. 126 as it joins Rt. 213 (Bunker Hill Road). Stay on Rt. 213 when Rt. 126 turns off to the right and follow Rt. 213 south along the west side of the lake. At the highest point on Bunker Hill Rd., the Bunker Hill Baptist Church provides a spectacular view of the Great Bay of the lake. There are also good views of the lake along Bunker Hill Road as one crosses the Jefferson/Newcastle townline. Rt. 213 ends at the intersection with Rt. 215 (Pond Rd.). Turn left onto Rt. 215, which crosses the southern tip of the lake on a bridge into Damariscotta Mills, where one can see where the lake is dammed and visit the fish ladder for the alewives. While there is a maze of camp roads along the southern part of the lake, there is no single road which completes a circuit around the lake back to East Pond Road. Instead, one can continue on Rt. 215 as it crosses the railroad tracks and continues south along the west bank of the Salt Bay of the Damariscotta River back to Rt. 1.

According to Lake Stewards of Maine (<https://www.lakesofmaine.org/lake-fish.html?m=5400>), a wide range of fish can be found in the lake: American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*); banded killifish (*Fundulus diaphanous*); blacknose dace (*Rhinichthys atratulus*); brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*); brown bullhead (*Ameiurus nebulosus*); brown an trout (*Salmo trutta*); chain pickerel (*Esox niger*); common shiner (*Luxilus cornutus*); creek chub (*Semotilus atromaculatus*); fallfish (*Semotilus corporalis*); golden shiner (*notemigonus crysoleucas*); lake trout (*Salvelinus namaycush*); landlocked salmon (*Salmo salar*); largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*); pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*); rainbow smelt (*Omerus mordax*); smallmouth bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*); white perch (*Morone americana*); white sucker (*Catostomus commersoni*); and yellow perch (*Perca flavescens*). According to the US Geological Survey, neither trout nor largemouth bass were native to the lake. A successful lake trout stocking program was introduced in 1972 and brown trout were added in 1993. Largemouth bass were

introduced into the lake without authorization in the 1980's and are now very common at the southern end of the lake. Bass fishing now exceeds by far all other fishing in the lake.

While catfish are not included in the official list of fish found in Damariscotta Lake, sometime in the 1980s my family did notice, near our dock on the Great Bay in Jefferson, a large school of baby catfish, tended by two adults. We only saw these fish for a few days and only that one year.



Loon seen near our camp on the east side of the Great Bay in 2021



1A rafting of loons seen near our camp on the east side of the Great Bay in August 2022

The loon population on the lake has increased in recent years. In 1983 only 28 adults and one chick were recorded in the annual Audubon Loon Count. In 2019 there were 51 adults and five chicks. In 2020 the annual Audubon Loon Count recorded 41 loons and one chick hatched on the lake. At least once we have seen a loon chick riding on the back of a parent and have also watched parents teach their young to dive for food. We have also occasionally seen a rafting (gathering) of loons in late August, as they prepare to migrate.



Two mature ducks on rocks near our camp shore in 2022.

In recent years mallard ducks have occasionally been spending time around our dock. Sometimes they have even slept on the dock at night.



2Young ducks visiting our dock in 2022

Sometimes, a heron will fly by a few feet above the surface of the water. Bald eagles are also becoming a more common site as they soar above the lake. Once a few wild turkeys came to drink at the shore near our camp. Chickadees, woodpeckers, nuthatches, gulls, gold finches, woodpeckers and blue jays come to our suet feeder and our hummingbird feeders attract many birds. In the summer of 2001, a pair of hummingbirds actually had a nest in a tree right outside our bedroom window. Also, for a number of years, a bittern used to sit on the island across from the camp at sunset and croak like a rusty pump.

Chipmunks, squirrels and garter snakes live along the lakeshore. Common Snapping Turtles (*Chelydra serpentina*) are also frequently seen in the lake.

Much of the lakeshore is wooded. Tree varieties include balsam fir, white birch, birch, maple and ash. Maine Wild Blueberries (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) and Bunchberries (*Cornus canadensis*) grow wild around our camp. Various kinds of fungi are common, especially in late summer and fall.

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