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AMOROUS STEELHEAD STYMIED BY OBSTACLE

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FREMONT At least a half-dozen steelhead trout the largest school spotted in Alameda Creek in 40 years are being chased with nets, but not for dinner.

Their pursuers want to rescue the elusive wild trout, blocked in their migration by a concrete structure, and take them upstream. But the fish outsmarted them on their first attempt Wednesday by hiding.

The rescuers will return today if weather permits and try to catch the fish and get them past barriers and into more suitable spawning and rearing habitat in and near the Sunol Regional Wilderness.

Wednesday's futile rescue attempt was made by local, state and federal fish and game officials, along with members of the Alameda Creek Alliance.

"It was pretty funny, all of us splashing around there and getting wet," said alliance spokesman Jeff Miller. "We thought we had them, but they were wily.

"They certainly will not be able to spawn where they are in the flood control channel, but on the other hand, I certainly had to admire their ability to evade us."

Even if rains postpone the rescue, it's going to happen, Miller said, predicting the fish won't try to head back to the Bay anytime soon. "They're coming in for sex, and the question is, how much patience do they have?"

Sightings of individual steelhead in Alameda Creek this winter have excited environmental and fishing groups pushing to restore a year-round steelhead run to and from the Bay, in part by getting local water agencies to build fish ladders to help fish get upstream over manmade barriers.

But Miller said the latest find is significant because such a large number of steelhead have not been documented in Alameda Creek since the late 1950s.

Steelhead were listed last year as a federally protected species, and regulations on how to protect them are being developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Wednesday's find was made by officials from the fisheries service and the state Department of Fish and Game, who happened to be in the area to design a fish ladder. The officials watched as several steelhead made unsuccessful attempts to get up the slippery slope of a concrete structure in the creek.

"There were at least a half-dozen," said Pete Alexander, fisheries specialist for the East Bay Regional Parks District.

"We do know they're steelhead, and as soon as we get genetic samples, will send them in and know eventually if they're from this area" or strayed from another Bay Area Creek.

Photo 1: Members of the Alameda Creek Alliance, Alameda County Flood Control District, National Marine Fisheries Service and East Bay Regional Park District lay a seine net; Photo 2: John Mann points to a 20-inch steelhead trout as it swims through his legs, evading the net of Pete Alexander. (Jim Ketsdever/Times)