

Creek Alliance Rescues Struggling Steelhead Trout Population Storms Bring Out Volunteers to Transport Fish Upstream

by Joy Mullholand Leong

A report released last week which confirms the possibility of a natural run of native steelhead trout in Alameda Creek is no revelation to a local group of environmentalists.

Volunteers of the Alameda Creek Alliance have for three winters now literally waded in the waters to transport the fish around man-made barriers in the creek that impede what would otherwise be a natural run.

"We've had wild steelhead stacking up in the lower creek the past two years and (the) report provides the basis for moving forward with restoration projects which will allow native fish to once again thrive in Alameda Creek," said the Alliance's Jeff Miller, who coordinates regular "fish rescues."

The most significant obstruction to a steelhead run is a drop structure where BART tracks cross the creek in Fremont. Other obstructions include two dams in the Niles Canyon area owned by the city of San Francisco though they are no longer used; a PG&E structure at the Sunol crossing; and inflatable dams

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— Jeff Miller

operated by the county Water District.

"Fishermen have been hand-carrying fish around the (obstructions) since the 70s," Miller said. "There was an attempt in the 80s to restore the run ... but that kind of died."

Miller took to the cause of Alameda Creek steelhead after watching a spawn run in Marin County a few years ago. He said he enjoyed watching the fish in their natural habitat and realized the best chance for a migratory fish run in the East Bay was Alameda Creek.

Often after a good rain Miller coordinates the fish rescues, for which anywhere from 10 to 20 volunteers show up to transport the fish up stream.

Fishermen, Miller said, used to catch the fish and place

them in burlap bags for transport.

There are a couple of different ways the Creek Alliance now captures and moves the fish, usually from Fremont to the lower Niles Canyon area.

"When we see fish at the barriers, we have a long net that stretches across the creek and we try to trap them that way," he said.

"It's not very effective," he added, because the net tends to lose or even scare some of the fish and they move further downstream where it is difficult for the volunteers to reach them with their smaller nets.

The Alliance also has access to equipment which will "stun" the water and bring fish

Cont. on pg. : Steelheads

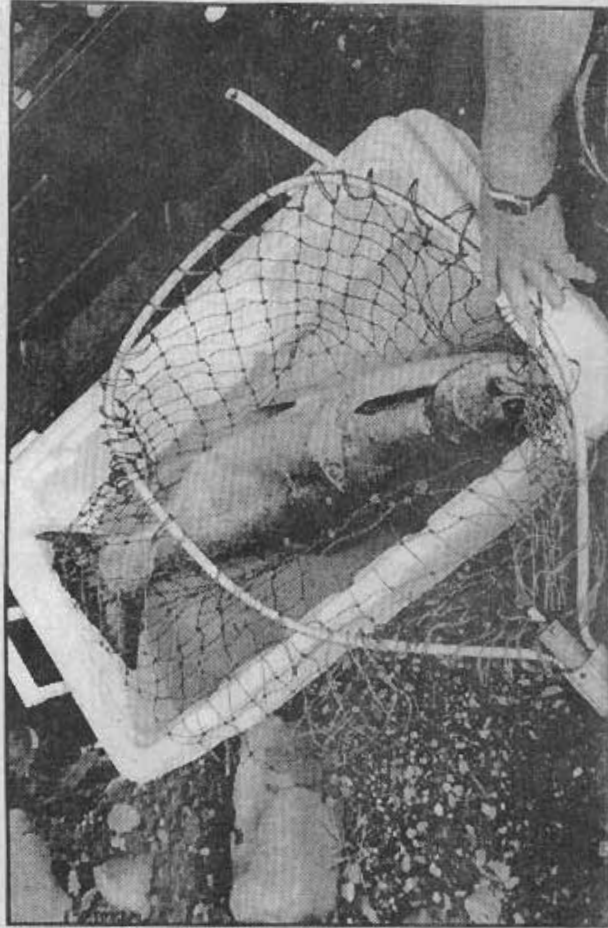


PHOTO - COURTESY OF ALAMEDA CREEK ALLIANCE
Volunteers netted this steelhead trout for transport upstream. Due to barriers in the creek the trout are unable to make it upstream to spawn without the volunteers' help.

Restoration of Creek Steelhead Possible, Report Says

Visions of salmon struggling upstream to spawn are often associated with undeveloped regions, but a recent study suggests it happens in South San Francisco Bay.

The study, commissioned by the Alameda County Flood Control and Water Conservation District along with the California Coastal Conservancy, says that steelhead, an

ocean-going form of rainbow trout related to salmon, could move up Alameda Creek to spawn if man-made structures in the creek channel are modified or removed.

"There appears to be adequate habitat for spawning, but presently the fish cannot get to it," said Laura Kilgour of the Flood Control and Water Conservation District.

A key barrier to fish migration is a drop structure that prevents scouring around bridge supports where Union Pacific Railroad and BART cross the creek in Fremont.

Recently, volunteers have captured adult steelhead at the drop structure, transporting them around the major barriers and releasing them upstream.

The report was prepared by Applied Marine Sciences of Livermore and Hagar Environmental Science of Richmond. It recommends applying for funding to construct facilities for adult fish passage and suggests studying flow requirements in the creek that are needed in order to implement restoration.

Steelhead Trout Making Inroads in Alameda Creek

Cont from pg. 1

to the surface for easier capture. Fish are placed into a cooler, then into an aerated tank for the trek upstream, Miller said. The transport process is also an ideal time to test and tag steelhead so their life-cycles can be monitored.

The genetic testing of the steelhead was one significant factor that allowed last week's report to conclude the creek could indeed sustain a natural population of the fish.

Previously it had been thought among some agencies that any steelhead in the creek were there by mistake, and that the last natural spawn hadn't occurred since the 1950s.

"We'd catch these fish and say, 'Hey, look,'" said Dennis Waespi, a Castro Valley resident who works for the East Bay Regional Park District and sometimes participates in the rescues. "But they'd say, 'These are just hatchery fish that took a wrong turn.'"

"I've been involved in a lot of environmental causes,"

Waespi added, "and you never really win."

The report's release and its recommendation to apply for federal funds to construct fish ladders for safe steelhead passage, however, provides a glimmering hope of at least "winning" support for the struggling steelhead.

Miller said that his fish rescues alone merely provide a temporary solution.

"Even if we can get them to a habitat to allow limited reproduction ... in a few years we could see a minimal run," Miller said. "We are quite pleased with the report and the commitment of the Flood Control District to steelhead restoration."

"Residents of the watershed are going to be thrilled when they can watch these fish spawn in their local creek in a few years."

Miller said he's always on the lookout for new volunteers to help with the fish rescues. Interested residents may contact him at the Alameda Creek Alliance by calling 510-845-4675.