

November 11, 2004

River otter reported at Alameda Creek

By Bonita Brewer

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

SIGHTINGS OF STEELHEAD TROUT vainly attempting to migrate past barriers on Alameda Creek to spawn have become commonplace.

But river otters are a different matter.

For several years now, the Alameda Creek Alliance has reported sightings of steelhead trout and Chinook salmon blocked in their upstream migration by a concrete structure and three rubber dams at the lower end of the creek in the Fremont area.

The alliance, which hopes to get fish ladders installed in order to restore steelhead runs up Alameda Creek and into the Sunol Regional Wilderness, reported more such sightings in late October.

But unusual were reports that a river otter was observed at the same location, said the alliance's Jeff Miller. He said there were three or four such reports, one from an Audubon member who said she watched a cute and furry, heavily whiskered otter swim around for 15 minutes before turning back toward the Bay.

"It's a pretty rare wildlife sighting for Alameda Creek and any urban creek in the Bay Area," Miller said of the reports of the river otter, which has a longer tail than the sea otter and often comes on shore. "It's exciting to think if we're successful in restoring any kind of fish run it would benefit other (predatory) species like that. We'd probably see river otters more often."

A countywide panel has been developing plans to build fish ladders to help stranded steelhead migrate upstream over the rubber dams and concrete structure, and to install fish screens at Alameda County Water District diversion points.

But Miller said hopes of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers covering much of the \$8 million-plus cost have fallen through, and the panel is now going to Rep. Pete Stark, D-Fremont, in search of a congressional appropriation.