

STEELHEAD SAGAS

Some creeks more welcoming than others

- Paul McHugh, Chronicle Outdoors Writer

December 8, 2005

No place like home for the holidays. Steelhead trout think this, too. As winter storms send spates of cold rain gushing down streams, a sea-wandering rainbow trout senses it's time to revisit a creek where it was spawned.

Amazingly, this occurs even in some of our urban zones, at a few dozen Bay Area creeks. As you read this, an unknown number of steelhead (*Onchorhynchus mykiss*) swim about in our murky bay, waiting for that special chemical thumbprint of their home waters to bop their noses, luring them upstream for a dramatic spawning romp on gravel beds awash in cold, clean water.

At least, that's their aim. These supreme athletes of the fish realm possess a dauntless fighting spirit. They can swim hundreds of miles, then leap for yards up foaming rapids to attain their goal. They ascend higher in a watershed than chinook salmon (another anadromous species). Unlike salmon, steelhead return to sea then back again to spawn, often performing this cycle several times.

At one time, 200 years go, they had to pass only dip nets and spears of Ohlone tribesmen and the swinging paws of grizzly bears. In modern times, "steelies" must run a gantlet of dams and weirs; extraction pumps; polluted, hot and/or inadequate water; urban trash; non-native fish that eat their young; riparian forests displaced by asphalt; and rapids replaced by culverts -- as well as a tangle of issues truly over their heads: politics and human competition over resource use.

At a few Bay Area watercourses, such as Codornices Creek, which flows between Albany and Berkeley, enthusiastic involvement by local homeowners and schools, and support from the Urban Creeks Council nonprofit group, has resulted in a commitment to a sustainable steelhead population; a watershed restoration plan is being implemented.

Alameda Creek concerns

At others, such as Alameda Creek, the situation is more perilous. Overall commitment to restore steelhead runs here is not well-defined. Rescue and enhancement measures are under way, but adoption of other essentials hangs in the balance. In fairness, issues here are much more complex. This major tributary river to the South Bay also is a major piece of the plumbing that provides a reliable water supply to millions of Bay Area residents.

Alameda Creek drains a 700-square-mile area of coastal hills south of Livermore and east of Fremont, then flows through 12 miles of concrete canal before it reaches the bay near Coyote Hills Regional Park. Regional water agencies utilize some of its flow. The biggest player is the San Francisco Public Utilities District (SFPUC), which owns 58 square miles here, including San Antonio and Calaveras reservoirs on creek tributaries. These capture local runoff.

Those two reservoirs also help buffer flows from the SFPUC's Hetch Hetchy project in the Sierra. Plans are afoot to rebuild the Calaveras dam, an aging and seismically unsafe structure, sited near three earthquake faults. Local environmental activists want the Calaveras rebuild to include a recognition of the historic importance of steelhead to this watercourse, a commitment to the species restoration, and specific structures to achieve that goal.

So far, says Jeff Miller, who founded the Alameda Creek Alliance in 1997, SFPUC's support of such measures has seemed wary, and partial.

"Alameda Creek could be the healthiest steelhead run in the bay," Miller asserts. "We're in dialogue with SFPUC. Some in the agency do take their natural resources seriously, and want to restore the native fish. Others act like they're only here to supply urban water, and needs of people trump needs of steelhead every time. We want to show how they can have both."

"It's true we've not been able to release water for the trout downstream of Calaveras, as we agreed to do in the past," says Tony Whinnaker, director of communications for the SFPUC. "The reservoir has stayed drawn down, due to that seismic issue. Even had we put more water in the stream, other agencies might just have taken it back out. So, we need to arrive at a multi-agency solution.

"We listened to trout advocates, and modified plans. For instance, we agree to look at alternatives to a rubber dam to recapture water that was part of the Calaveras project. It's a good faith effort. Ultimately, the Commission and our general manager must reach a decision on how to value all these different elements."

Alameda Creek steelhead runs do enjoy bits of good news. The East Bay Regional Park District removed a pair of small dams near the Sunol Wilderness in 2001. Alameda County Water District has agreed to yank one of its rubber dams in Fremont, and it hopes to add a fish ladder to another dam. A new ladder also will bypass the obstacle of a concrete weir under BART tracks there.

The SFPUC in 2001 announced removal of two old and obsolete concrete dams further upstream; that project should get under way next year. The upshot of these improvements should be enhanced spawning in the Niles Canyon "beat" of the stream.

High hopes

But two Holy Grails of steelhead restoration seem to hang just beyond reach. Miller wants to link the genetically pure ancestral strain of steelhead that have been landlocked behind Calaveras Dam for more than a century with that downstream population. He

also wants more vigorous water flows to help young fish go downstream in spring, and reliable, cool fishery flows in this river throughout hot summer months.

A key to the first will be a determination by the National Marine Fisheries Service this month, as to whether or not the above-Calaveras and downstream steelhead are the same threatened species. Miller claims the only genetic testing done so far shows they are; but SFPUC has lobbied NMFS to declare that they are not.

And the flow regime is still under debate. The key here is whether or not water released to the stream eventually may be recaptured for urban supplies.

Tim Ramirez, a veteran of the Tuolumne River Preservation Trust, has just been hired by the SFPUC to head up its new natural resources division. This division will bring together the utility's biology personnel to emphasize proper stewardship of land holdings and waterways.

"We have impressive ecological resources on San Francisco Peninsula and in the Alameda Creek drainage. Right now, the Alameda issues take up 75 percent of my time," says Ramirez.

"In-stream water needs are a puzzle to figure out. We'll have a lot more flexibility after the new Calaveras dam is up and online."

That's a sticking point for Miller. For six years, he has worked diplomatically with SFPUC in the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup, a multi-stakeholder task force. But, he says, if commitment to serious steelhead enhancement isn't written into Calaveras dam project documents, the gloves will come off.

"SFPUC must show sincerity in its promise to restore our native fishery," Miller says. "If not, we will sue under state Fish and Game codes that say living, native streams must not be hurt. We will challenge San Francisco's rights to the Calaveras water, and we will obstruct every single stage of the permitting process."

Wednesday, SFPUC general manager Susan Leal, who took the reins of the sprawling utility late in 2004, said that inserting statements about steelhead restoration goals in its Calaveras plans is under consideration.

"Our absolute first commitment has to be to complete the seismic upgrade to that reservoir, and enhance our potable water storage. We do want to maintain natural habitat and help the steelhead come back to the extent that we can," Leal said. "We've brought key new staff on board to help us determine how. But we can't say whether we have interest in linking those upstream and downstream fish populations until we really know how much money, water and infrastructure might be required."

Leal did say that, in the SFPUC's recently approved budget, \$20 million was assigned to watershed-land acquisition and improvement. "I can guarantee, a significant part of that will go to improve things on Alameda Creek," she said.

-- Oakland's Center for Environmental Management and Restoration (CEMAR) has a study on Bay steelhead. Of 277 streams, 70 percent likely once had runs. Six percent (18 streams) probably boast self-sustaining runs and 10 percent more might have them. Gordon Becker, co-author of the study, says streams in Napa and Sonoma counties have high potential for restoration and enhancement. Find data on streams through the steelhead link at cemar.org.

-- Urban Creeks Council in Berkeley assists neighborhood groups in adopting creeks and launching watershed cleanups and restoration. To find out if a "friends-of-a-creek" group operates near you or to take a fund-raising creek tour go to urbancreeks.org.

The Friends of the Creeks group oversees a surprisingly abundant salmonid stream in Walnut Creek, which received an estimated 10,000 chinook salmon, 1,000 steelhead and even a few coho salmon in 2003. Easiest viewing is along a 2.5-mile stretch of the Iron Horse Trail, from Concord Avenue to Willow Pass Road in Concord -- especially where fish back up at a concrete structure near the Willows shopping center. When rainfall is heavy enough, fish ascend far enough to be seen at Civic Park in the town of Walnut Creek. ci.walnut-creek.ca.us/creeks.html.

-- The Alameda Creek Alliance seeks volunteers to help capture steelhead below the BART tracks weir in Fremont and to transport them upstream for release in spawning areas. alamedacreek.org.

-- Steelhead usually hit Bay Area streams from late December through February. Check with rangers and personnel at streamside parks to locate best viewing sites. Because these fish are drawn by storm runoff, sometimes it's best to let the water clear before seeking to view them. Otherwise, find shallow stretches of water, or rapids where jumping is required for steelhead to make upstream progress.

-- Some destinations: Redwood Creek in Muir Woods has salmon now and steelhead usually in February. (415) 388-2596; Lagunitas Creek in Marin County has tours led by SPAWN (Salmon Protection and Watershed Network), spawnusa.org; The Guadalupe River in San Jose has a river park with trails extending from highways 880 to 280, with access points at West Hedding Street, West Santa Clara and Woz Way. Bridges with views (north to south) include Coleman, Julian, St. John Santa Clara and San Fernando streets, and Park Avenue.