

Alliance hopes steelhead trout making comeback

Alameda Creek watershed once boasted many of the species

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A pair of steelhead trout may be attempting to spawn in Stonybrook Creek in the Nilas Canyon area.

Last week, the fish were tracked to a pooled area of Alameda Creek by members of the Alameda Creek Alliance after being spotted Feb. 25 near a barrier in the lower Alameda Creek flood control channel.

It was the first time adult steelhead trout have tried to spawn in the Alameda Creek watershed since the 1960s, said Jeff Miller, alliance director.

In March 1999, a lone female steelhead named "Stella" was rescued and later swam into Stonybrook Creek.

After the steelhead pair were spotted near the barrier, members of the alliance obtained permits to fit them with radio tags. Members then helped the female they named "Bonnie" and the male they named "Clyde," above the barrier.

"It went really well," Miller said. But he noted, "It's a disorienting process (for the fish)."

Within 24 hours of being caught, weighed and tagged, the pair swam up Stonybrook Creek together, exhibiting spawning behavior.

During the last four years, the alliance has fitted approximately six fish with radio tags. Though the numbers are small, the tags have been helpful for the group.

"(Before tagging and tracking Stella in 1999) we weren't even looking at StonybrookCreek," Miller said. "One fish actually keyed us into a whole new steelhead habitat."

Steelhead trout were listed as a federally threatened species in 1997.

The alliance wants to remove the dams along Alameda Creek and replace them with fish ladders and fish screens that allow fish to navigate upstream.

Fifteen local, state and federal agencies are cooperating on fish passage projects in Alameda Creek.

Miller considers the BART weir in the creek the main impediment to fish swimming toward the cooler spawning grounds above the Sunol Valley and Sunol Regional Park. BART plans to construct a fish ladder at the weir by 2010.

A culvert at the bottom of Stonybrook Creek obstructs the spawning fish and Caltrans officials have said they will replace the culvert with a free span bridge.

In addition, Alameda County completed designs in 2005 to modify two other culverts in lower Stonybrook Creek. Fishing in Stonybrook Creek is not permitted.

The Alameda Creek watershed once supported populations of steelhead trout and salmon, Miller said.

Urbanization and the construction of dams along the creek blocked the steelhead from migrating to more suitable spawning areas. As a result, the trout have been absent from Alameda Creek for decades.

Miller welcomes the steelhead back to Fremont.

"Residents along Stonybrook and Sinbad creeks could literally see steelhead and salmon spawning in their backyard creeks within a few years," Miller said.