

After five decades, steelhead trout babies spotted in Niles Canyon watershed

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FREMONT - Environmentalists think that a steelhead trout couple they named Bonnie and Clyde may be the first of their kind to reproduce in the Alameda County watershed in about a half-century.

This week, volunteers with the Alameda Creek Alliance spotted hundreds of baby trout that had just hatched in Stonybrook Creek, about one-third of the way up Niles Canyon.

The fry, as young trout are known, hatched in and around the pool that Bonnie and Clyde had settled in, said Jeff Miller, the alliance's executive director.

Their appearance also comes nearly two months after the couple was seen exhibiting spawning behavior - the average amount of time for trout eggs to hatch and babies to emerge from underwater gravel.

Steelhead historically swam upstream to spawn in the Alameda County watershed.

However, the construction of a flood control channel and the 9-foot-tall concrete BART weir in the 1960s and early 1970s blocked the path of the trout. As a result, steelhead have been absent from the watershed for several decades.

Volunteers carted Bonnie and Clyde around the barriers last February and tagged them with monitors to track their journey upstream to Stonybrook Creek, a prime spawning area for rainbow trout, which live their entire lives in the watershed.

The alliance has escorted a few dozen steelhead beyond the barrier in the past decade, but so few fish are usually rescued at one time that they can't find each other upstream to spawn, Miller said.

The alliance won't know for sure if the young fry, which are about 1-inch long, are steelhead or rainbow trout until later this year. Volunteers will take

fin clippings from the fry that die in shallow pools and compare them with those previously taken of Bonnie and Clyde to establish lineage.

Young steelhead stay in the watershed for a year or two before heading downstream and into the Bay, Miller said. They then return to freshwater streams to spawn.

In a few years, the Bonnies and Clydes of the Alameda Creek watershed shouldn't need any help to spawn.

Construction of a fish ladder and the removal of dams so that steelhead can migrate upstream on their own is scheduled for completion in 2010.

The project would make up to 20 miles of the watershed and its tributaries accessible to steelhead and other ocean-run fish for the first time in more than 50 years, Miller said.