

Timely Return Of Steelhead Trout To Alameda Creek



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Up to a dozen federally protected steelhead trout were spotted in Alameda Creek in Fremont yesterday during a tour of the creek given to state and federal fish and game officials. Engineers and hydrologists from the federal National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the state Department of Fish and Game (DFG) were invited to the creek by the Alameda Creek Alliance to view the concrete weir in the creek channel below the B.A.R.T. tracks in order to develop a design for a proposed fish ladder on the structure. Several steelhead were seen jumping onto the weir, in unsuccessful attempts to get up the slippery concrete slope. Up to a dozen of the silvery fish were congregated downstream of the obstruction, periodically making efforts to get upstream to potential spawning grounds above Niles Canyon. "These fish had an impeccable sense of timing", said Jeff Miller, leading the tour for the Alameda Creek Alliance. "They demonstrated the need for a fish ladder in quite a dramatic way."

At the weir, an often amusing attempt was made to net the fish, in order to move them upstream past migrational barriers. Employees of EBRPD and Alameda County Flood Control District (ACFCD), the agency which owns the weir, along with several Alameda Creek Alliance volunteers and the NMFS engineers, splashed around in the creek, pursuing the wily and elusive fish. Three steelhead were caught temporarily in a seine net, but slipped away from would-be rescuers. "This proves that fish are smarter than men." said Miller. The steelhead are holding in a pool of impounded water below the weir and are in good condition. Another attempt will be made on Friday, March 13th at 7 A.M. to net and move the fish. Biologists will also try to get fin clips, for genetic tests which may confirm hopes that these fish are natives returning to their ancestral streams.

The steelhead were believed to have moved up to the creek from the bay over a week ago, before an inflatable dam was raised 1/2 mile downstream. A steelhead was spotted at the weir by an East Bay Regional Parks District (EBRPD) employee on March 4th. Steelhead, an ocean-going form of rainbow trout, were listed as a federally threatened species last August. Unlike other Pacific salmon, they do not necessarily die after spawning, and can return to the sea, surviving to potentially spawn again. Local environmentalists and fishermen, organized as the Alameda Creek Alliance, have been fighting to restore the steelhead and salmon runs to Alameda Creek.

Two other steelhead were seen spawning in a tributary to the original Alameda Creek channel on March 2nd and 3rd. Unfortunately, the tributary the fish were in was judged to be unsuitable habitat for the eggs to successfully hatch. This was evident not only from the garbage and refuse dumped in the creek, but also due to the channel being lined with concrete, loaded with silt, and devoid of any vegetation to shade the creek to keep water at suitable temperatures.

The Alameda Creek Alliance will be meeting with ACFCD and the Army Corps of Engineers in April to discuss permitting and funding for the fish ladder as well as possible construction of a low-flow channel, to facilitate migration of juvenile fish out to the bay during low flows in the spring. The Alliance has also obtained agreements from the Alameda County Water District (ACWD) on an interim solution to help keep fish alive that are blocked at the weir, so they can be transported upstream - until a more permanent solution, such as a fish ladder, is realized. ACWD has also committed to accommodate fish migration up and down the creek once sufficient water is obtained to ensure that juvenile fish can migrate out to the bay. ACWD operates three inflatable rubber dams in the creek channel in Fremont, operation of which has left fish high and dry in the de-watered channel during attempted spawning runs.

The next meeting of the Alameda Creek Alliance is 7PM Thursday, March 26th, at the Centerville Public Library in Fremont; 3101 Nicolet Ave.

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