

# Workers restoring blocked creeks

By Dennis J. Oliver  
STAFF WRITER

**ALONG WILDCAT CREEK** — The concrete ditch, its lifeless banks marred with gang graffiti, isn't much to look at. Overhead are railroad bridges and the noise of freight trains. Nearby is a muddy automobile wrecking yard.

Only a few stray shrubs have sprouted at the cement-block edges of the channel.

But Bay Area creek restorationists see a different future for the area. The 800-foot section of Wildcat Creek in north Richmond wasn't always this way — and it can be brought back to life with a little help, they say.

On Thursday, workers with shovels and picks began removing the last barriers on the creek that prevent steelhead trout from freely moving from the San Francisco Bay to historic spawning grounds in the canyons of the Richmond/Berkeley hills. The group began dismantling a poorly designed fish ladder in the cemented portion of the creek and digging a trench to provide enough depth for fish to migrate. The ladder, installed two years ago, had become clogged with debris.

When the work is finished in a few days, steelhead will be free to spawn in creek sections downstream from Tilden Regional Park's Lake Anza for the first time in nearly a century.

"What we're trying to do is recreate what was here before,"



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NICK LAMMERS — Staff

**East Bay Conservation Corps clear debris from a "fish ladder" in a channel of Wildcat Creek in Richmond, where they will dig a trench to help steelhead trout get through.**

said Ann L. Riley, executive director of the Waterways Restoration Institute, which teamed up with the East Bay Conservation Corps to do the work.

The creek is one of scores around the Bay Area paved or shoved into underground tunnels decades ago. Today, those creeks are being rediscovered.

"To think that steelhead can spawn in an urban area like this is amazing," said Joanne Lennon, the corps' executive director. "There's still a lot of work to be done, but great impetus to do it."

Citizens' groups have been particularly active in the East Bay. San Leandro Creek in San Leandro, Strawberry Creek in Berkeley, Alameda Creek in Fremont and Sausal Creek in Oakland have been subjects of aggressive community interest — and ambitious restoration projects. A steelhead



Staff

trout was found in Alameda Creek in Fremont last month.

Last summer's listing of the steelhead in the Bay Area as a threatened species bolstered the movement, as restoration of traditional spawning grounds is considered critical to bringing back the fish. The steelhead run in the Bay Area has plummeted from an estimated high of 94,000 in earlier years to about 9,400 today.

Steelhead still can be found in creek sections throughout the

East Bay hills, but they are landlocked by dams, flood control structures and log jams.

"We're staged for a comeback," said Pete Alexander, a marine biologist for the East Bay Regional Park District.

The effort to restore Wildcat Creek began 15 years ago when conservationists, residents in the Richmond flatlands and farmers in rural Contra Costa County upstream became concerned that the creek might some day be lost to pavement.