

Steelhead trout seen flirting in Alameda Creek

By Andrew Cavette

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For the first time in four decades, a pair of steelhead trout may be attempting to spawn in the Niles Canyon area between Sunol and Hayward.

The fish were tracked last week to a pool in Alameda Creek by members of the Alameda Creek Alliance after being seen 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 past 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 Stonybrook Creek," 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 give fish access to upstream areas.

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 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.

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

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

Urbanization and the construction of dams blocked the steelhead from migrating to 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.