

In an East Bay creek, a hopeful hunt for a threatened fish

By Peter Fimrite
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Inspired by a rare sighting of steelhead trout, biologists and volunteers tromped through Alameda Creek under the BART tracks in Fremont on Tuesday in an animated search for the fish, a federally protected species that once reigned supreme throughout the Bay Area but is now almost gone.

The expedition was an attempt to find two steelhead spotted last week, and some of their buddies, but the search party came up empty, netting only carp, some pike minnow and an ice chest full of the slithery eel-like fish known as the Pacific lamprey.

“No success with the steelhead,” said a disappointed Jeff Miller, executive director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, as he stood in the creek bed, wet up to his thighs. “We know they are still here in the creek and we will probably come back after the next set of storms and try again to net them.”

The pair of steelhead, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, were spotted by biologists last week in the flood control channel below the BART weir, a concrete barrier that has blocked fish migration for decades.

It was the first confirmed sighting of steelhead in Alameda Creek in eight years and grounds for giddiness among fisheries biologists, who have been working for decades to bring back the historic fish migrations.

The biologists were hoping to capture the elusive trout, affix them with radio tags and release them into the upper part of the watershed, where they could be monitored as they freely laid eggs in what was once their native habitat. The spot where steelhead are born is forever imprinted in their brains, which is why the fish return every three to five years.

The volunteers, led by biologists with the East Bay Regional Park District and Alameda Creek Alliance, blocked the escape routes under the weir and dragged the remaining pond with netting. The effort was helped along by the Alameda County Water District, which used an inflatable dam upstream to block the flow of the creek, which has been raging after a series of storms over the past week.

“We have a remnant run here — a small number of fish who try to come up in wet winters,” Miller said. “Like everything, steelhead are just a fraction of their historic numbers, (but) we’ve got 20 miles of good spawning habitat.”

Major tributary

The 45-mile-long Alameda Creek is the third-largest tributary of San Francisco Bay behind the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. It has been the focus of intensive restoration efforts since 1997, when Central Coast steelhead were listed as threatened.

Huge numbers of steelhead and coho salmon once swam up Alameda Creek, which runs through Niles Canyon and the Sunol Valley, bisecting both Santa Clara and Alameda counties before emptying out along the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay in Hayward.

Dams and various blockages and diversions, though, cut off the migratory route of the fish. Coho have not been seen in the East Bay waterway since the 1960s and it has been a half century since any significant number of steelhead have spawned in the creek, according to watershed biologists.

Fifteen federal, state and local agencies, including the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the Alameda County Water District, are working within the watershed, which essentially drains the southern two-thirds of the East Bay, including the southern slopes of Mount Diablo.

Seventeen fish-passage projects have been completed since 2001. And several fish ladders are expected to be built, including one bypassing the Fremont weir and the inflatable rubber dam upstream, between 2017 and 2020.

Capital improvements

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is also rebuilding the seismically unsafe Calaveras Dam in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. The \$416 million project, which is expected to be completed in 2018, will replace the 210-foot-high earthen barrier that has collected water from Alameda Creek since 1925.

The rainbow trout in the reservoir are believed to be landlocked steelhead that are descendants of the indigenous fish population, biologists say. Conservationists hope to use those fish as a potential gene pool for restoring the original native steelhead runs.

The new dam will have fish ladders and screens to prevent fish from being sucked into pumps. Once that is done, the weir in Fremont will be the largest impassable barrier left in the watershed.

The idea is to eventually open 20 miles of previously inaccessible habitat for steelhead to migrate, lay eggs and raise babies in the watershed, Miller said.

There has been some progress. Miller said biologists have radio-tagged and moved 27 steelhead since 1997, including a pair of fish that spawned in March 2008 in the Stonybrook Creek tributary in Niles Canyon. There were also unconfirmed sightings of steelhead in the creek in 2010 and 2012.

"It's not surprising with this rain that steelhead trout are coming back into Alameda Creek, the largest local tributary to San Francisco Bay," Miller said.

"This makes it more urgent to finally build the fish ladders that are planned for the flood control channel, so steelhead can migrate upstream through Niles Canyon and into suitable spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek."