

Chinook salmon returning to Alameda Creek in Niles Canyon

By Ryan Yamamoto

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Almost every day, you will find amateur photographers Dan Sarka and David Young traversing the trails around Alameda Creek, looking to capture and document the return of Chinook salmon in the Niles Canyon area.

"I catch more fish with cameras than I do with a hook," joked Young. "I used to liken it to a kid in a candy factory, but it's better, it's better."

Sarka would agree, and will patiently spend two to three hours staring at the creek, hoping for any sign of salmon.

"We are looking for ripples in the water," Sarka said. "And when you see it, it is total excitement to see those fish struggling to make it up into the watershed and beyond. It is a fabulous experience."

Together, the pair have taken dozens of photos of salmon, including the most recent migration through the creek, which began this fall.

Young even recorded a video of a salmon leaping over a weir.

"I got the final leap," said Young. "I have several leaps before that that weren't successful, but the very last one, he leapt all the way across and made it by, you know, a good 2 to 3 feet."

The return of Chinook salmon has been a historical and pivotal moment for the region after a community of environmentalists, scientists and researchers spent the past several decades trying to restore the area's natural habitat.

In 2022, the Alameda County Water District completed a massive infrastructure project downstream that included a series of fish ladders to help with the migration of Pacific lamprey, endangered steelhead trout and, of course, salmon.

"They've been showing up in big numbers, and the unique thing about them is they are highly visible," said ACWD water planning manager Thomas Niesar. "They're just an enigmatic fish, and they are energizing for people."

No one is more energized than Jeff Miller with the [Alameda Creek Alliance](#), whose group has worked with other environmental organizations to clear dams along the creek, including the final unnatural fish barrier that was removed by CalTrout and PG&E this year, creating nearly 20 miles of potential spawning habitat.

"This is the biggest run of Chinook we've seen," Miller said. "And this is the first time we know since the 1950s that showed Chinook salmon could swim on their own, all the way up as far as they've gotten to the Sunol Valley."

The return of the salmon is already having an impact on the ecological health of the region.

"We have already seen a family of river otters move in, there is a local bald eagle pair that comes in and gets the salmon carcasses," said Miller. "Turkey vultures, raccoons, and we may have bears here in the next couple decades in the Bay Area."

It will only mean more natural wildlife for Sarka and Young to document, and whose work capturing the migrating salmon has been more than just a hobby, but also an invaluable piece of research for scientists.

"We actually refer to them as citizen scientists," said Niesar. "Those early photographs that Dan captured were critical for biologists to determine when we would expect to see the fish. If we didn't have that data, we would have been shooting in the dark."

ACWD is encouraging other photographers [to upload their photos and videos](#) of wildlife to study and share with researchers.