Salmon Make Return to Sunol Valley for First Time in More Than 70 Years

Migration is a Huge Positive for Ecosystem and Other Threatened Species

By David Jen

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A Chinook salmon swims up Alameda Creek to spawn where salmon have been unable to travel for more than 70 years. (Photo — Dan Sarka)

SUNOL — Chinook salmon last month swam to their farthest point in Alameda Creek in more than 70 years, traveling from the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay through Niles Canyon into Sunol Valley. As of Nov. 19, they had reached a point upstream of Interstate 680, beyond a fish-passage project completed in November by the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup.

The project has opened up more than 20 miles of fish habitat that includes the Arroyo de la Laguna in Pleasanton and the Calaveras Reservoir.

The salmon's return signals more than just new fish in the creek, said Claire Buchanan, the central California regional director at California Trout. California Trout joined the project in

2023 to coordinate permitting and fundraising for the restoration phase of the $6 million project.

“Salmon and steelhead (trout) are ecosystem indicators,” Buchanan said. “When you have salmon and steelhead that are healthy and reproducing, you know that you have cool, clean water, and that you’re likely supporting other elements of the ecosystem. One of the cool things about our Alameda Creek project in Sunol is that we’re already seeing other threatened species coming in our project site, like, we’ve seen tiger salamanders (and) we’ve seen northwestern pond turtles.”

While historical records recount natural spawning runs in Alameda Creek, the route has been closed off to migratory fish since the 1960s, when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers converted lower Alameda Creek from a natural watercourse to a flood-control channel. The conversion destroyed fish habitats and added water-diversion structures. An erosion-control dam for a Bay Area Rapid Transit crossing built in 1972 further blocked the creek.

Since its inception in 1999, the restoration group’s 15 local, state and federal agencies have worked to return steelhead trout, a threatened species, to the Alameda Creek watershed. The group has removed dams, built fish ladders and improved riparian habitat along the creek.

This fall’s project, led by group member Pacific Gas & Electric, remediated the last unnatural barrier on the creek’s mainstem, burying a gas pipeline crossing the creek in Sunol Valley upstream of I-680.

“We just wrapped up construction, and the fish are already finding their way home,” Buchanan said following the salmon sightings. “It’s incredibly gratifying to see these incredible species reclaim crucial habitat that they have been locked out of for decades.”

Alameda Creek Alliance Director Jeff Miller said, “The return of salmon heralds hope for more healthy ecosystems, and these charismatic fish are excellent ambassadors for protecting and restoring our local watershed. We’re seeing results from two decades of restoration projects, and we hope Alameda Creek will have an outsized impact on recovery of steelhead trout in the region. It’s profoundly gratifying to see watershed residents and local water agencies taking pride in bringing back native fish and wildlife.”

Although the group has worked to protect steelhead, “the Chinook just showed up first,” said Joseph Sullivan, fisheries program manager at the East Bay Regional Park District, another workgroup member. “We see Chinook usually come in earlier than steelhead. They come in October, November, December. Steelhead come usually in January, February, March. So, it’s just been a product of us restoring steelhead that we’re starting to see Chinook salmon also coming into the system.”

Salmon, like steelhead, are anadromous, meaning they migrate between rivers and the sea throughout their lifecycle. They lay their eggs in fresh water, where the young fish develop before they migrate to the ocean.

“The young juvenile salmon will then move out to the ocean where they have a lot more access to rich food resources, so they can get really big,” Sullivan said. “They stay in the ocean for approximately three to four years and then will return historically to the same stream where they were born. I make that point because they haven’t been born in Alameda Creek for over 75 years. What we’re seeing now are hatchery strays.”

Because humans often transplant hatchery fish into the bay, the fish lose their natural homing abilities and instead follow flushes of fresh water when it’s time to spawn.

“We see hatchery fish entering almost every stream in the bay just because they sense fresh water with these big rains, and they’re waiting for that big queue of fresh water,” Sullivan said. “They’re just going to whichever stream that attracts them first.”

Salmon migrations can exceed 1,000 miles. Once returning adults reach freshwater, they stop feeding.

While the group has not reported any sightings beyond Sunol Valley, Buchanan said she looks forward to the next big rain, which may attract even more fish, including the first steelhead of the season.