‘Epic’: Salmon seen far upstream in Bay Area creek for first time in 70 years

By Anna Bauman,Staff Writer

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A chinook salmon jumps upstream in Alameda Creek in November while migrating for spawning. Some salmon have swum further up the creek than any others over the last 70 years.

Alameda Creek Alliance

Leaping over small man-made jumps and swimming determinedly upstream in Alameda Creek, a small group o bright red chinook salmon are back rom the Pacific Ocean and ready to spawn.

Twenty miles upstream in the Sunol Valley, at least one salmon had made it arther than the rest by Wednesday — and arther than any known salmon since the 1950s, said Jeff Miller, director o the nonprofit advocacy group Alameda Creek Alliance.

“I’d say it’s epic — this is what we’ve been working or the last three decades,” Miller said. “It’s going to be a really interesting change and enhancement or a lot o wildli e, but also or the public, seeing these fish back in the stream a ter so long.”

Alameda Creek, a 45-mile stream, twists through Fremont and empties into the San Francisco Bay just south o the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge.

Once native to the stream, chinook salmon have been unable to reach the upper portion o Alameda Creek or decades due to concrete barriers and other water supply in rastructure blocking their path, Miller said.

But over the past three decades, the Alameda County water and flood control districts and other agencies — urged on by environmental groups — have completed restoration projects meant to encourage fish migration.

Officials have removed a ew small dams and built fish ladders or others; these help steelhead trout and salmon swim up and over barriers.

A ladder in lower Alameda Creek, completed in recent years, “creates hydraulic conditions where it’s easy or them to move,” Miller said. “There’s places or them to hold, and then they just move up a step, and hold, move up a step.”

Water flows through a cement fish ladder maintained by Alameda County Water District that’s along Alameda Creek in the Fremont area, as seen in 2024. The fish ladders help salmon and trout surmount man-made obstacles such as dams as the swim upstream.

Jessica Christian/S.F. Chronicle

Fish passage improvements on lower Alameda Creek cost $80 million, with seven projects spanning more than two decades, according to the Alameda County Water District.

This week, volunteers with the Alameda Creek Alliance snapped photos o roughly a dozen chinook salmon using the newest fish ladder to navigate upstream into lower Niles Canyon, located about 12 miles rom the bay.

Meanwhile, the salmon arther upstream in Sunol was seen “exactly where a ormer fish passage barrier got taken out this summer and all,” Miller said.

“We probably are seeing a raction o them, so there could be a decent run o fish,” Miller said. “They know what they’re doing — they’ll find each other, they’ll find a good spawning habitat.”

The restoration efforts were ocused on bringing back steelhead trout, a threatened species in Northern Cali ornia, but chinook salmon are also reaping the benefits as they migrate up Alameda Creek in late November and December.

“We’re proud to see our environmental stewardship efforts making a real difference or local wildli e and our watershed,” the Alameda County Water District wrote Thursday on Facebook, in a post sharing photos o the migrating chinook salmon.

Similar efforts have occurred in other parts o Cali ornia. A ter a $500 million dam-removal project on the Klamath River, considered the largest in U.S. history, salmon reached the river’s headwaters in October or the first time in more than a century.

Salmon are anadromous fish, meaning they are born in reshwater streams, migrate out to the ocean or their adult lives and, guided by smell and magnetic cues, eventually return to the stream where they were born to spawn and die.

With the native salmon population in decline, however, many o the chinook salmon in Cali ornia are artificially propagated in hatcheries, then dumped in the San Pablo Bay or Carquinez Straight.

With no imprint on a native stream, Miller said hatchery fish return rom the ocean and “opportunistically” swim up available streams, such as Alameda Creek.

Miller said his group had not yet seen evidence o spawning, but volunteers and fisheries biologists with the East Bay Regional Parks District and San Francisco Public Utilities Commission are monitoring the stream.

The returning salmon benefit the wider ecosystem, attracting “all kinds o predators and scavengers,” Miller said. A bald eagle pair in Fremont regularly eat chinook carcasses, he said, while a amily o river otters treats the fish ladder “like their snack machine.”

Miller said he hopes the chinook salmon — and eventually, more steelhead, which have been returning more slowly — reach the Sunol Regional Wilderness, where remote conditions are ideal and park visitors could see them spawn.

“I think o salmon as kind o the soul o our rivers,” he said. “My hope is that these fish will get people to really care about the stream and the watershed.”

Dan Sarka, a volunteer with the Alameda Creek Alliance who has been watching the salmon and steelhead or decades, said it was heartbreaking to watch them try to jump over concrete barriers, only to slide backward. Now, with the fish ladder in place, “they can make their way upstream to their home.”

“It’s just marvelous, it really is,” said Sarka, a photographer.

With the stream now cleared o many obstacles, Miller said he hopes to see more fish migrating up and down Alameda Creek each year.

“Given enough generations,” he said, “this will be the native salmon run on the creek.”