

## OUTDOORS

## Alameda Creek's Renaissance

Steelhead's return  
a symbol of change

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Bike, hike or ride a horse out to a spot where Alameda Creek flows into San Francisco Bay, and you'll soon score a splendid and educational view.

This point — 2 miles out in the bay from the edge of Coyote Hills Regional Park in Fremont — is reached by a pair of trails atop flood-control levees that bracket the stream.

Usually, only yachtsmen enjoy such tranquil vistas. The bay's rim of natural landforms dominates the skyline; human structures seem shriveled in scale and importance. Sounds of wind and wave are ascendant. Noise only issues from aircraft drifting into SFO, 10 miles to the northwest.

Near you, herons and egrets stalk the estuarine marsh along the creek. Harriers hover on the breeze. Sandpipers flit to and fro.

This Alameda Creek scene seems a living gift, a tiny fragment from the south bay's past. Turn and gaze back upstream toward Fremont, and it looks as though development's concrete and asphalt jaws are snapping shut on the stream's watershed like pliers.

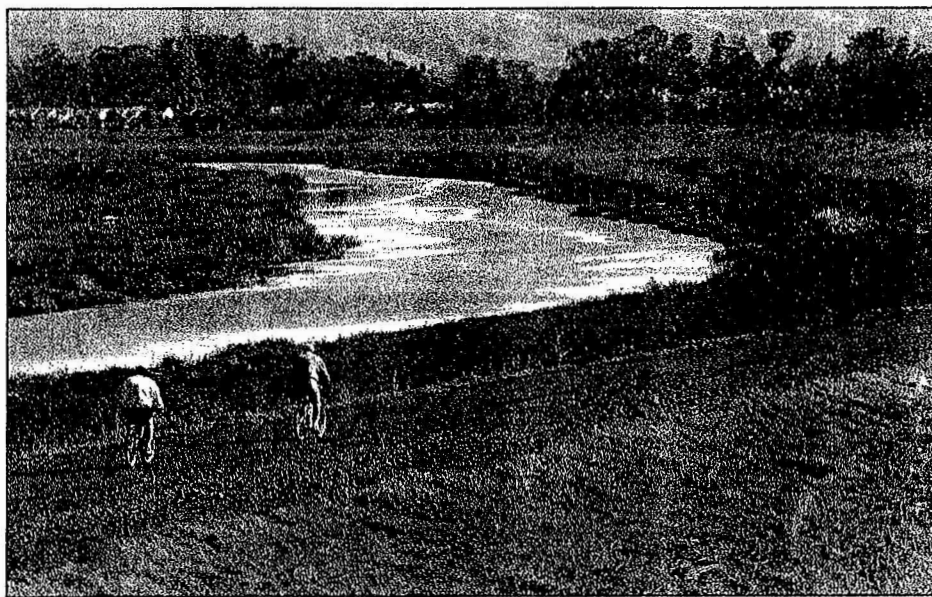
But the reality is more interesting. Alameda Creek is on the brink of a natural renaissance. Moves are under way to enhance ecologic values, and make this whole drainage a grander place for outdoor recreation. Symbol of the change: Massive sea-wandering steelhead trout. A few return to this creek, striving to swim upstream to ancestral spawning riffles. Soon, that struggle will get easier.

In summer, two of nine dams barring their progress will come down. Plans are afoot to remove others, modify their operation or add fish ladders, allowing steelhead to reclaim miles of stream. Next, major enhancement efforts will be launched to restore this magical but threatened species.

This fall, the Quarry Lakes, just north of the creek in Fremont, will be reborn as wildlife preserves and recreational sites — complete with a new swimming beach. Envisioned for the future: hiking trails, picnic grounds and campsites in a linked system ascending Alameda Creek through Niles Canyon, going more than 40 miles inland, all the way from the creek's mouth to Sunol Regional Wilderness and beyond.

"Many issues remain to be dealt with," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. The new, non-profit group organizes volunteers to work for watershed restoration. "But last year, the watershed's major management agencies agreed on what should be done. Momentum for restoration seems to be snowballing."

Miller, who also works for the Berkeley Center for Biodiversity, snatched up the torch for restoring steelhead here, a flame that has flickered since the 1940s. He has toured board meetings and classrooms making his pitch — lately with a stuffed steelhead named Stella under one arm. A 27-inch, gravid female, Stella was found three miles up San Lorenzo Creek, just to the north, during last winter's spawning run.



CHRISTINA KOCI HERNANDEZ / The Chronicle

Alameda Creek is on the brink of a natural renaissance that will make it a grander place for outdoor recreation.

Miller has also hoisted live fish. The 180-member Alliance has promoted cleanups of in-stream trash, and also netted steelhead below the dams and given them a boost up to spawning areas in Niles Canyon — one of several *ad hoc* efforts to keep the runs alive.

Stand at the mouth of Alameda Creek on any day this winter and adult steelhead may be finning past just below you, invisible in the turbid water.

Were you to ascend with them, your first obstacle would be a big, inflatable dam of black rubber — one of three operated by the Alameda County Water District. Their job is to impound winter run-off, letting it percolate down to recharge ground water. The first is only 6 feet high; steelhead can leap it easily. The others may be inflated to 13 feet. The district is exploring the notion of operating these dams in a way that permits fish passage.

The next major impasse is a big concrete weir built to stabilize overhead BART tracks. This impediment needs ancillary construction of a fish ladder.

You'd pass the final black rubber dam at Niles, just before the entrance to the canyon, near a large parking and staging area for hikers and cyclists. This point is 12 miles upstream from the Alameda Creek mouth. Two other staging areas for human recreationists are found in between: Beard, at 5.98 miles; and Isherwood, at 7.83 miles.

Beautiful as the steep, green, 6-mile-long Niles Canyon is, it still poses a transit problem for people and fish. You can drive it, but the very best way to see it is to take a Sunday run on the Niles Canyon Historic Railway.

If they made it up this far, steelhead would bump into two old concrete dams, owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC). The first is 6-feet high, the second is 11 feet. Both are slated to be either removed or netted to enhance fish passage. The hope is to acquire Army Corps of Engineers mitiga-

## Alameda Creek Information

- **Alameda Creek Alliance** — [www.alamedacreek.com](http://www.alamedacreek.com).
- **Coyote Hills Regional Park** — Take Patterson-Ranch Road west from Paseo Padre Parkway, west of Fremont. Visitor Center has natural history displays. It's open: 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m., Tuesday-Sunday (park gate opens at 8 a.m.). Parking: \$4. (510) 795-9385.
- **Alameda Creek Regional Trail** — Distance from Niles Staging Area (off Old Canyon Road) to the bay: 12 miles, paved south side; 12.4 miles, unpaved north side. Open: sunrise-10 p.m. daily. (510) 881-1833.
- **Niles Canyon Heritage Railroad** — One-hour runs on historic trains, first and third Sundays of each month. Cost: \$7 (general); \$3 (children ages 3-12). No reservations. (925) 862-9063.
- **Sunol Regional Wilderness** — Located off Calaveras Road, southeast of Sunol. Open 7 a.m.-sunset, daily. Fees: \$4 (parking), \$5 (night, backpack camping); \$11 (car camping). (510) 636-1684.
- **Quarry Lakes Recreation Area** — The nine quarry pits of this 450-acre site now are used for groundwater recharge by the Alameda County Water district. Over the past year, the shoreline has been resloped, and a third of the area will be opened in fall for wildlife habitat and low-impact recreation. Facilities include a swim beach, boat ramp, picnic areas and hiking trails. General information, on this and other parks above: (510) 635-0138, or [www.ebparks.org](http://www.ebparks.org).

— Paul McHugh

tion funds or other environmental grants to accomplish it.

Also, the SFPUC may transfer some of its 40,000 acres in the Alameda Creek watershed to the East Bay Regional Park District. This would permit establishment of connecting trails through Niles Canyon and beyond.

Once past the town of Sunol, Alameda Creek fans out into valleys of its 700 square-mile drainage. Problems here include road crossings, an armored PG&E gas line, and hurdles like steep rock-falls and a partially denuded landscape.

"To restore a fishery, you must work on water courses and the whole riparian corridor," said Michael Carlin, planning director for the SFPUC. "That includes replanting forests to shade the water, establishing pools and riffles, and getting sufficient flows at the right times of year — which means agencies will have to change the way they look at water."

One ace in the hole is the existence of

native steelhead populations (who are a variant on native rainbow trout) that have survived locked behind two SFPUC dams high in the watershed, San Antonio and Calaveras.

Pete Alexander, fishery biologist for East Bay Regional Parks, said using smolts from these fish to repopulate the creek could mean the creation of a catch-and-release fly-fishery within 10 years after dams come down.

"We are excited about this," Alexander said. He stood near two swimming impoundment dams scheduled to be yanked out of Sunol Regional Wilderness by August. "We're on a long, pristine stretch, here. This could be one of the best restorations possible in the entire Bay Area."

In the upper Alameda Creek watershed, tule elk roam, coyotes yip, raptors soar, red-legged and yellow-legged frogs splash. Add spawning steelhead to this mix, and humans will be able to visit a site in which they can take joy, awe, inspiration and pride.