

Salmon Spawning in Alameda Creek

Chinook Salmon Reach Niles Canyon for First Time in 30 Years

For Immediate Release: November 18, 2025

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Fremont, CA – Adult Chinook salmon have moved upstream through Alameda Creek into lower Niles Canyon, the first time in three decades that salmon have migrated this far upstream thanks to new fish ladders and fish passage projects recently completed in the lower creek. Alameda Creek Alliance volunteers photographed nearly a dozen Chinook moving into lower Niles Canyon over the past week, 12 miles upstream from San Francisco Bay.

“We are currently welcoming a small run of Chinook salmon into the middle of the Alameda Creek watershed, some beautiful adult fish that are benefitting from the fish passage projects recently completed in the lower creek aimed at steelhead trout migration,” said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance. “About a dozen salmon are on their way into Niles Canyon to spawn. This is the furthest upstream migration of salmon in Alameda Creek since the mid-1990s when East Bay Parks biologists rescued a couple dozen stranded Chinook and moved them upstream.”

The salmon have moved through newly constructed fish ladders in the Alameda Creek flood control channel that were formerly barriers to fish migration. They now can swim into the upper watershed to reach suitable spawning habitat in Niles Canyon, Sunol Valley, and lower Arroyo de la Laguna in Pleasanton.

Early storms have attracted migration of small numbers of adult Chinook salmon into lower Alameda Creek in Fremont every fall since 2018, though this year’s salmon run appears to be the largest in recent years. More salmon were seen this week in the lower creek, holding at the mouth of the creek and in the flood control channel near tidal influence. Fisheries biologists with the East Bay Regional Park District and San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, along with Alameda Creek volunteers will be monitoring upstream reaches of Alameda Creek and tributaries to determine where these salmon will spawn.

The Chinook are most likely strays from Central Valley fish hatcheries. However, Chinook spawned in the nearby Guadalupe River in San Jose could enter Alameda Creek as well. Chinook of hatchery origin began spawning in the 1990s in South Bay streams, where there are now small numbers of naturally reproducing fish. Chinook historically spawned in Alameda Creek, evidenced by ancient salmon remains found in Native American shell mounds along the creek in Fremont. Recent scientific studies and DNA sequencing have provided proof of historic Chinook salmon runs in Santa Clara County in the Guadalupe River.

Downtown San Jose is now the southernmost major metropolitan area hosting salmon runs in the United States. A genetic analysis done on Chinook salmon sampled from recent returns to the Guadalupe River watershed revealed that most fish are closely related to Feather River Hatchery strains, with a few of natural origin. Chinook will likely repopulate Alameda Creek now that fish passage projects are completed. The return of salmon benefits other native wildlife in the watershed such as river otters and bald eagles.

“The continuing return of salmon heralds hope for more healthy ecosystems and these charismatic fish are excellent ambassadors for protecting and restoring our local watersheds,” said Miller. “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 the local water agencies taking pride in bringing back native fish and wildlife.”



Chinook Salmon photos by ACA members Dan Sarka (left) and David Young (right)

Background

Since steelhead trout in the Bay Area were listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, a consortium of organizations and agencies has cooperated on restoration projects to allow migratory fish to reach spawning habitat in upper Alameda Creek. Partners in the Alameda Creek Fisheries Restoration Workgroup have completed two dozen fish passage projects in the watershed since 2001, including removal of small dams and other fish passage barriers, construction of fish ladders, replacement of road culverts, and installation of fish screens at water diversions. Water agencies are also working on projects to improve stream flows and restore stream and riparian habitat along Alameda Creek and its tributaries. These restoration projects now make up to 20 miles of potential spawning and rearing habitat in Alameda Creek and its tributaries accessible to ocean-run salmonids.

For nearly half a century anadromous fish such as salmon and steelhead had been blocked from spawning in the Alameda Creek watershed by a cement weir below the BART tracks and two inflatable rubber dams used for water supply operations. The Alameda County Water District completed a critical fish ladder at this former migration barrier, a 12-foot cement drop structure known as the BART weir. The new fish ladder allows fish to migrate under the BART tracks and past an adjacent inflatable rubber dam used for water supply operations. In 2019 ACWD completed another fish ladder at a second inflatable rubber dam one mile upstream in the flood control channel.

In 2018 the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission finished rebuilding the seismically challenged Calaveras Dam in the upper Alameda Creek watershed. The new reservoir now operates with cold water releases in the summer and fall to help trout rear downstream of the dam. The SFPUC also built a new fish ladder and fish screens at the associated Alameda Diversion Dam in upper Alameda Creek. This diversion dam is now operated to bypass much more of the winter and spring high flows in upper Alameda Creek. The enhanced stream flows will help migratory fish get further upstream to better habitat.

The last remaining major fish migration barrier was removed from the mainstem of Alameda Creek in summer and fall of 2025. A cement apron across the creek in the Sunol Valley protecting a gas pipeline was removed as part of a project by California Trout, and PG&E relocated the pipeline.

Multiple agencies are planning a project to restore former salt ponds near the mouth of Alameda Creek to tidal marsh as part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration. This project will create estuary habitat near the outlet of Alameda Creek that could be critical to growth and survival of salmonids.