

It's a Fish's Life

by Parker Pringle

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Since January huge steelhead in the local creeks have been thrilling hundreds of creek watchers. These are ocean-run fish that were born in the watershed, roamed the Pacific feeding and fattening up, and have returned here to spawn. They have shown up all over the place. In San Anselmo in January, a fish-stick-sized trout squirmed a 24-inch female steelhead, fat with eggs, around a pool. On a March afternoon in Fairfax, three steelhead burst into the clear, shallow pool below the Leo family's backyard, splashed around, and then disappeared. During the first week of March at the Ross Post Office pool, three steelhead fearlessly basked in the morning sun filtering through the placid water. In this same period, above the Saunders Avenue fish ladder, a green and silver steelhead gathered its strength to spawn. At the time of this writing (May 22), at least eight steelhead are holding in the pool at Bridge Avenue in San Anselmo, and some of these fish have been there since February.

Steelhead migrate into the creek throughout the rainy season, but the bulk of the spawning run arrives in January and February. Ordinarily, the fish will return to the ocean after spawning. However, when the rainy season is truncated by drought, some spawned-out steelhead may attempt to spend the summer and fall in the creek rather than risk migrating downstream in low flows. This year only 0.52 inches of rain fell at Kentfield after February 24.

Consequently, many steelhead are holed-up in the Corte Madera Creek watershed and they will likely stay until the autumn rains.

Experts at National Marine Fisheries Service, Salmon Protection and Watershed Network, EPA, and UC Davis say that the Bridge Avenue fish have likely spawned successfully and are pausing in the course of their downstream migration to the estuary and ocean.

The question that time will answer is whether these steelhead can survive a summer and fall in the creek. Steelhead are really big ocean-run rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). Stream-dwelling rainbow trout up to twenty inches long, any of which could actually be a pre-ocean steelhead, are seen in all the downtown San Anselmo pools throughout the summer. Therefore, we can say with some certainty that the Bridge Avenue pool is suitable holding water. The pickle for the steelhead is that they tend to feed little or not at all in freshwater, living off stored energy. Furthermore, as water temperatures rise, the steelhead will burn more and more energy. At some point, they can just run out of fuel even though water temperatures are below lethal levels. Other threats include poaching, predation by otters, raccoons or birds, general cumulative stress, and water main spills.

In light of these problems, it is natural to look at the giant steelhead at Bridge Avenue in the shrinking creek and think that they are in terrible peril and in need of help. Yet it is their offspring, the just-hatched, inch-long fry, that are in true jeopardy and worthy of our aid. The adult steelhead have probably spawned successfully; they have made another generation of fish. Even if they die, they will provide sustenance to other members of their species and the creek ecosystem. It is the fry and other young steelhead/rainbow trout that are just beginning to struggle with water scarcity and impaired water quality, among many other problems. These little fellows are not as easy to see as a two foot long steelhead. So when we look at the big steelhead at Bridge Avenue and elsewhere, we should remember that they have



The large steelhead seen in our creeks this year have been the talk of Fairfax and San Anselmo. This 28-inch long specimen was photographed in March by Gary Leo as it swam in San Anselmo Creek along the back of his Fairfax property.

entrusted their progeny to the care of the Ross Valley. If we help these fish by practicing good creek stewardship such as not pumping water from the creek, we may be rewarded with more big fish on a regular basis and an increasingly vibrant creek ecosystem.

Fish watching in June and July is excellent in San Anselmo, and with binoculars you will be able to see the sharp nasty teeth of a big male steelhead or the black dots on the leading edge of his pectoral fins. San Anselmo has a number of large resident trout. At times you can watch them feeding on insects in the surface film. Other times, they may hide under the banks. Wait patiently and you may see one do a circuit around its pool. At the Bridge Avenue pool, the drama of the steelhead will be ongoing. Rainbows will be there, joined by California roach, Sacramento sucker, and sculpin. A now-familiar turtle, survivor of the near-flood of 2008, will be watching it all. Go watch this pool in early June to see nearly all of the watershed's fish species in all their various life stages, young and old, pre- and post-migration. It is inspiring to see the diversity and abundance of these passing generations, whose fates, in many ways, we hold in our hands.

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