

Hominid Meets Salmonid, Eye to Eye

by Andrew Bartschire

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I grew up in the Deer Park neighborhood of Fairfax, and in preschool spent my afternoons exploring trails, climbing trees, and playing in ephemeral stream beds, being a typical carefree kid. I always found myself drawn to creeks. In the summer I would clamber through pitch-black culverts never knowing where the light at the other end would be. In the winter I would drop sticks off the Bridge Court footbridge into raging winter flows and marvel at how fast they would disappear into the brown turbid water. I would spend hot summer days trekking up San Anselmo Creek, splashing through riffles and throwing rocks into pools. I noticed wildlife, ducks, deer, frogs and the occasional small fish darting around the pools but I never thought too much about the volume or complexity of wildlife that calls the small year-round pools of the watershed home. I grew up instinctively being drawn to water but I always looked at it surface deep, never considering what was below the surface.

I moved away to go to school and continued my interest in the natural environment, getting a degree in geography. After school I was lucky enough to get a job for the University of California monitoring endangered coho salmon populations in the Russian River watershed. Up to that point, I had always looked at nature from the watershed perspective, of which the main elements were topography, climate, geology, hydrology, flora, and fauna. Suddenly I was looking at the watershed from the river bottom, up—literally.



California Sea Grant Coho Salmon Monitoring crew member conducting a fish survey in a tributary of the Russian River. Snorkelers can see into refuges invisible from above.

The first time I learned I would be snorkeling streams as a method to monitor salmon, I imagined the commercials of the people snorkeling in crystal clear water looking down on all the colorful marine life deep below them. Instead what I found was a creek very similar to San Anselmo Creek in the summertime. Small pools connected by trickling riffles, or sometimes completely dry riffles and isolated pools. It seemed kind of silly to waste my time snorkeling around in a pool that was only a foot or two deep and barely wider than a dinner table, but I put on my gear and stuck my head in the water anyway. It was as though I had entered a different world.

I was immediately struck by how large the pool appeared once I eliminated the optical and physical barrier of the water surface. The root structures, which seen from above appeared to be merely a part of the bank, now opened up into a massive undercut cave going back five or six feet with a labyrinth of nooks and crannies where even the most slow-moving aquatic species could hide out. Rocks and cobble on the bottom of the pool that gave the appearance of a smooth bottom from the surface, now formed a series of peaks and valleys where thumb-size

California roach and three-spine stickleback dive in and out of view. A crayfish scurries backwards into the closest hole, daring me to come after him and face his open claws.

At first I am so overwhelmed with the vastness and complexity of this subsurface ecosystem that I fail to

notice the telltale dark parr marks and large round eyes of the juvenile salmonid staring at me from the deepest part of the pool. Their contrasting tones and transparent fins allow them to blend into the gravel bottom and disappear from view. Soon they will lose the creek camouflage and turn a bright silver color as they shift into the smolt lifestage and move out to the ocean.

What appeared to be a small pool in a seasonal creek is teeming with life when the water is clear and cool. It makes me think back to my childhood, playing around in San Anselmo creek, splashing through riffles and throwing rocks into pools just like this. If I had known then how much was going on below the surface, I would have taken greater care not to disturb my finny neighbors.

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