

## Big Fish

by Charles Kennard

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When heavy winter rains begin, most people clear out their gutters and check their drains. Other people turn their thoughts to the creek and the life that torrential flows brings to our watershed. In winter months salmon and steelhead return from the ocean and wait in the bay for the gush of fresh water that instinct tells them will lead them to the stream of their birth. Instinct is not always right, however.

During the last days of October 2004 several steelhead and at least one king salmon responded to the signal and were seen in Ross and in downtown San Anselmo when the water cleared. Jack Curley of the Flood Control District first spread the word that he was watching a fish trying to negotiate the Ross fish ladder; later the same day, fish biologist Alice Rich found another fish lying dead near Lagunitas Road Bridge, a king salmon, measuring 30 inches. Had it died from exhaustion after running the concrete channel and ascending the poorly-designed fish ladder behind the post office? Alice believes that this fish was seeking the Sacramento River and had no chance of spawning successfully in our creeks.



This large fish, probably a steelhead, was photographed by Bob Snyder in downtown San Anselmo.

A couple of days later several excited callers reported two big fish waiting in pools overshadowed by the creek-side shops of downtown San Anselmo. “Spot”, with a

white fungus patch behind its head, appeared to be about two feet long. More rainfall would enable these steelhead to continue ascending the creek to find a suitable spawning ground—if they survive harassment by wildlife and humans. A teenager rod-fishing at Bridge Street was warned that state laws prohibit sport fishing in all the streams of our watershed, and that steelhead is a federally protected species; he apologized and put away his gear.

Pollution is another threat to our fish. In July several adult trout (the same species as steelhead, but “trout” haven’t been to the ocean) over-summering in pools in downtown San Anselmo were killed by a water mains break near the fire station. Thousands of gallons of drinking water containing the disinfectant chloramine, and sediment, gushed via a storm drain into the creek, which became café-au-lait colored. Chloramine enters the bloodstream of fish through their gills, and inhibits the blood’s oxygen-carrying capacity, leading to death. Employees of MMWD attempted to neutralize the harmful chemical to no avail, and the incident is being investigated by regulatory agencies.

Coho salmon formerly spawned in our creeks, but being even more sensitive to habitat conditions than steelhead, have not been seen for several decades.

**Big Fish Identification** Three large fish species have been seen over the years in the streams of our watershed: coho (silver) salmon, king (Chinook) salmon, and steelhead. Spawning male coho salmon are bright red on the side, while females are pinkish; they often have white fungus patches on their backs or tails. King salmon and steelhead seen in the water are easily confused. King salmon are more bulky and have a longer jaw; steelhead may have a pinkish lateral stripe. Behavioral differences such as spawning time and location also help experts to identify a species. Of the three species, only steelhead survive spawning. The young of all three have a row of 8-12 dark blotches on their sides, distinguishing them easily from roaches and sticklebacks. We look forward to hearing of your sightings of large fish in our creeks! Call 457-6045, or e-mail at [info@friendsofcortemederacreek.org](mailto:info@friendsofcortemederacreek.org). We are also interested in learning of any historical records of big fish, especially in Larkspur Creek.