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## Local Stories by Local People

Feb 16, 2008

### On Valentine's Day, Endangered Steelhead Trout Again were in the Mood for Love in Mission Creek Downtown

*by David Pritchett, news correspondent and City Creeks Committeemember Emeritus*

Fish happen. Once again, the rain falls, the creek flows, and the Steelhead Trout return to spawn in Mission Creek.

In downtown Santa Barbara on Valentine's Day, February 14, a 28-inch long (that's a big one) adult female Steelhead Trout was seen cavorting with about 5, likely male, fish of size 8 to 12 inches long. Through powerful flaps of her caudal (tail) fin, this big momma fish excavated a redd, or spawning nest, in the silt- and algae-covered streambed. Gravel and small rocks were blown aside in about a 5-foot diameter, dish-like depression.

The next day, all the fish were gone except for 1 of the smaller ones. This is an indication that Big Momma indeed may have spawned successfully, thanked (or not) one or several of her milt-contributing suitors, and then promptly swam back down to sea while the gittin was good for the receding creek water level. The absence of fish the day after the redd was built, and the likely spawning occurred, actually is a good sign, because during recent years adult Steelhead Trout often have been stranded in drying pools of Mission Creek.

These fish were observed and initially reported by downtown resident Mark Capelli, a Steelhead Trout expert with National Marine Fisheries Service, the lead Federal agency for all things Steelhead. Capelli has been looking for fish in Mission Creek several times per week since the heavy rains earlier in January.

Just like the bedrooms of Edhat readers, the exact location of the downtown fish love-nest is not disclosed to protect them from mischief or worse.

In the photos recorded by Mark Capelli on Feb. 14, 2008, notice the relative sizes of the fish (the 28-inch long female and the much smaller male) and how the algae and sediment on the streambed have been blown aside where this big female fish built a redd (spawning nest) through powerful flaps of its tail fin.

If indeed the Steelhead spawned in Mission Creek downtown, the successful maturation of the fertilized eggs still is a long shot for baby fish to develop and hatch out. Such challenges in this urban stream habitat include a steadily receding and warming water level, too much swift water that could scour out the streambed if the

next rain is too heavy, sediment from upstream erosion and dumping that can bury and smother the redd, and the other hungry fish and birds present in Mission Creek.

Nevertheless, with such challenges, this big fish tale shows again that Mission Creek is still attractive to endangered Steelhead Trout, because the resilient fish are making do with the best micro-remnants of habitat they can find in Mission Creek below an impassable barrier at Canon Perdido Street. Upstream above Canon Perdido Street, the mile-long concrete flood control channel --built by CalTrans along with the freeway in early 1960s-- remains as a complete barrier for fish swimming upstream from the ocean to the excellent spawning habitat in Rattlesnake Canyon and the upper Mission Creek watershed.

Essentially, juvenile-age (about 10-inch long) Steelhead Trout in Mission Creek surf down from the perennial pools of Santa Ynez Mountains and then spend a few years feasting in the ocean, reaching adulthood and a yearn to breed. If and when the creek flows sufficiently during the winter, the fish are trying to go home to Rattlesnake Creek in the upper Mission Creek watershed. However, they keep meeting a transportation and circulation barrier because of the flood control channel and a few bridge crossings that block fish passage to swim upstream.

Habitat degradations like these, along with water diversions elsewhere in the broader region, are why Steelhead Trout in southern California were listed by the Feds as an endangered species in 1997.

Fortunately, through a fish passage project now underway by the Santa Barbara City Creeks Division with extensive community support (as reported extensively at Edhat and elsewhere), engineering plans currently are under design to modify the "CalTrans Channel" so the fish can go home and swim up through that artificial channel extending for a mile above Canon Perdido Street.

The recent history of Steelhead Trout in Mission Creek, video links, and the fish passage project now being designed are described last year in a [prior PritchNotes article](#) on Edhat.



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