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Creeks study: Steelhead have no place to go

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There was a time when George Bliss could go fishing for breakfast in Carpinteria Creek and easily catch a few California steelhead trout.

The 83-year-old avocado rancher recalls that he would often find the fish trapped in ponds. He figured they would perish anyway as the dry weather set in.

"I don't know if I should tell you this," Mr. Bliss said. "We used a hay hook. We would slide that hook right under their belly and hook 'em right out of the pond."

Today, steelhead are rare in Carpinteria Creek and throughout Southern California — not because they were fished out, but because they could not navigate the dams, road crossings, tunnels, pipes and concrete channels that increasingly blocked the way to their historic spawning grounds.

Steelhead, the oceangoing form of rainbow trout, are now on the endangered species list in Southern California.

A new study by the Conception Coast Project, a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit group, is the first to assess how difficult it will be to bring back the

legendary "silver warrior" just to South Coast creeks alone. In a survey of 30 streams and their tributaries from Jalama Beach to the Rincon, scientists counted more than 500 barriers to steelhead passage, most of them man-made.

Altogether, 125 miles of streams are blocked out of a total 170 miles, the study found. The concrete tunnels, or culverts, built by Caltrans to convey the creeks under Highway 101, are the worst barriers, said Matt Stoecker, the consulting ecologist who performed the study. Many of these tunnels would

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Ecologist Matt Stoecker counted more than 500 barriers to steelhead passage in South Coast creeks, including this paved tunnel under Las Canoas Road on Rattlesnake Creek.

RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

By Melinda Burns
News-press Senior Writer
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Many of these tunnels would stop steelhead less than a half a mile from the beach.

"There's absolutely zero potential to restore steelhead runs with Highway 101 culverts at the mouths of creeks," Mr. Stoecker said. "We need bridges installed. That's the first step that has to happen."

Steelhead are prized by sportsmen for their acrobatics: Once hooked, a steelhead on the way upstream will leap into the air in arcs six feet high, plunge to the bottom and then surge out of the water again. The deeper the pool, the higher it jumps.

But the combative fish cannot fight their way upstream when floodwaters are surging through a mile of concrete channel in lower Mission Creek. They cannot jump across the huge tunnel under 101 at Rincon

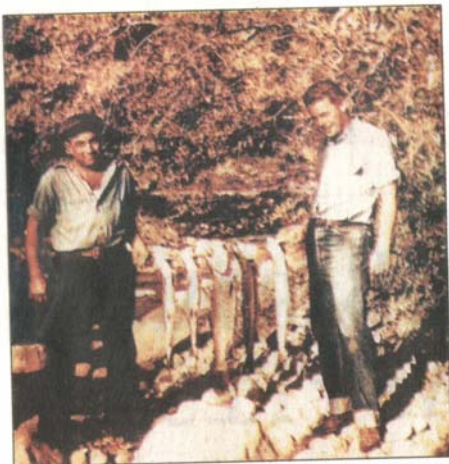


PHOTO COURTESY GEORGE BLISS

George Bliss, right, and a friend show off five big California steelhead they caught in Carpinteria Creek in 1942. Steelhead today are listed as an endangered species in Southern California. They cannot reach their historic spawning grounds because of dams and other man-made obstacles in the streams.



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

A steelhead trout is trapped in a pond below the bridge on Rattlesnake Creek.

Carpinteria Creek No. 1 priority for restoration

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to get steelhead past two major downstream barriers — a road crossing on a ranch belonging to the Bliss family on Casitas Pass Road; and a road crossing on Cate School property on Lillingston Canyon Road.

Above these barriers are 20 more that impede steelhead passage on Carpinteria Creek; but Bob Thiel, a spokesman for the Community Environmental Council, a coalition member, is optimistic.

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barriers could be removed on Carpinteria Creek; San Jose Creek; Gaviota and Arroyo Hondo creeks on the Gaviota Coast; and Maria Ygnacio Creek in Goleta. For his part, Mr. Bliss is not so sure that it's worth trying to bring back the days when the South Coast creeks were thick with steelhead.

There's creek pollution to contend with now, and pesticides, and urban population pressure, in addition to the natural cycles of drought, he said.

Creek in shallow water. In heavy rains, steelhead are able to make their way upstream only if they can take refuge behind boulders and logs that break the velocity of the flow.

"Steelhead want to choose the path of least resistance when they're going upstream," Mr. Stoecker said.

In 1997, the California Legislature provided \$43 million for steelhead and salmon restoration over a six-year period. Recovery efforts include a fish ladder on the Ventura River. A proposal to remove a 200-foot-high dam on Matilija Creek, a tributary of the Ventura River, is under review.

The water agencies that draw from Lake Cachuma in the Santa Ynez Valley are proposing a \$2.5 million project that, among other things, would release more water from the lake for fish; divert a creek below the dam, and build a channel for steelhead swimming upstream to spawn.

The Conception Coast Project does not favor such artificial methods.

"We're not advocating intricate plans," said James Studarus, the project operations manager. "We're trying to get a natural scenario where steelhead can get up into the creeks and spawn without our having to release water from a dam."

Mr. Studarus estimates that it would cost \$7 million to \$8 million dollars to remove just one of the

Highway 101 culverts on the South Coast and replace it with a bridge -- and there are 25 of them.

"We can't be the ultimate optimists here," Mr. Studarus said. "We've built too much and we've gone too far. But we have to do what we can to get steelhead back in our creeks before they're gone forever."

The steelhead study was funded by the state Department of Fish and Game and private foundations, including the Wendy P. McCaw Foundation. Mrs. McCaw is the owner of the News-Press. The study is presently under review by Fish and Game. It will be available later this month on the Internet at www.conceptioncoast.org.

Decades ago, thousands of steelhead swam upstream in the winter to spawn and lay their eggs in the headwaters of South Coast creeks, high up in the Santa Ynez Mountains. Typically, the fish would spawn two or three times in a seven-year life span, each time returning to the sea.

As part of his 18-month investigation, Mr. Stoecker went snorkeling in the headwaters of South Coast creeks in search of adult steelhead. He found only one.

At the same time, Mr. Stoecker saw thousands of rainbow trout, descendants of steelhead. These fish still have the genetic imprint to become steelhead. But for them, the instinct to go out to the

ocean is not an advantage right now, Mr. Stoecker said. They can travel down the creek, but they cannot likely swim back up to spawn.

"In a lot of these creeks, the door would be locked and they would have nowhere to go," Mr. Stoecker said.

Based on the quantity and quality of upstream habitat for steelhead, the study ranks Carpinteria Creek as the No. 1 priority for long-term restoration work.

Unlike other South Coast creeks, steelhead entering Carpinteria Creek are not blocked at 101 or the railroad tracks; and the creek was never lined with concrete along the banks and bottom for flood control. Carpinteria Creek is one of a handful on the South Coast that flow year-round. Much of it is shaded by tall trees, providing the cool water that steelhead require.

A few local restoration efforts already are under way. The Carpinteria Creek Watershed Coalition, a partnership of landowners, citizens groups and government agencies, has obtained a \$100,000 state grant to study the condition of creek habitats. Studies also will be performed to find a way to get steelhead past two major downstream barriers -- a road crossing on a ranch belonging to the Bliss family on Casitas Pass Road; and a road crossing on Cate School property on

Lillingston Canyon Road.

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"I think there's a lot of interest in bringing fish back," he said.

Mission Creek in Santa Barbara, Rincon Creek in Carpinteria, San Jose Creek in Goleta and El Capitan Creek on the Gaviota Creek also are ranked as top long-term priorities in the Conception Coast Project steelhead study.

For the quickest results in the short term, the study suggests, a few key barriers could be removed on Carpinteria Creek; San Jose Creek; Gaviota and Arroyo Hondo creeks on the Gaviota Coast; and Maria Ygnacio Creek in Goleta.

For his part, Mr. Bliss is not so sure that it's worth trying to bring back the days when the South Coast creeks were thick with steelhead.

There's creek pollution to contend with now, and pesticides, and urban population pressure, in addition to the natural cycles of drought, he said.

"I can't see spending millions of dollars on something that isn't going to work," he said. "It's a great idea, but is it practical?"